

Quality Counts for Kids

A Continuous Quality Improvement Program

SECTION

Program Overview

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W

elcome to **Quality Counts for Kids!** There is a lot of energy around this program in Hillsborough County and we are so pleased that you are thinking about participating in this project which is designed to continuously improve the quality of early childhood and after school services available for our community's children.

Quality Counts for Kids is an exciting new quality rating improvement system for all legally operating centers, family child care homes and out-of-school time programs in Hillsborough County. The initiative is administered by the Early Learning Coalition of Hillsborough County (ELCHC) and offers many forms of support, resources and information to programs that participate in Quality Counts for Kids. We look forward to working with you and are available to answer any questions you may have. This guide is for centers. Specific guides for family child care homes and school age only programs are also available.

Why is the ELCHC so focused on continuous quality improvement...because early experiences last a lifetime. The research is clear— high quality early experiences can help prepare children for success in school, work and life. Higher quality care leads to greater cognitive, language and social skills for children, which are key measures of school readiness.



Recent research demonstrates how vitally important the early years are for children's future success. For this reason, the ELCHC and the Children's Board of Hillsborough County have made a significant investment in this quality rating improvement system. Quality rating improvement systems (QRIS) are becoming the best-practice model for supporting early learning programs. Quality rating improvement systems are already implemented in over a dozen states and are being planned in many others. In Florida, several counties are implementing a quality rating improvement system while many others are exploring this idea.

The ELCHC implemented a pilot quality rating project in 2004. As a result of an external evaluation and work with the QRIS Multi-County Collaborative (a group of representatives from Florida's existing and emerging initiatives) the ELCHC has redesigned the former Five Stars for Kids Program and adopted the new collaborative QRIS standards.

If you have any questions after reading through this guide, please contact the Quality Counts for Kids office of the Early Learning Coalition at 813-202-1000 or through the "Contact Us" link at www.elchc.org. If you have not already attended one, we look forward to seeing you at a Quality Counts for Kids training soon. More information will be shared at these meetings and questions can be answered. The schedule for these trainings can be found on our web site.

Hillsborough County's Quality Rating System

Quality Counts for Kids is Hillsborough County's voluntary quality rating system which uses licensing as a foundation and sets a continuum of clearly defined levels of increasing quality. This quality rating improvement system is based on a point system in which a program receives points for every quality benchmark it achieves. Quality Counts for Kids has five levels of quality above licensing standards. Licensing compliance provides the foundation needed to support quality.

Quality Counts for Kids awards star level designations based on the number of points a program receives for meeting specific quality standards. These standards address:

- ★ Curriculum and Instructional Assessment
- ★ Family Engagement
- ★ Learning Environment
- ★ Program Administration
- ★ Ratio and Group Size
- ★ Screening and Identification of Special Needs
- ★ Staff Qualifications

These standards and indicators have been selected as a result of a thorough review of the

research literature and promising practices in other communities. Current research confirms that early care and education programs that focus on improving these standards can enhance children's positive outcomes. The indicators for each standard do not represent all aspects of quality, but rather the essential elements that lead to higher levels of quality.

Quality Counts for Kids reviews early learning programs with clearly defined standards and offers supports and incentives to help providers reach their goals. The program is open to any licensed and license-exempt center in Hillsborough County that wants to participate. Early learning programs can choose to participate in this initiative and the supports are individually tailored to meet each program's needs.

Goals of Quality Counts for Kids

Vision: All of Hillsborough County's children and families will have access to quality child care from birth through school age.

The goal of Quality Counts for Kids is to improve the quality of Hillsborough County's early care and education and school-age programs.

The ELCHC and its partners are working to have ALL programs in the county rated as high-quality programs. The quality rating system will:

- ❑ Ensure young children throughout

Hillsborough County are provided with the best possible early learning experiences through high quality early learning programs and school age programs;

- ❑ Provide information and support to early learning programs to improve and sustain the quality of their programs; and
- ❑ Provide families with an easy to use tool to select the best program for their child.

