naeyc® National Association for the Education of Young Children

Early Learning Program Quality Assessment and Accreditation
Application Review Protocol

Recognition and Accreditation/Accreditation+

July 2025

Contents

Introduction

All programs are to receive a fair and equitable assessment of the documentation and materials submitted as applicants for NAEYC Early Learning Program (ELP) Recognition and Accreditation/Accreditation+. NAEYC Assessors must plan and execute the review and evaluation of such applications consistently and reliably. This protocol aims to provide a standardized review process to achieve these goals.

Fidelity to this protocol and inter-rater reliability statistics related to the assessment of submitted applications is continuously monitored.

This protocol is applicable to all programs that have submitted applications for NAEYC ELP Recognition, Accreditation, or Accreditation+ as of March 1, 2025, or later.

Assessment Tools

NAEYC Assessors must use NAEYC provided hardware, software, and technology systems to complete all assessment and evaluation tasks as outlined in this protocol. Use of personal computers or devices, or software and technology systems not described in this protocol is not permitted.

Technology Systems

Salesforce

Salesforce is a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) tool that NAEYC utilizes to operate key services and support, including managing the accreditation system, and connect with our customers. Salesforce is used to capture data related to all interactions and manage recognition and accreditation requirements.

Survey Monkey

SurveyMonkey is a cloud-based platform that helps users create, send, and analyze surveys and forms. Survey Monkey has been integrated with Salesforce and is used to capture the documentation and evidence for Early Learning Programs that are applying for Recognition and Accreditation. Assessors will work directly in Survey Monkey to review and score documentation; once the scores are completed the data is migrated to Salesforce via an automation. Programs can view application results via the Early Learning Hub (Salesforce) and in Survey Monkey.

Assignments

Assessors are assigned Recognition and Accreditation applications on a rolling basis. Assessors are responsible for reviewing applicant information and ensuring that no conflict of interest exists (see sidebar). When a conflict of interest has been identified designated ELP staff must be informed so the application can be manually reassigned. Assessors will complete the reassignment form to identify the need for reassignment.

Applications must be reviewed and completed no later than 90 days from the date the application was successfully submitted by the program. Assessors are responsible for ensuring that all assigned applications are completed on time.

Assessors are expected to complete all assigned applications for which there is no conflict of interest. There may be rare circumstances that warrant an application be reassigned to another assessor during the 90-day review period. Such reassignments must be discussed and approved.

Application Reviews

Assessment Environment

NAEYC assessors have an ethical responsibility to maintain the confidentiality of all programs seeking recognition and accreditation. To that end, assessors ensure that the review of recognition and accreditation applications takes place in a quiet and relatively private environment that is reasonably free of distractions. A privacy screen is recommended for devices (laptops, tablets) that will be used for reviewing applications.

A secure internet connection is required. It is not recommended that NAEYC work, including the review of recognition and accreditation applications, be conducted while connected to unsecured, publicly accessible internet connections (e.g., airports, cafes, coffeeshops, malls).

Allocating Time for Application Reviews

The amount of time it takes to review recognition and accreditation applications will be closely monitored in the months following system launch in March 2025. The information gathered during this monitoring period will be used to adjust the recommendations for allocating sufficient time to complete application reviews. To begin, recognition applications should be allocated 1 hour and 30 minutes at minimum and accreditation applications, 2 hours and 30 minutes at minimum.

Assessors should not complete more than 6 hours of application reviews per office-workday and ensure that adequate breaks of at least 20 minutes are scheduled between application reviews. No more than 2 recognition

Conflict of Interest

Assigned applications must be returned and reassigned to another assessor when there is a real or perceived conflict of interest.

This includes when:

- The assigned assessor has a current or recent past (within 2 years) fiduciary connection to the program (e.g., governing board member, oversight committee member, financial stewardship).
- The assigned assessor has been employed by the program/provider within the recent past (2 years).
- The program has had a previous application reviewed by the assigned assessor which resulted in a deferred decision within the past year.

