Niagara Region Quality Development Tool

How is Quality Measured in Niagara?

Quality programming is consistent and intentional programming rooted in supporting strong early childhood development and child wellbeing. Niagara Region is committed to supporting high quality early years child care programs that support children to achieve their full potential. This Development Tool will support Quality in Niagara Region's early years and child care system using the following four pillars:



1. Governance, Leadership and Workforce
Strong leadership and governance structures that promote program accountability and sets the foundation for quality programming.



2. Pedagogy and How Does Learning Happen
Pedagogy that is guided by research, reflective practice and the principles of How Does Learning Happen? to build programs that supports child development.



3. Early Learning Environment
Environments that are safe, inclusive, accessible and thoughtfully designed to promote the well-being of children and educators.



4. Family and Community Engagement
Strong, collaborative relationships with families and community partners to ensure all children, families and educators are supported in partners in building a high quality system.

Framework Goal

To ensure all children have access to safe, inclusive, and enriching early learning environments by establishing a consistent, evidence-based framework. This will promote meaningful participation in children's lives, positive child outcomes, supports families, empowers and equips educators, fosters equitable access to resources and tools, and builds public confidence in the child care sector.

What is the purpose of this tool?

Niagara Region's Quality Framework is a vital component of the Inclusion Resource Support Model. This tool uses a standardized method for observing, understanding, and evaluating centers, and for developing recommendations to strengthen quality. It adopts a holistic, supportive approach to co-design, collaboration, and capacity building to promote consistency across Niagara's Early Year and Child Care Sector. It empowers educators, guides continuous improvement, and fosters safe, inclusive, and evidence-based early learning environments.

How will this tool be implemented?

Your Community Pedagogical Advisor (CPA) will support you throughout the quality assessment process

Step 1

- CPA will observe your program and assess quality based utilizing the Quality Development Tool on an annual basis
- In this assessment, your CPA will note their observations and draft recommendations

Step 2

- Once the assessment is complete, your CPA, IQC and Centre Supervisor will work collaboratively to tailor goals and recommendations to your centre to support your progression through the 3-level system
- Goals and recommendations will be tracked regularly through the Quality Development Action Plan

Step 3

- Over the course of the year, you will receive continued support from your IQC and CPA to successfully implement these recommendations

Step 4

- Prior to your next assessment, your CPA will track your progress from the year prior to ensure that each assessment builds on the prior successes and lessons learned
- Progress and goal attainment will be tracked within the Quality Development Action Plan

Definitions

Level 1:
Needs improvement. Below quality standard

Level 2:
Meets quality standard expectations

Level 3:
Beyond Quality standard, provides strong quality programming

At the time of assessment your CPA will record administrative details (such as date of observation, names of staff present, number of children, etc.) as well as make observations, notes, recommendations and positive reflections for each pillar.

Pillar: Governance, Leadership and Workforce

Objective: Achieve effective governance and leadership through clear policies, strong infrastructure, transparent decision-making, skilled supervision, and targeted support. Enhance workforce stability and quality by aligning recruitment, retention, and compensation, and while supporting ongoing staff education and professional development.

Condition of Quality	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Staff Meetings: Hold regular, purposeful staff meetings including support, supply, full-time and leadership staff; that promote collaboration, reflection, and shared accountability for quality programming	• Staff meetings are not routinely scheduled or are frequently rescheduled for various reasons • No meeting minutes or agenda are available	• Staff meetings are held monthly but are occasionally rescheduled due to staffing/other reasons (rescheduled no more than twice per year) • Meeting minutes and agenda are available but not posted for staff • Staff meetings may be in-person or virtual to promote accessibility • Staff meetings are focused on logistics, with no time for reflective practice	• Staff meetings are held monthly and are rarely cancelled (cancelled once per year or less) • Meeting minutes/Set agenda are available to all staff and posted/ accessible • Staff meetings may be in-person or virtual to promote accessibility • Staff meetings are intentional spaces for reflective dialogue and meaningful professional learning – not simply for sharing reminders or routine updates