Getting Involved

There are number of benefits for programs that participate in the Quality Counts for Kids Program, beginning with the knowledge that they will be working to improve the quality of their program so that the children they serve get off to a great start. Quality Counts for Kids offers:

- ★ Program standards and environment rating scales to help programs target areas for improvement
- ★ Technical assistance to support quality improvement efforts
- ★ Training opportunities
- ★ Scholarships for directors and staff to achieve professional development goals
- ★ Funding to support quality improvement

- ★ Formal recognition of participation and quality improvement efforts
- ★ Use of the program's rating as a marketing tool



Expectations for Participating Programs

A program participating in Quality Counts for Kids is expected to:

1. Commit to continuous quality improvement at all levels of the organization
2. Attend an initial information meeting and subsequent mandatory meetings
3. Recognize that the program is responsible for making the quality improvement changes needed to improve program quality
4. Identify a contact person in a leadership position. The designated individual must:
 - Attend an initial information meeting
 - and subsequent mandatory meetings
 - Have authority to make changes and to implement the quality improvement strategies that emerge from the technical assistance process with the ELCHC's technical assistants (TAs)
5. Participate in the collection of information and ongoing assessment related to the Quality Counts for Kids process
6. Request an initial star level designation at the highest level possible
7. Develop and implement a Quality Action Plan (QAP) including staff in the process
8. Take the steps necessary to meet the goals identified in the QAP. Program leadership will set clear expectations and engage all appropriate program staff in the implementation of the continuous quality improvement process, holding them accountable for the implementation of mutually agreed upon strategies presented through training and technical assistance.
9. Support change and be willing to invest time, effort and resources in making necessary changes
10. Ensure their program is in good standing with the Hillsborough County Child Care Licensing Program
11. Maintain star standards for previously earned star level designations
12. Report program changes as requested by the Quality Counts for Kids Program
13. Provide feedback to help with the review and revision of the Quality Counts for Kids system
14. Provide current and accurate information to the public about their star level. Programs participating in the Quality Counts for Kids may:
 - Advertise their participation in Quality Counts for Kids, including their Star Level. When a program advertises its participation in Quality Counts for Kids it must use language that talks about their programs commitment to "continuous quality improvement"
 - Use the ELCHC logo, making absolutely no changes to the logo except sizing
 - Display signs advertising their participation in the Quality Counts for Kids Program
15. If a program receives a request to talk with the media about participation in Quality Counts for Kids, it MUST clear the request with the Early Learning Coalition of Hillsborough County first
16. Follow through on all agreed upon commitments (i.e. deadlines, appointments, or to call at least 24 hours in advance to make alternate arrangements)

Continuous Quality Improvement

Programs are expected to make a commitment to continuous quality improvement and are strongly encouraged to move through as many Star Levels as is possible. Programs are expected to achieve at least a Star 3 rating. Beyond Star 3, programs are not required to achieve a specific star level and should take pride in all quality improvements they achieve.

What Can a Program Expect from Quality Counts for Kids

1. Programs can expect Quality Counts for Kids personnel to:
 - Help you determine your program's needs and provide assistance if needed in the development of a Quality Action Plan
 - Support your program's quality improvement efforts
 - Provide time-limited technical assistance on specific areas of quality improvement. Technical assistants under contract with the ELCHC are required to have expertise in child development, quality standards for early care and education and/or school age programs, best practices for technical assistance, and best practices for program leadership and administration
 - Use the Quality Counts for Kids standards
 - Follow through on all agreed upon commitments
 - Perform his or her duties in an ethical and professional manner
 - Respect your program's ownership of the quality improvement work
 - Quality Counts for Kids personnel and contractors are mandated reporters of child abuse and neglect. They are also ethically responsible to address situations they encounter in programs in which they believe children are at risk
2. Quality Counts for Kids will offer eligible programs:
 - Preferred status for training and technical assistance
 - Funding to support quality improvements
 - Recognition of star level achievement, including marketing support

Learn More about Quality Counts for Kids

Each year Quality Counts for Kids offers information sessions to prospective programs. These sessions provide current information about program standards and how to enroll in the initiative. Dates, times and locations of these information sessions are posted online at www.elchc.org. Additionally, Quality Counts for Kids materials, including standards and forms can be found on the same web site.

