

Early Learning Program Quality Assessment and Accreditation Site Visit Protocol

Accreditation and Accreditation+

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Introduction

All accredited programs are to receive a fair and equitable site visit whether that is a random visit, verification visit, or accreditation+ visit. NAEYC Assessors must plan and execute site visits consistently and reliably. This protocol aims to provide a standardized process to achieve these goals.

Fidelity to this protocol and inter-rater reliability statistics related to the assessment of randomly sampled classrooms is continuously monitored.

This protocol applies to all programs that have achieved accreditation as of March 3, 2025 and 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, devices, or software and technology systems not described in this protocol is not permitted.

Hardware

NAEYC-issued iPad

NAEYC-issued laptop

Software/Applications (apps)

Office 365

- Outlook
 - Email, calendar
- Word
 - Visit schedules, email templates

Microsoft Teams

PDF Expert

PDF Expert is an app that is necessary to complete relevant visit forms, worksheets, and back-up observation tools. This app is required on the NAEYC-issued iPad and may also be added to the NAEYC-issued laptop for ease of transferring documents between devices.

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.

Visit Assignments

- The Reliability Specialist, Observation will be responsible for completing visit assignments on a weekly basis.
- Assignments will be made based on geographic location of the program, assessor current workload, known Conflict of Interests, etc.

Returning a Visit

- There may be a time when an assessor is unable to follow through with conducting a visit after it has been accepted. In this circumstance, the assessor must notify their supervisor as soon as they realize they will be unable to complete the assignment.
- Once the program is formally returned, it will be removed from the assessor's assigned visit queue. The visit will be reassigned to another assessor and the visit scheduling process will continue.

Timeline for Completion

Random visits and accreditation+ visits must be completed within 6 months of assignment. Verification visits ordered through Quality Assurance processes must be completed within 3 months of assignment. Refer to [Visit Planning](#) for additional guidelines around scheduling visits.

- Clearing or declaring COI
 - Assignments 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 or provider within the recent past (2 years).

Building Visit Schedules

- Schedule arrival and visit start based on program information (hours of operation, nap times, etc.) available in Salesforce.
- Do not begin a visit earlier than the program opens or before 7 AM without approval from designated ELP staff.
- Do not end a visit later than the program closes or past 6 PM without approval from designated ELP staff.
- Pay careful attention to individual class hours (full day vs. part day, part week hours, nap times) when planning visit dates and schedules.
- In multi-site programs, pay attention to which classrooms are located at which site. Plan inter-site travel accordingly in the visit schedule.
- Add extra time to the schedule to visit classrooms not selected for observation

Visit Planning

In General

Site visits must be scheduled when the program is open and serving children except for [federal holidays](#). Careful attention must be given to the information provided in each program's ELP Hub including operating information and planned closures. Some programs only operate part of the year, part of the week, and/or part of the day. It is imperative that this information be fully understood when planning visits within the specified [visit window](#).

Length of Visits

The size of the program, and therefore the number of observations required, determines the number of days and assessors needed for a site visit. Site visits are typically completed in one day or two consecutive weekdays. Visit length can also be influenced by the program's hours of operation, the schedules of individual classes, and the possibility that assessors are conducting reliability checks or collecting research data in addition to basic visit tasks. Accreditation visits have a maximum of 8 observations.

- No more than 5 observations should be done in a day, and the assessor must ensure adequate breaks are scheduled. In general, the recommended amount per day is 4 observations within one day.
 - See schedule templates.
- In some cases, it may be possible to plan two visits on a single day; one in the morning and one in the afternoon. This is usually possible when the number of observations required at each program is small (1-2) and the programs are located near one another.
 - See schedule templates.
- In some instances (e.g., remoteness of the site, short program hours, large number of observations) it may make more sense for a single assessor to conduct a visit over 3 days rather than bring a co-assessor. There may also be times when it is necessary to change the number of days needed to complete the assessment midway through the visit.
 - This requires approval from [designated ELP staff](#).
- Visits conducted in remote areas, on military installations, and/or overseas are likely to require additional planning and consideration with relation to travel logistics or restrictions, overnight accommodation options, and/or public health orders. [Designated ELP staff](#) are authorized to approve additional travel or visit days in these circumstances. These staff members may also provide support in planning arrangements.
- Visits should be clustered in such a way as to maximize travel efficiency. Programs in the same geographic area should be visited in the same trip itinerary whenever possible. [Designated ELP staff](#) may provide assistance in determining the best possible clustering given the various factors at play.