Condition of Quality	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Organizational Infrastructure: Centre has adequate infrastructure or access to adequate infrastructure to support and sustain effective operations and quality service delivery	• The centre is working with limited access to HR, IT, financial, or legal support • Lack of structured systems may lead to operational disruptions, unclear procedures, and increased workload for staff or leadership	• The centre has some access to HR, IT, financial, and legal support • Systems are generally sufficient to support day-to-day operations, though there may be occasional gaps or delays in support that impact efficiency	• The centre has reliable and sufficient HR, IT, financial, and legal support, ensuring strong administrative infrastructure to meet their needs • Systems are organized, proactive, and consistently maintained, supporting efficient operations, clear communication, and high-quality service delivery across the organization
Leadership Capacity: Staff are supported and onboarded by a skilled and knowledgeable supervisor that has a strong understanding of program's statement and philosophy	• Limited structured supervision practices are in place (i.e., one of: regular check-ins, informal feedback, addressing concerns as they arise) • Staff receive information on an ad hoc basis, with limited clarity or timeliness, leading to uncertainty around routines and operational expectations	• Regular structured supervision practices are in place (i.e., many of: regular structured check-ins, informal feedback, addressing concerns as they arise) • Staff are provided information regularly; however, communication lacks a consistent structure or standardised method, resulting in occasional gaps or mixed messages	• Comprehensive structured supervision and coaching practices are in place (i.e., scheduled check-ins, documented feedback, goal-setting, building staff confidence and competence through coaching) • Staff receive timely, clear and consistent guidance related to routines, program delivery and immediate operational issues

Condition of Quality	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Workforce Capacity and Stability: Workforce capacity and stability are supported through strategies that attract and retain a qualified and diverse workforce, reduce staff turnover, and ensure reliable and consistent supply staff coverage, maintaining continuity of care, meeting ratio requirements, and supporting high-quality programming for children and families	• The centre does not consistently have adequate or reliable supply staff coverage, resulting in room closures, combining groups, or families needing to find alternative care when staff are absent • Professional learning is available but supported inconsistently. Staff largely direct their own learning, with limited time, resources, or guidance provided by the centre	• Workforce stability is supported through established strategies such as mentoring, professional development, and staff recognition. Staff turnover is moderate and generally managed to minimise disruption for children and families • Reliable supply staff coverage is usually available, allowing most staff absences to be covered without closing rooms and helping maintain ratio requirements • Professional learning is encouraged by leadership. Staff participate in required or recommended opportunities, with the centre providing guidance, allocated time, and access to resources resources	• The centre fosters a strong culture of support, belonging, and professional growth that promotes staff wellbeing and long-term retention. Proactive strategies—such as career pathways, ongoing recognition, and flexible practices—are embedded and result in consistently low staff turnover • Well-organized staffing systems and a stable pool of trained supply staff ensure absences are covered seamlessly, with supply staff familiar with children, routines, and expectations and no need for room closures • Professional learning is actively prioritized and systematically supported. Staff are encouraged, resourced, and compensated to engage in ongoing development, and a strong culture of reflective practice and shared learning is evident across the centre

Pillar: Pedagogy and How Does Learning Happen?

Objective: Deliver well-planned, inclusive, responsive, play-based learning that nurtures engagement, relationships, and skill development, grounded in the pedagogy of How Does Learning Happen? Applying the four foundations: well-being, belonging, engagement and expression.

Condition of Quality	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Programming: Educators deliver responsive, play-based programming that nurtures engagement, exploration, and inquiry in alignment with the foundations of how does learning happen (HDLH)	• The approach to programming is adult-centered, resulting in limited child-led engagement and inquiry-based learning. Programming is not in alignment with HDLH • Limited evidence of planned independent play experiences • Programming does not include reference to diversity, equity and inclusion practices	• Programming is a mix between educator-driven programming and programming that nurtures engagement, inquiry and play. Educators deliver programming that exemplifies some aspects of HDLH • Educator provides some opportunities for independent play experiences and educator led play experiences • Programming includes reference to diversity, equity and inclusion practices (i.e. celebrating diverse cultural significant dates) on a regular basis	• Educators deliver responsive, play-based programming that clearly exemplifies the four foundations of How Does Learning Happen? • Educator provides a balance of planned independent play experiences and educator led play and learning experiences • Programming intentionally and consistently embeds diversity, equity, and inclusion practices throughout daily experiences and the learning environment