Program Eligibility

All legally operating centers, family child care homes and school-age only programs in Hillsborough County that:

- ★ have been operating for at least one year prior to application
- ★ have not been referred to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) for investigation for fraud connected with the School Readiness Program and/or the Voluntary Prekindergarten Program, and
- ★ have been in good standing for 1 year and are currently in good standing with the Hillsborough County Child Care Licensing Program

are eligible to participate in Quality Counts for Kids. Being in good standing with licensing means the program is not under any administrative action. Enrollment priority is given to programs that serve children receiving subsidies through the School Readiness Program. In addition, programs must be committed to the quality improvement process.

Application Process – Step by Step

Step One: Orientation

All programs that want to participate in Quality Counts for Kids must attend an orientation. This training will give an overview of Quality Counts for Kids and its goals, the review and improvement process, and information on supports available for programs.

For a schedule of the orientations, go to www.elchc.org or call the Early Learning Coalition of Hillsborough at 813-202-1000.

Step Two: Application

All programs must complete an application. All legally operating child care programs in Hillsborough County can apply to participate in Quality Counts for Kids. The application form is included in the Appendix of this guide or it can be downloaded at www.elchc.org.

Applications are accepted any time, but to be considered for selection, the application must be received by the ELCHC by the first Wednesday of the month by 5 PM. Within approximately 30 days of application, Quality Counts for Kids will send a letter to the program telling the program that either:

- it has been enrolled in Quality Counts for Kids
- it is ineligible with the reasons for ineligibility
- the application is incomplete, or
- the application will be considered during the next enrollment period, contingent on funding.

The number of programs enrolled in Quality Counts for Kids is subject to the availability of funds.

Applications may be mailed or hand-delivered to the Early Learning

Coalition offices at 1002 East Palm Avenue, Tampa, FL 33605. You will be contacted after we receive your application. Quality Counts for Kids checks with the Hillsborough County Child Care Licensing Program to determine how long the program has been in operation and if the program is in good standing with licensing regulations. Additionally, Quality Counts for Kids will make sure the program has not been referred to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) for investigation of fraud.

Applications are reviewed by a committee that includes staff from the ELCHC, Nova Southeastern University – Mailman Segal Institute, Hillsborough County Public Schools – School Readiness Program, and/or other community partners. The goal of Quality Counts for Kids is to have all types of programs represented so program selection is based on factors such as geographic location and program type (*i.e. center, family child care home, school-age only program*).

Step Three: Enrollment

Once your program is accepted in the Quality Counts for Kids program, you will be asked to sign a Letter of Expectations which explains the purpose of Quality Counts for Kids and serves as documentation of the program's commitment to continuous quality improvement. The Letter of Expectations also spells out the responsibilities of Quality Counts for Kids and your program. The letter can be reviewed on the ELCHC web site.

Step Four: Self-Study Training

Every program selected for Quality Counts for Kids must take part in a self-study training to learn how to complete the self-study process and the quality improvement process. You also need to attend trainings about the Environment Rating Scales (ITERS-R, ECERS-R and/or SACERS) that will be used to your review program. The director will:

- participate in instructional sessions about program self-assessment
- complete assignments between instruction sessions and bring them back to the next group session

Step Five: Self-Study

During the self-study training, you will receive a **self-study packet** that includes checklists and forms to record information about these components:

- Curriculum and Instructional Assessment
- Family Engagement
- Learning Environment
- Program Administration
- Ratio and Group Size
- Screening and Identification of Special needs
- Staff Qualifications

You and your staff can get started with the self-study to see which quality standards your program already meets. The self-study helps programs learn about the quality standards and the tools used to assess each area. The self-study packet provides detailed instructions for gathering the required documentation. The self-study materials should be organized in a 3-ring binder.