Selecting Class Observations

Random selection of classes for assessment is necessary to maintain the validity of the NAEYC Early Learning Program Accreditation system. Random selection is a research-based practice that allows for confidence in the assessment system by assuring that no human bias factors potentially contribute to the decision as to which classes are assessed.

Determining which classes and how many classes are observed during the visit depends upon the following guidelines:

- Observe at least 50% of the total number of classes in the program, to a maximum of eight; For purposes of determining how many classes to assess, part-day and part-week classes that have the same lead teacher in the same classroom space are a single class.
- Observe at least one class from each eligible age category (infant, toddler/two, preschool, kindergarten);
- In multi-site programs, observe at least one class from each site.
- Within each age category, use a random selection process to determine the specific classes to be observed.

Relevant Materials:

Visit Schedule Templates

Visit Disruptions and Change of Travel Plans

Visit disruptions may be caused by unexpected program closures, assessor illness, family emergencies, flight cancellations, natural disasters, etc. [Designated ELP staff](#) are available to assist with visit disruptions that impact the site visit and/or planned travel and can help with approving revised protocols, visit postponements, and/or authorizing out-of-policy travel expenses.

Visit Notification

Unannounced random visits are the only visit type for which programs receive no notification of the visit prior to the assessor's arrival. For all other visit types (announced random visit, scheduled verification visit, and scheduled accreditation+ visit), programs are entitled to advance notification of the visit. Programs will receive notification of these visit types no later than 2:00 PM local time the business day prior to the start of the visit. This allows for the flexibility needed to maximize travel arrangements among constantly shifting logistics in balance with program need and desire for advance notification of the visit.

This advance notification should be first attempted by phone. If the primary and secondary contacts are not reached directly via phone call, a voicemail or message is left with the staff person who answers the phone. A follow-up email will then be sent. If no response is received to visit notifications sent via email, a second attempt may be made.

The goal of this notification is to prepare the program for assessment and confirm information related to operating hours; open classrooms and the age categories served; logistics for the assessor's arrival and general plan for the visit, including necessary parking information; and any other information needed to successfully complete the visit. Programs are responsible for ensuring that the information in the ELP Hub is accurate at the time of notification of a visit to ensure the assessor has the most up-to-date information about open classrooms and staffing. Contact information for the assessor is provided to allow programs to quickly notify the assessor of any unexpected closures or other issues that may impact the visit.

Visit Procedures

Visit Refusal

A program's continued participation in the Early Learning Program Accreditation system is voluntary. At any time throughout the course of the site visit, the program administrator may choose to refuse or end the site visit. In this circumstance, the administrator is provided with an opportunity to carefully read and complete a digital copy of the Acknowledgement of Refusal of NAEYC Visit form. Upon completion of this form the visit is concluded. The program will receive a modified Visit Completion Packet within 48 hours.

Relevant Materials:

Acknowledgement of Refusal of NAEYC Visit Form

Attire and Belongings

Functional "business casual" clothing is acceptable when conducting accreditation site visits. Layers are recommended. Bright colors, bold prints, flashy jewelry and heavy fragrances are discouraged to remain as unobtrusive as possible during class observations.

Limit belongings to only those necessary to complete the site visit. A safe location to store belongings during class observations should be identified during the opening meeting. It is recommended that any food brought into the program be nut-free or stored in a vehicle. Water offered by the program may be accepted under any circumstance. Coffee, tea, and other beverages may be accepted if these are normally provided to staff and/or families. Foods and beverages purchased by the program off-site may not be accepted under any circumstance.

Confidentiality

All information and evidence that is observed and assessed during the visit is to remain confidential. No video recording, audio recording, or photography of evidence is permitted. Questions regarding the assessment and evaluation of specific evidence or circumstances should be directed to [designated ELP staff](#) only.

At no time is it permissible to share details of information (written, observed, verbal, or otherwise) obtained throughout the course of a site visit on social media platforms or with individuals not directly involved in the accreditation site visit process, except as required by law.