There may be other circumstances that indicate a conflict of interest may exist which warrant a conversation with designated early learning staff to make a final determination.

applications or no more than 1 accreditation application should be reviewed on travel days and site visit days. These parameters have been put in place to help manage fatigue risks which can compromise the quality of the application review process.

General Rating Practices

Assessment items in the recognition and accreditation applications are organized by source of evidence rather than by standard. The sources of evidence evaluated in the applications include 1) ELP Hub Items, 2) Family Handbook Items, 3) Staff Handbook Items, 4) Show & Describe Items, and 5) Narrative Description Items.

In General

Carefully review the entirety of the item language, guidance, and scoring information. These provide the necessary information to evaluate and rate the evidence provided in a consistent and reliable manner. Unless a specific definition of a term has been provided or specific rating principle has been outlined for an item in the provided guidance, apply a broad interpretation to the item language when evaluating the evidence.

ELP Hub Items

ELP Hub items are related to the program's regulatory status and staff qualifications. Programs are expected to keep this information updated within the Hub. Programs must self-assess the relevant items in the application.

For staff qualifications, there is no documentation uploaded into the application; evaluate and rate these items as directed in the ELP Hub. Assessors will reference the staff qualification tab/dashboard in the Account Record in Salesforce and also review the staff listing to ensure that at least one administrator and teacher is listed. NAEYC reserves the right to request documentation to validate any staffing changes/updates.

In general, a program's ELP Hub record should be updated and confirmed at regular intervals to reflect the program's current location, ages enrolled, staffing, and classes. The following ELP Hub fields have an impact on what a program encounters in an application. Within the ELP Hub under "General Information", when a program does not have any enrollment entered for one of the four age groups, assessment items specific to that age group will not be present in the application. Example: If there is no data entered in the "Infant" enrollment field, infant specific items will not be included in the application (R.1.03 Infants).

Licensing/Regulatory Status

Within the application, programs will be asked about their current licensing/regulatory status and will upload a copy of their license showing it is current and in good standing and/or describe any issues related to their current licensing/regulatory status. License-Exempt programs must provide a signed copy of the License-Exempt Acknowledgement Form. The status of programs licensed by the state may be confirmed by assessors through online records and databases. Quality Assurance may also assist assessors in determining the licensing or regulatory status of programs when there are unique circumstances. If the

assessor determines that the program is not in good standing, the assessor will send the application back to the program and advise them to proceed with submission once they are back in compliance and have a valid licensing status.

Evidence

Programs are required to use evidence that reflects the specific program location that is submitting the application. Only system-wide eligible items should include generalized information that may not be specific to a location. See Appendix C for a list of all system wide eligible assessment items. False or misleading information may result in the cessation of the application review and/or revocation of the program's status. Any use of artificial intelligence (AI) must serve to enhance or assist a program's original work. Programs must not rely solely on AI-generated content; instead, submissions should reflect specific and meaningful details about how the program is meeting the specific item requirements.

Family and Staff Handbook Items

Programs are prompted to upload up to ten Family Handbook/Manuals and up to ten Staff Handbooks/Manuals. Programs must self-assess the relevant items in the application and provide the specific page number(s) and the specific staff handbook, if more than one has been uploaded, where the relevant documentation can be found.

Passages within the handbooks may or may not be highlighted (programs are strongly encouraged to do so). Evidence not found on the pages within the specified handbook/manual identified by the program will result in the item being rated as unmet (NO). When relevant evidence is located elsewhere in the documents provided the rating for the item will not be revised. If evidence of an item being met is found outside of the page number(s) provided by the program, notations will be provided to the program to guide and inform improvement efforts.

Show and Describe Items

Programs must self-assess, upload specific documentation, and provide a written description for these items. The item language and guidance will indicate how many examples must be uploaded and described as well as how many sentences the written description needs to be. The written description should address all uploaded examples within the range provided (see side bar). The written description should directly address the specific evidence that has been uploaded.