Condition of Quality	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Child Skill Development: Educators support healthy child development with intentional and responsive interactions that support overall growth and well-being across development domains (physical, social, emotional, communication, language and literacy, cognition)	• Programming shows limited evidence of intentional approaches to support children's skill-building • Opportunities to support development across domains are not yet consistently planned or embedded in experiences	• Educators provide balanced programming and play experiences that support children's skill development across domains • Educators sometimes engage in activities that intentionally promote developmental skill-building	• Educators actively plan and engage in experiences that promote developmental skill-building (e.g., planning provocations, supporting children in learning new tasks, promoting choice) • Educators identify each child's emerging areas of growth and intentionally scaffold experiences to support ongoing development
Staff/child interactions: Educators promote a warm, respectful environment where positive, authentic staff-child relationships support emotional security and learning	• Educators demonstrate limited engagement with children and may sometimes miss or overlook children's verbal or non-verbal cues • Educators do not consistently use a supportive and responsive tone when communicating with children • Opportunities to intentionally promote and support positive peer interactions are not consistently evident	• Educators make an effort to be present with children, demonstrating active listening skills and responsivity • Educators use an appropriate tone of voice when communicating with children • Educators occasionally promote positive peer interactions	• Educators listen actively to children, get down to their eye level, and respond thoughtfully to cues • Educators use an appropriate tone of voice when communicating with children • Educators promote positive peer interactions by encouraging turn-taking, cooperation and collaboration • Educators use open-ended questions and descriptive language to extend children's thinking and vocabulary

Condition of Quality	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Behaviour guidance: Educators implement consistent, supportive behaviour guidance strategies that promote self-regulation, emotional awareness, and respect for others	• Educators show limited flexibility in responding to children's individual needs. Expectations are applied for all children, regardless of developmental differences, and conflict situations are often managed through directive or punitive approaches rather than co-regulation • Strategies such as redirection and de-escalation are inconsistently used, leading to missed opportunities to support children's emotional well-being and conflict resolution skills	• Educators adjust expectations to reflect children's individual needs and developmental levels most of the time. They use co-regulation, redirection, and de-escalation strategies to support children in resolving conflicts, though practices may not always be proactive • Emotional well-being is considered during conflict resolution, with educators guiding children toward appropriate responses and problem-solving, though individualized support is not consistently implemented	• Educators demonstrate flexibility by adjusting expectations to reflect each child's needs and capabilities. Using co-regulation, redirection, and de-escalation strategies, they help children resolve conflicts while prioritizing children's emotional well-being • Educators demonstrate flexibility by adapting expectations and consequences according to each child's individual needs and guide children in resolving conflicts respectfully, while fostering inclusion for all children

Condition of Quality	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Program Plan and Documentation: Develop and implement a flexible, reflective program plan guided by children's interests, observations, and pedagogical documentation.	• No program plans posted, or program plans posted are incomplete • No additional time provided for pedagocial documentation and program planning	• All program plans posted in classrooms and are easily accessible. Program plans could include more detail. • Pedagogical documentation is visible in classroom and includes documentation of group activities. • Time allocated weekly for documentation and program planning	• All program plans are posted in classrooms, thorough (include outdoor activities), and easily accessible. Program plans are updated as new interests develop within classroom. • Pedagogical documentation is visible and accessible, includes both individual and group activities, and references developmental domains. • Time allocated daily for documentation and program planning

Pillar: Early Learning Environment

Objective: Create a safe, inclusive, and stimulating early learning environment that foster security, engagement, and development through classroom play spaces, supportive transitions, accessible materials, inclusive supports, and consistent routines.

Condition of Quality	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Group Sizes: Maintain appropriate group sizes to ensure individualized attention and responsive interactions	• Large groups rarely break into smaller sub-groups for learning activities, small group play, and transitions	• Large groups occasionally break into smaller sub-groups for learning activities, small group play, and transitions	• Large groups frequently break into smaller sub-groups for learning activities, small group play and transitions . • Flexibility in ratio (additional staff) is present to accommodate individual child and classroom needs

Condition of Quality	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Materials/equipment: Provide a variety of open-ended, accessible, and developmentally appropriate materials to stimulate creativity, inquiry, and skill development . Materials represent diverse cultures, identities, and abilities, ensuring all children can see themselves and others positively reflected in the learning environment.	• Children do not have access to a wide range of toys, experiences and materials. Conflict or the exclusion of children from play is evident due to lack of materials • Play materials are not developmentally appropriate, are rotated infrequently, are in poor condition and/or are inaccessible to children • Materials show limited or no representation of diversity, equity, and inclusion • Opportunities for children to see diverse cultures, identities, and abilities reflected in the environment are minimal	• Children have access to a sufficient range of toys, experiences and materials that support some developmental domains with minimal observed conflict or exclusion • Most play materials are in good condition and developmentally appropriate, are stored on open shelves to encourage independent choices • Toys and materials are rotated based on child's interest(including toys, loose parts, and art materials) • Some materials reflect diversity, equity, and inclusion. • Children have occasional opportunities to see diverse cultures, identities, and abilities represented in the environment	• Children have access to a wide range of toys, experiences and materials that support all developmental domains, with enough available so that each child can participate without conflict or exclusion • Play materials are adaptive and developmentally appropriate to reflect the needs of all children, rotated based on child's interest, in good condition and are labelled and stored on low, open shelves so children can make independent choices • Materials consistently and intentionally reflect diversity, equity, and inclusion • Diverse cultures, identities, and abilities are meaningfully represented so children can see themselves and others positively reflected in the environment