[Designated ELP staff](#) and members of the Quality Assurance team may request pertinent information pertaining to the site visit as needed to address matters related to authorized protocol exceptions and required assessment items. Additionally, the Council for NAEYC Accreditation of Early Learning Programs will be provided information about the site visit when considering appeals to adverse decisions.

Arrival

Arrive promptly at the time coordinated with the administrator during the communications at the time of visit notification. Ensure that ample time has been allocated to allow for parking and completing any necessary security checks. NAEYC issued badges should be worn visibly throughout the site visit and state issued driver's license or identification card must also be available to access some locations. Business cards may be provided but are not required.

Following introductions and completing any necessary security checks and immediately begin the orientation meeting.

Orientation Meeting

The orientation meeting is always the first task of an accreditation site visit. The purpose of this meeting is to review the planned schedule of the visit, orient the program administrators to the site visit process, and share information related to the assessment process, and identify the workspace in which assessor belongings and administrative visit tasks can be completed. The orientation should be scheduled for no less than 30 minutes and should generally take no more than 60 minutes in even the largest of programs. The *Process Verification Form* serves as a guide for the orientation meeting ensuring important information is shared and documented.

Visit Schedule

The general order and anticipated timing of visit tasks is shared verbally with the administrator during the orientation meeting. Confirm that the number of scheduled observations is consistent with [protocol](#) and that they are scheduled for times during which children are not napping. The specific classrooms that have been selected for observation are not shared until the closing meeting. Updates to the visit schedule may be required based on information obtained in the orientation meeting (adding or removing class observations, re-randomizing selected classes, etc.).

Throughout the course of the site visit, the written schedule is updated to reflect the actual time for each specific task. This final schedule is reviewed during the closing meeting with program administrators and a copy of the final schedule is included in the visit completion packet email following the site visit.

Review Forms & Interview

The process verification form is reviewed and orientation meeting checklists are completed. This includes collecting written responses to a short series of questions that help build context for what the assessor can expect to see during the class observations. All relevant elements of the process verification form are completed. This form is reviewed again during the closing meeting.

Program Tour

The last task of the orientation meeting is to receive a tour of the program to ensure understanding of all relevant indoor and outdoor spaces utilized by the program, including classrooms, playgrounds, or other learning or working areas that may not be formally assessed as part of the randomly selected class observations. Staff members, family members, and children present or encountered during the tour should be greeted warmly and professionally.

Relevant Materials:

Site Visit Schedule

Site Visit Forms

Compiled Safety Concerns Report Form

Class Observations

Class observations are scheduled for exactly one continuous hour each. The following guidelines ensure that the class observation is conducted as unobtrusively as possible:

- All talk is kept to a minimum. The names of observed staff and the presence of any children receiving specific services or other accommodation will be confirmed and educators will be asked if there is anything specific the assessor should be aware of at the beginning of the observation period, or at a convenient time prior to the end of the observation.
- Do not interfere with the class activities in any way and move to less active areas when in the way of teachers or children.
- Sit or stand at the perimeter of the classroom as discreetly as possible.
- Do not sit on classroom furniture such as shelves, tables, the children's chairs near an activity table, or on play equipment.
- Move around the area to get a better vantage point of interactions or conversations as needed.
- Be cordial and pleasant when interacting with staff and children. Staff may be nervous about the visit, and assessors will do their best to put them at ease. Assessors may acknowledge and respond to children if they are approached, but do not initiate conversations or otherwise take part in classroom activities. Assessors are encouraged to tell children that they are watching the class play or that they must

finish their work. If a child is interested in what is on the assessor's tablet, assessors may show them that it is nothing interesting to them!