Once you have completed your self-study and gathered the necessary documentation, you will submit your binder to the Quality Counts for Kids office. To maintain momentum and help schedule formal assessments, programs are asked to complete their self-study binder within 6 months of participating in the self-study training.

The timeline depends on program size, as large programs may need additional time to gather information on all classrooms and all teachers.

Step Six: Formal Validation

Each program will receive a formal validation after completing the self-study binder. This review will be completed by professional early childhood program validators and will determine your program’s star level.

Quality Counts for Kids has trained personnel that will conduct validation visits. During the validation process the validator will:

- ★ **Verify information provided in self-study binder.** The validator will verify the self-study by reviewing the documentation for each item included on the self-study checklist. All documentation that has been gathered to show evidence that a program is meeting each standard must be submitted to Quality Counts for Kids in a binder.
- ★ **Evaluate the learning environment using the Environment Rating Scales (ERS) on a random sample of the classrooms.** The Quality Counts for Kids personnel will use the Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ITERS-R) for classrooms serving children birth to 30 months; the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) for classroom serving children 30 months to 5 years; and the SACERS for

classrooms serving school-age children.

Quality Counts for Kids personnel will observe at least 50% of the classrooms serving children birth to 30 months, at least 50% of the classrooms serving children 30 months to 5 years, and at least 50% of the classrooms serving school-age children. This will include at least one classroom from each age group that needs a specific Environment Rating Scale (i.e. one infant/toddler classroom, one early childhood classroom, one school age classroom). The chart below shows an example of the type and number of ERS observations that would be conducted for a center with 6 classrooms serving children birth to school age.

Classroom Number	Children's Age	Type of Assessment
1	Infants	ITERS-R
2	Toddlers	
3	2 Year Olds	ITERS-R
4	3 Year Olds	ECERS-R
5	4 Year Olds	
6	School Age	SACERS
Total Number of Assessments Conducted		4

Note: When more than one classroom is formally assessed using the same ERS tool, the total scores are averaged to determine the number of points awarded.

Quality Counts for Kids personnel will not conduct verification visits for programs in which they have previously provided on-site technical assistance or have a conflict of interest.

Step Seven: Star Level Designation

Once the formal validation visit has been completed, Quality Counts for Kids personnel will total the points earned on all program standards to establish the star level for your program. The point ranges for the star level designations are as follows:

Star 1	Star 2	Star 3	Star 4	Star 5
7-18 points	19-28 points	29-38 points	39-48 points	49-60 points

In order to achieve a star level designation, your program must achieve at least one (1) point in the following standards:

- Curriculum and Instructional Assessment
- Family Engagement
- Learning Environment
- Program Administration
- Ratio and Group Size
- Screening and Identification of Special Needs
- Staff Qualifications

To receive a star level designation of 3, 4, or 5 your program must receive at least one (1) point for each ERS tool used to assess your program. Your program will be issued a star level certificate based on the points your program receives on the quality standards.

Your program’s star level designation is valid for two (2) years. By the end of two years, a program must have achieved the next higher star level or have submitted a written request to renew their current star level. A program may

not renew a Star Level 1 designation; programs are required to at least move to Star 2 within two years. When a program renews its Star Level designation, the program’s maintenance of star level standards will be verified by an on-site visit from a Quality Counts for Kids validator.