Evaluating Written Descriptions

Often an item will call for more than one example. Descriptions should address ALL requested examples within the sentence range provided.

Example 1:

Item R.1.02

The program or provider has worked to establish warm, positive relationships with each family.

This item requires two examples to be uploaded to show how this happens at the program AND a description between five and eight sentences.

✓ Both examples should be addressed within a single description of 5-8 sentences in length.

✗ It is not required that each example be accompanied

Evidence requires a description of either three to five sentences or five to eight sentences. Responses less than the stated minimum may be rated as met (YES) if the provided response sufficiently addresses the evidence beyond a restatement of the item language or affirmation that the item is met without specific examples. Responses longer than the stated maximum are not automatically rated as unmet (NO). Attempt is made to read the full description but there is no requirement to evaluate descriptions beyond the stated sentence maximum + 1 (i.e., six sentences total for items requiring 3-5 sentence descriptions). If the description has not adequately addressed the evidence in the stated range + 1, this will be reflected in the notes provided to the program.

Narrative Description Items

There is no requirement for programs to upload evidence in response to these items. The item language and guidance will indicate how many examples must be described as well as how many sentences the written description needs to be. The written description should address all requested examples within the range provided (see side bar).

Items require a description of either three to five sentences or five to eight sentences. Responses less than the stated minimum may be rated as met (YES) if the provided response sufficiently addresses the item beyond a restatement of the item language or affirmation that the item is met without specific examples. Responses longer than the stated maximum are not automatically rated as unmet (NO). Attempt is made to read the full description but there is no requirement to evaluate descriptions beyond the stated sentence maximum + 1 (i.e., six sentences total for items requiring 3-5 sentence descriptions). If the description has not adequately addressed the item in the stated range + 1, this will be reflected in the notes provided to the program.

Rating Assessment Items

Item Types

There are three types of assessment items in the recognition and accreditation applications.

Standard Assessment Items make up the bulk of the items. These may or may not be applicable to a particular program based on the specific age categories served and/or program characteristics.

Required Assessment Items represent practices and supporting policies that are considered critical for creating safe environments for young children. They include standards for licensing/regulation, supervision, child guidance, and safe infant sleep. Programs that do not meet the applicable required items will have their application deferred.

Optional Assessment Items are items in the accreditation application that reflect recommended practices but may not yet be widely adopted. Programs that demonstrate the practices and policies addressed in these items will receive credit for their efforts in going above and beyond the standard and required assessment items. However, programs will not be penalized if they are not yet able to fully meet the stated practices or policies.

Optional items can only be submitted in an initial application submission; if not met, these items are not present on the re-submission application.

Response Options

There are three possible rating options that may be available.

YES ratings indicate that the program has sufficiently addressed all elements of the item in question (item language, item guidance, and rating guidance). All items, regardless of type, will always have YES as a response option. YES ratings always have a positive impact on scoring (adds to both the numerator and denominator).

NO ratings indicate that the program has not sufficiently addressed all elements of the item (item language, item guidance, and rating guidance). Standard items and required items will always have NO as a response option. NO ratings always have a negative impact on scoring (adds to the denominator, but not the numerator). Notes and feedback are provided for all unmet items to guide programs in their improvement efforts.

NOT APPLICABLE (N/A) responses are available only on specific items, regardless of type (standard, required, or optional). Standard items and required items may have N/A as an available response option depending on the specific ages served by the program and/or other program characteristics. Optional items will always have an N/A response option rather than a NO response. N/A ratings have a marginally positive impact on scoring (reduces the denominator without contributing to the numerator).