- Assessor should bring outdoor wear into the classroom if there is a chance, they will be following a class outside during the hour.
- Class observations may begin if the class includes at least one awake child and one teaching staff member.
- Assessors do not begin an observation if no children have arrived, if all children have departed for the day, or if there are children present but they are all asleep.
- While conducting the observation, assessors stay with children and staff for one hour, wherever they are. If the class moves outside, the assessor must follow along. If a class breaks into subgroups, it is the assessor's discretion to choose one or the other subgroup to stay with. The time the class observation starts is noted on the CO cover page along with the time the assessor leaves the class.
- Upon starting each observation, assessors confirm the names of the teaching staff present and the status of other adults present (parents, volunteers, administrators). It may be that this can be determined by reading staff name tags, seeing their photos posted, or listening to their conversations. If none of these means is available, assessors will briefly ask staff to confirm their names, and then begin the observation. Assessors do not ask staff about children with special needs or ask them about looking through closets and cabinets.
- Small objects choke testers are brought into infant/toddler/two observations.
- Assessors must follow the program policy regarding shoes in infant rooms.
- Assessors must silence their cell phone and/or tablet and do not receive or make phone calls or text messages during observations.
- When conducting the class observation, assessors are considering the full experience of the children in the identified class. Therefore, in instances where two or more classes are combined (for example, in an outdoor space) or there are other adults in the room, all teacher/adult – child interactions are considered when completing ratings

Closing Meeting

- Review schedule as completed.
- Assessor reviews safety concerns that were noted in each observation and will provide the location and specifics around the noted issue. Programs will be able to provide a verbal response, and the assessor will note the program's response on the tool.
- Assessor MAY adjust relevant ratings if there is compelling reason (e.g., the outlet is actually tamper resistant, the “hazardous” material is not actually harmful (i.e., “terminix” sprayer was actually WATER for the garden plants, etc).
- Exit Interview - Assessor will ask the administrator if there was anything that happened during the visit that was not typical, and if they would like to provide additional context around it. For example: non-custodial parent pick-up, fire drill,

teacher accidentally drove through playground fence, pipe burst, staff callout/staffing difficulties, staff emergencies, etc.)

- This response will be captured, noted and reported back in results. This information may become relevant if a program appeals their final decision.
- Assessor will share 1-2 pieces of brief feedback about their experience in the program during the visit.
- Assessor will review next steps in accreditation process:
 - Timing for scoring and decisions
 - Where to reach out for support
 - Required item follow up
 - Post-visit evaluation
- Assessor and administrator (or their designee) will complete the Visit Signature Form and will sign electronically.

Required Items

Required items are those that are considered essential to program quality. Failure to meet any one of these items during the site visit will trigger a specific write-up by the assessor and will result in the program receiving an adverse accreditation decision.

Required Item	Item Language
O.6.10	Staff never use physical punishment and do not engage in psychological abuse or coercion.
O.6.11	Infants and toddlers are always supervised by sight and sound.
O.6.12	Preschoolers and kindergarteners are supervised by sight and sound most of the time. Children may be out of sight for up to five minutes so long as they can still be heard.
O.6.13	There is always at least one educator with current pediatric CPR and first aid training in the learning environments where children are present.
O.6.14	Staff always place infants younger than 12 months on their backs to sleep without the use of sleep positioners unless ordered by a physician.
O.6.15	Infants are only placed to sleep, or permitted to sleep, in equipment that is specifically designed for infant sleep. When infants fall asleep in a staff member's arms the infant is placed to sleep in appropriate equipment.
O.9.04	The class observation was free of unusual circumstances or critical issues (not otherwise covered in this observation tool) that should prevent this class from passing.

If at any time during a visit the assessor directly observes evidence of a potential failure to comply with any of the listed items, this protocol is followed by the assessor:

1. The assessor completes the Required Item Report Form (RIRF) and provides the form to the program at the closing meeting.

2. If a child is in immediate risk for harm or abuse the assessor must halt the observation and follow the Mandated Reporter Policy below.
3. The program should send an email with the Required Item Report Form to qualityassurance@naeyc.org within 72 hours of the site visit.
4. NAEYC will respond within 30 days to inform the program of the final decision on the required item.

First Aid / CPR Certification Review (Item O.6.13)

If after all class observations are completed there is some question or doubt as to whether adequate information has been found to verify the First Aid/CPR documentation of staff who were present with children during scheduled observations, a final request for documentation is made prior to the closing meeting. Ratings for item O.6.13 must be completed prior to the start of the closing meeting.

Mandated Reporter Policy

A mandated reporter is required to report any situation where they suspect or have reason to believe that a child has been abused or neglected. The NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct requires NAEYC assessors conducting work on behalf of Early Learning Program Accreditation to take steps to protect children from practices and situations that endanger their health, safety, or well-being. Under these circumstances, NAEYC Assessors are required to stop a site visit and make a report to local authorities (licensing/regulatory bodies, police department, child protection agencies, etc.). If the assessor is unsure where or when to report, please contact NAEYC General Counsel to help advise.