Condition of Quality	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Classroom play spaces: Create and maintain safe, engaging, and developmentally appropriate classroom play spaces including cozy spaces. Play spaces support exploration, creativity and social interaction while promoting independence and autonomy amongst children	• Play areas are not well-defined, and/ or accessible to all children • Provocations and invitations are not observed in all classrooms. Limited evidence of interest-based provocations • Not all play areas are available every day. i.e. wet/dry sensory are not available every day, toys are not accessible • Not all classrooms within program have a designated quiet/ cozy area or quiet areas are missing key elements	• Majority of play areas are represented and well-defined • Provocations and invitations are observed in all classrooms. Some evidence of interest-based provocations • All Play areas are available everyday but may be closed during programming times of day – i.e. sensory bins only open in the morning • All classrooms within program have a designated quiet/cozy area that includes sensory items (fidget toys), books, and soft furnishings	• All play areas are intentionally defined and encourage exploration (dramatic play, block centre, art centre, manipulates/table activities, wet/ dry sensory and science) • Multiple provocations set out around classroom reflecting children's interests • All play areas are accessible to children at all times of the day (may exclude meal and rest times) • All classrooms within program have a designated quiet/cozy area that includes 4 of the following: sensory items (fidget toys), books, self-regulation prompts (breathing cards, mindfulness jars etc.) and soft furnishings and lighting. Visual supports are posted within area to help children identify feelings

Condition of Quality	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Routines & Transitions: Support smooth, predictable transitions through consistent routines and individualized approaches to reduce stress and promote a sense of security . Visual schedules and auditory supports are consistently used to enhance children's ability to anticipate transitions and participate meaningfully in daily routines	• Transitions are rigid • Children are required to wait for long periods of time without transition support, visual schedules and auditory supports across all classrooms • Limited evidence of auditory supports (verbal warnings) or positive engagement from educator • Visual supports are not readily available, or available in the room but are inconsistently used within the program, and educators demonstrate limited awareness of when and how visuals can be used to support children's participation, communication, and transitions	• Transitions are predictable but flexible when needed. • Occasional evidence of visual schedules used to support in transition but not consistently across all classrooms • Educators provide sufficient auditory supports (verbal warnings) and look for teachable moments. • Visual supports are available and used consistently on a daily basis within the program to support children's understanding, communication, participation, and transitions. Educators are aware of when and how to intentionally incorporate visuals into routines and activities and use visuals proactively to support children's participation and help prevent challenging behaviour	• Transitions are predictable but flexible when needed • Clear evidence that transitions , minimize wait times for children, are active and engaging (include auditory supports like songs, movement games), and utilize visual schedules and transition objects/bin. • Children are given auditory supports (sufficient verbal warnings) prior to transitions. Additional staff available to support streaming of children to reduce wait times • Visual supports are embedded throughout the program and are consistently used across routines, activities, transitions, and learning experiences. Educators are confident and intentional in selecting and using a range of visual schedules and tools, which are always available and used to support children's understanding, communication, participation, and independence. Visual supports may include step-by-step picture sequences for routines (e.g. handwashing, toileting, dressing for the outdoors), choice boards, first-then language and boards, sound and picture cues for upcoming transitions, daily schedules, and visual timers

Condition of Quality	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Meal and snack times: Utilize meal and snack times as opportunities for promoting healthy development, fostering independence, and nurturing relationships	• Educators do not sit with the children during snacks or mealtimes. Seating is not arranged so that all children feel included • Conversation and learning are not encouraged at the table throughout the meal/snack • Limited evidence that children are offered choices/opportunities to engage in serving or clean up tasks	• Educators sit with children at the table during snacks and mealtimes and seating is arranged so that all children feel included • Conversation is encouraged throughout the meal/snack • Some evidence that children are offered choices/opportunities to engage in serving • Some evidence that children are encouraged to help with clean up tasks	• Educators sit with the children during snacks and mealtimes, and seating is arranged so that all children feel included • Conversation is encouraged throughout the meal/snack and learning opportunities are leveraged (e.g. counting, noting colours of foods) • Children consistently have the opportunity to either serve themselves or participate in family style meals • Children are encouraged to help with clean up tasks (i.e. scraping plates)