SAMPLE STAR LEVEL CALCULATION: ABC EARLY LEARNING CENTER			
Component	Score	Weight	Points Achieved
Curriculum and Instructional Assessment	1		1
Family Engagement	3		3
Learning Environment	2		2
Learning Environment (ITERS-R)	3	X2	6
Learning Environment (ECERS-R)	4	X2	8
Learning Environment (SACERS)	3	X1	3
Program Administration	3		3
Ratios and Group Size	2		2
Screening and Identification of Special Needs	1		1
Staff Qualifications	3		3
Subtotal			32
Star Level: 3			

the development of their programs. They develop a curiosity about their program – Why are more children getting injured on the playground? Why aren't the children enjoying this activity? Why are the parents so concerned about our health policy? They think about what they are hoping to achieve such as improved child interactions, increased parent involvement, or increased staff retention. Information from your ERS assessment, self-study and/ or other sources such as the Program Administration Scale (PAS), Caring for Our Children, School Readiness Program Standards or the Florida School Readiness Performance Standards can be used to guide your program's improvement. Keep in mind that even if your program is operating at a high level of quality, there are always practices that can be improved. To document your goals, you will develop a Quality Action Plan (QAP).

Detailed information regarding the quality standards and scoring can be found in the *Quality Counts for Kids Self-Study Guide*.

Step Eight: Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI)

Quality Counts for Kids is a system of continuous quality improvement (CQI) that guides centers, family child care homes and school-age programs toward achieving and maintaining high quality and best practices. CQI is an ongoing process that includes reviewing sources of evidence that indicate program quality, planning goals, and implementing strategies that move learning programs toward best practices.

Unfortunately, quality in early education and after school programs doesn't "just happen". Quality is the result of intention and planning. Centers that are committed to quality are thoughtful and purposeful in



Step Nine: Developing a Quality Action Plan (QAP)

Developing a Quality Action Plan is an important step in the CQI process. The primary purpose of the quality action plan is to serve as a road map to support improvement practices. While there is no right or wrong way to write a QAP, it should include some basic elements such as what quality goals the program wants to achieve, how and when the plan for improvement will be implemented, who is responsible for specific tasks, and resources needed to achieve the goals.

The Quality Action Plan will guide how your program will spend funds, prioritize staff time, determine curriculum and instructional practices, and choose staff development. **Please note that your program must develop a QAP in order to access grants, scholarships and other supports.**

Programs with a 1 or 2 star level designation have up to two years to reach the next star level. However, programs are encouraged to move through each level as quickly as they can while still doing a thorough job. Programs are expected to continue showing evidence of progress toward the next Star Level in order to continue as an active Quality Counts for Kids program.

Programs with a 3, 4, or 5 star level designation are not required to achieve a higher star level. However, they are required to submit an annual QAP and demonstrate progress in meeting their continuous quality improvement goals.

Step Ten: Accessing Continuous Quality Improvement Supports

Programs that complete a quality action plan (QAP) will receive support to help achieve their goals. Supports that may be available to Quality Counts participating programs include:

Technical Assistance: time-limited, on-site consultation can help by working with program leadership and staff to plan for how the tasks in the Quality Action Plan will be carried out. Technical assistance is available from Quality Counts for Kids partner agencies to help the program keep focused on the quality improvement process. It's important to remember that the TAs are not responsible for doing the program's quality improvement work. That is the responsibility of the program.

Training: specific training opportunities offered in response to the needs assessments of Quality Counts for Kids participants.

Quality Action Grants

★ For programs at any level working with technical assistants to implement quality improvement plans, support grants are available for materials and equipment to address issues identified in the quality improvement plan. The Technical Assistants help programs use the materials to improve the environment and enhance the experiences of the children.

★ The amount of support grants and achievement awards are related to program size and the number of subsidized children served.



Step Eleven: Reporting Progress

Quality Counts for Kids receives and reviews copies of the QAP that are submitted by a program. Participating programs submit a progress report to Quality Counts for Kids using the progress report form. This report is due every 6 months. In order to be eligible for the supports in Step Ten, programs must demonstrate progress in achieving the goals established in their QAP.