Application Review Meeting

To ensure that evidence is reviewed equitably, fairly, and with consistency, a regular meeting schedule allows for the confidential discussion and review of evidence in a group setting consisting of reliability-trained early learning program assessors, reliability specialists, members of the applied research team, and/or quality assurance staff. These meetings provide opportunities to address training concerns, evaluate unique or challenging evidence, and establish the need for improvements to the item language, item guidance, and/or rating guidance prior to finalizing relevant ratings.

Notes & Feedback to Programs

An important element of the application review process is the feedback that programs receive. It is not enough that programs understand which assessment items they did not meet, they must also understand why any items were unmet and be guided toward better practices. It is essential that assessors be able to accurately and succinctly describe the specific elements present or lacking in contributing to unmet ratings. This also serves to avoid costly appeals and inform ongoing training and reliability needs across assessors.

Notes are required in the following circumstances:

- When relevant evidence is found in the family or staff handbooks somewhere other than where the program indicated in their application.

- When a written description has not adequately addressed the item in the stated range + 1.
- When an item is rated as unmet (NO).

Notes are <u>encouraged</u> in the following circumstances:

- When evidence could be strengthened or improved (rated YES).
- When something is recognized within the evidence as a specific area of strength for a program.

Notes and feedback should always align with Developmentally Appropriate Practice. It is strongly recommended that assessors have a physical or digital copy of the book available to assist with notes and feedback.

Inter-rater Reliability

Assessors are required to maintain inter-rater reliability to a degree of 90% accuracy as a condition of employment. Formal inter-rater reliability scores will be completed on a quarterly basis for both Recognition and Accreditation applications. Additional reliability reviews may be assigned as deemed necessary through continuous monitoring protocols.

When an application has been identified for reliability review it will be assigned to Reliability Specialist, Documentation. The Reliability Specialist, Documentation will download a copy of the application and send it to the Assessor. Both the assessor and reliability reviewer independently complete their evaluation and assessment of the application materials. The reviewers meet to discuss their rating discrepancies and come to consensus prior to finalizing any ratings. Final ratings are recorded on the assigned assessor's tool and this is submitted for scoring.

Submitting Completed Reviews

For information on the application review process, see <u>Policy Handbook – Scoring and Administrative Review of Discussions</u>.

Review Outcomes

Recognition

- Approved – Recognized for 1 year. Program may choose to upgrade to accreditation at any time during the recognition term or may renew recognition at the annual renewal date.
- Deferred – May resubmit evidence for unmet items within 30 days at no cost. There is no option to appeal the final decision. Programs seeking recognition can reapply at any time.

Accreditation/Accreditation+

- Approved – Accredited for 5 years, subject to random announced[1] and random unannounced[2] visits as well as scheduled verification visits[3].
    - o If Accredited, may upgrade to Accreditation+ at any time.
    - o Must submit Annual Reports
    - o Programs seeking Accreditation+ will receive a scheduled announced site[4] visit within 6 months of the application being approved.
- Deferred – May resubmit evidence for unmet items within 30 days at no cost. May not appeal until after the resubmission has been reviewed and scored. Appeal within 30 days of decision.

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[1] Programs are notified of random announced site visits no later than 2:00 PM local time the business day prior to the assessor's arrival. These account for approximately 10% of all accredited and accreditation+ programs and are conducted at no additional cost to the program.

[2] Programs do not receive any prior notification for random unannounced site visits. These account for approximately 1% of all accredited and accredited+ programs and are conducted at no additional cost to the program.

[3] Verification visits are a type of scheduled site visit ordered in response to Quality Assurance processes. Programs receiving verification visits are notified of the site visit no later than 2:00 PM local time the business day prior to the assessor's arrival. Programs are responsible for the fees associated with these visit types and failure to comply with an ordered verification visit will result in withdrawal of the program's accreditation or accreditation+ status.

[4] Site visits in connection with an Accreditation+ application review are scheduled within the six months following the application review. Programs seeking Accreditation+ are notified of the site visit no later than 2:00 PM local time the business day prior to the assessor's arrival. The fees associated with this visit type must be paid prior to scheduling.