Condition of Quality	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Outdoor play: Outdoor play spaces are in good repair, accessible to all, encourage connection to nature, and provide a variety of play opportunities for both group interactions and individual exploration	• Outdoor play space is in poor repair; sensory materials are not available. Insufficient play materials available to children (including wheeled toys) and open-ended materials • Educators offer limited supervisor of playground and are not actively engaged in play experiences with children • Risky play experiences are discouraged • Limited evidence of educators making connections to nature • Outdoor play discontinued during times of inclement weather	• Outdoor play space is in good repair and fully enclosed, Equipment and materials are plentiful, age-appropriate and in good repair • Educators actively supervise playground and are dispersed around the space, but are not engaged in play experiences • Risky play is not discouraged • Spaces have some naturalized materials • Outdoor play is based on the discretion of the educator and/or is seasonally dependent	• Outdoor play space is in good repair and fully enclosed, Equipment and materials are plentiful, age- appropriate and in good repair. Sensory play is accessible • Risky play is not discouraged • Educators are dispersed around the space providing supervision and are observed joining in children's play and scaffolding learning • Connection to nature is encouraged and nurtured. Spaces have naturalized materials and are inclusive for children of all abilities • Outdoor play is all-weather, all-season year round

Pillar: Family and Community Engagement

Objective: Promote strong partnerships with families and the community through transparent communication, responsive feedback, clear policies, and inclusive practices that support children's learning, well-being, and sense of belonging.

Condition of Quality	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Parent communication: Maintain open, respectful, and consistent communication with families to build trust and support each child's learning and well-being	• Family communication occurs but is limited; parent boards or newsletters may not always be available • Families are welcomed inconsistently at drop-off and pick-up, and daily updates from educators occur only occasionally • Communication to parents/families about children • Changes to processes affecting families may not always be clearly communicated	• Parent communication boards are visible but may not always be fully up to date • Families are usually welcomed at drop-off and pick-up, and educators frequently share daily updates • Changes to processes affecting families are generally clear, documented, and followed	• Parent communication boards are visible, up to date, and include menus, staff photos, schedules, and upcoming events. • Families are consistently welcomed at drop-off and pick-up, with educators always sharing daily updates. • Changes to processes affecting families are clearly documented, consistently applied, and regularly reviewed.
Community activities/ connection to broader community: Foster children's sense of belonging and social awareness by participating in community activities and building connections with the broader community. Interdisciplinary practice is present in the centre and there are collaborative practices occurring	• Limited community activities/ connection to broader community • Inter professional practice is not present in the program	• Community activities/ connection to broader community occurs quarterly • Limited inter professional practice is present in the program	• Regular community activities /connection to broader community occurring monthly • Inter professional practice is present in the program and children and staff benefit from the interprofessional practice

Condition of Quality	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Family Input and Feedback: Families are provided with regular opportunities to share input and feedback, including through parent committees, surveys, or meetings, helping the centre respond effectively to their needs and preferences	• Opportunities for families to provide feedback are limited or informal • Parent committees, surveys, or meetings may occur occasionally but are not consistently used	• Families are regularly invited to provide feedback through parent committees, social events, surveys, or meetings • Feedback received is inconsistently considered or acted upon to inform centre practices	• Families have regular, well-established opportunities to provide input, including active parent committees, structured surveys, and regular meetings • Input is considered in decision-making and used to inform routines, programs, or processes • A strong culture of family engagement is evident, with families feeling their input is valued and acted upon

Additional Overall Considerations

Additional Documentation:
Note: non-observable, not to be completed on site. CPA will gather documentation based on the following considerations and for relevant and applicable considerations will include these in their overall quality assessment.

Considerations:
A. Terminations: termination of care is considered only as a last resort, after all appropriate supports, accommodations, and collaborative problem-solving efforts have been explored in partnership with families and relevant professionals
B. Review patterns around the frequency of serious occurrences
C. Student Placements: The centre has provided placements for students in past 12 months
D. IEYMH Participation: Is the centre actively participating and training staff in Infant Early Years Mental Health?
E: Additional assessments: Is the centre performing additional assessments to improve quality? (ECERS/ITERS)?