Step Twelve: Continuing in Quality Counts for Kids

Please remember that a Star Level designation is only in effect for two (2) years. If your program needs more than two years to achieve the next Star Level you must renew your program’s current Star Level designation while you continue to work on meeting the standards for the next Star Level. Programs with a Star Level 1 can not renew their star level designation and are required to meet the standards for Star Level 2 within two (2) years of receiving their initial star level designation.

Renewal

In order to renew your program’s Star Level you will follow the same process you used when you requested your current Star Level designation. This includes compiling all the documentation that provides evidence the program is still meeting all the standards for your program’s current Star Level. A Quality Counts for Kids validator will visit your program to conduct a formal validation to review documentation and conduct the appropriate Environment Rating Scale(s).

Requesting A New Star Level Designation

You can request a new Star Level designation once your program has completed its Quality Action Plan goals, and can meet the standards for the next higher Star Level. To request a new Star Level designation you will submit your self-study binder. Quality Counts for Kids follows the same procedures that were used when you requested your initial Star Level designation. A validator will be sent to verify all required documentation has been gathered to show that your program is meeting standards and to conduct the appropriate Environment Rating Scale(s).

Financial Supports

Participation Award: Programs will receive a one-time award of \$200 for completing their first Quality Action Plan. This award is automatically issued to a program when the Quality Counts for Kids office approves the program’s completion of the first Quality Action Plan.

Quality Action Grant: Programs may apply for a grant to support the implementation of the program’s Quality Action Plan. Grant expenditures must be linked directly to meeting a specific quality standard(s) from the QAP. Quality Improvement Grant amounts are based on program type and the Star Level the program is working to achieve – see the chart titled Quality Action Grants in the Appendix for the amounts available for the current fiscal year.

The published grant amounts listed in the chart represent the maximum amount available to each program. Programs are not automatically entitled to receive the full amount. Grant amounts are determined by the costs associated with meeting specific Quality Counts for Kids standards. Programs can request grant funds at multiple times as the quality improvement work progresses, as long as the maximum grant amount is not exceeded.

After writing the Quality Action Plan (QAP), a program can develop an itemized list of expenditures needed to support the implementation of their QAP on the Spending Plan section of the Request for Quality Action Grant. The program then submits the Request for Quality Action Grant, which includes the Spending Plan, to the Quality Counts for Kids office for review and approval.

The following is a brief list of examples that could be included in your grant application:

- ❑ *Curriculum* – blocks, art supplies, manipulatives, dramatic play props, literacy materials, diversity materials, etc.
- ❑ *Family engagement* – lending library, literacy backpacks, speakers for parent meetings, etc.
- ❑ *Learning program* – classroom furnishings, minor renovations, gross motor equipment, etc.

- ❑ *Program administration* – costs of producing marketing materials, accounting software, computers, printer, internet connection, etc.
- ❑ *Staff development* – registration costs for training/conferences, tuition for college courses, stipends for staff attending training, substitutes for staff to attend training.

Quality Action Grant funds must be used only for the purposes described in the written grant request. Documentation must be maintained to demonstrate how the Quality Action Grant funds were spent.

The ELCHC and its partners understand that there are costs associated with continuous quality improvement. For that reason, programs who have achieved star level designation of 3 or 4 who are not seeking to move to a higher star level designation and programs who have achieved a star level designation of 5 are eligible to apply for Continuous Quality Improvement Grants.

Merit Award

Programs will receive a **one-time** award of \$1,000 for achieving their Star Level 3 designation. This award is automatically issued to a program when the Quality Counts for Kids office validates the program's achievement of Star Level 3 designation.

Continuous Quality Improvement Grants

Programs that have reached a Star Level designation of 3 or 4 and are not seeking to move up to the next star level and programs

who have received a Star Level 5 designation level, may apply for grants to help support the continuous quality improvement of their program. Continuous Quality Improvement Grant amounts are based on program type and continuous quality improvement goals of the program the program is working to achieve – see the Appendix for the amounts available for the current fiscal year.

