

# Early Education Commission

*A community leadership collaborative supporting the United Way's goal of ensuring children are ready for school*



United Way of  
Metropolitan Atlanta

## Research Abstract

**Title:** “High-Quality Preschool: Why We Need It and What it Looks Like,”  
Preschool Policy Matters, National Institute for Early Education Research  
(NIEER)

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**Date:** November, 2002

In this 11-page brief, the author introduces the topic of quality: *How do we define and measure preschool education? What is the current state of preschool programs? What do high-quality preschool programs look like?* Using the best practices recommended by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the author answers these questions and more.

In her introduction, she reminds us that research has consistently shown that 3- and 4-year-olds who attend a high-quality preschool succeed at a higher rate in kindergarten and beyond—both academically and socially. But the majority of preschool programs in the United States rank below “good”, with many rated far lower. As well, many of our most vulnerable children attend the lowest quality programs, and children who are at risk for school failure are more strongly influenced by the quality of preschool. Many children from middle-class families also attend preschools that are not of good quality.

Preschool programs are typically rated on two dimensions of quality – **process quality**, which involves direct experiences such as teacher-child relationships, and **structural quality**, which involves elements such as class size and teacher qualifications. Both process and structural quality are critical factors.

Process quality is typically measured by observation; a widely used research tool in early education is The Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS). Although there are no nationally representative studies on process quality, several state and smaller studies using ECERS have shown that few preschool programs rank in the “excellent” range and more than half generally fall into the “fair” category. Structural features are frequently regulated through state licensing requirements. Together, process and structure influence the quality of young children’s educational experiences.

What does high-quality preschool education look like? The author says the features of a high-quality preschool program focus on what is critical for not only the child – but also the family, and the teacher/curriculum/classroom. Using current research and the best practices of NAEYC, the author cites recommendations in each of these areas in a detailed listing of items that are “critical” for child, family and teacher/classroom.

Finally, the brief includes these policy recommendations:

- Develop state standards for all preschool programs that address teacher qualifications, group size and class ratios.
- Raise teacher salaries and benefits to levels similar to those of comparably qualified K-12 counterparts.
- Develop valid measures of early educational quality incorporating recent research on early literacy, mathematical, scientific, and social-emotional learning.
- Provide continuous training and quality improvement efforts to all preschool teachers and programs.
- Work together at federal, state, and local levels to establish a coordinated system of high-quality education and care for all 3- and 4-year olds.

Link to the full article:

<http://nieer.org/resources/policybriefs/1.pdf>