If an assessor observed such a situation, they should take the following steps:

- Ensure the health and safety of any children impacted which, in certain situations, may mean intervention by the assessor (e.g., removing the child from an unsafe situation preventing abuse, or requesting assistance from other program staff or administrators) which may include calling emergency services or local authorities if an immediate threat or unsafe situation is happening.
- After it is determined that children are safe, the assessor contacts their direct supervisor to discuss the situation that was witnessed.
 - o If the supervisor is unavailable, the team member should contact the Manager of Accreditation or the Director, Quality Assessment and Assurance
 - o If local authorities or emergency services have not been called, the assessor should call the appropriate authority to report the situation
- Informs the program administrator of the situation that was observed, NAEYC's requirement to report to whichever local authority we determine to be appropriate, and that the visit has been halted.

- The assessor completes an incident form then provides the program administrator with time to add their response in the correct section on the incident form. The assessor and program administrator sign the form.
- The assessor stays onsite until the local authorities have the information needed.
- The assessor submits the completed incident form and any other necessary information to Quality Assurance by the end of the business day on the date of the incident.
- The assessor informs Quality Assurance of any further requests for information or documentation from the program, licensing/regulatory authorities, local policy, child protection agencies when requests are received.
- The assessor is not authorized to make a statement to news or media outlets. Such requests should be forwarded to the Managing Director, Early Learning.
- Quality Assurance team members ensure that appropriate ELP Directors and NAEYC General Counsel are informed of the situation and apprised of any new developments as they occur.

After an accreditation visit is halted due to suspected child abuse, neglect, failure to provide a safe environment, or failure to protect children from imminent harm, Quality Assurance calls the program the same day the visit is halted to inform the program of (a) next steps and (b) information that will need to be provided.

- There will be no accreditation decision issued based on the data collected during the visit prior to it being halted.
- The program must submit a 72-Hour report to Quality Assurance and respond to all requests for additional information, including but not limited to policy reports, licensing/regulatory reports, and investigation results.
- If the program is currently accredited, the Scope and Severity review may result in revocation of the remainder of the Accreditation term.
- The program, whether currently accredited or not, will not be permitted to re-engage with the accreditation process until the program is able to demonstrate full and valid compliance with the applicable licensing or regulatory authority. This information will be provided to NAEYC's Quality Assurance Department.
- The program will not be able to re-engage in the accreditation process for at least 6 months from the date of the incident to ensure proper time for any investigations or inspections to take place with resolution.

When the program can demonstrate full and valid compliance with the applicable licensing or regulatory authority, a new application may be submitted. However, an accreditation site visit will not be scheduled if the program is unable to meet Required Item 10B. 16

Visits to other Classrooms

Classes that are not selected for observation may be visited by the assessor when onsite at the program. These visits are not mandatory and are not included in the overall assessment of the program. However, if concerns related to required items are noted during this time, it will be shared with the program and Quality Assurance.

Decision Outcomes

Programs receive a decision notification within 45 days following a site visit. The email notification is sent to the active primary and secondary contact preferred emails on record for the program. The site visit report is accessible through the Early Learning Hub under “Site Visit History”.

A decision of “Accredited” or “Accredited+” indicates that the program has demonstrated through observation-based assessment that it:

- Meets 100 percent of all required items
- Meets 80 percent of overall observation-based items in all classrooms observed

Appendix A: Federal Holidays

Early Learning Program Accreditation does not conduct accreditation site visits on federal holidays, regardless of whether NAEYC offices are open and/or the accredited program is open and serving children. Ensure that visits are not scheduled during the following holidays or days of observation.

Specific Dates and Days of Observance can be found via the [U.S. Office of Personnel Management website](#).

New Year's Day

Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Inauguration Day*

Washington's Birthday†

Memorial Day

Juneteenth National Independence Day

Independence Day

Labor Day

Columbus Day

Veterans Day

Thanksgiving Day

Christmas Day

* Each fourth year when a President is inaugurated.

† This holiday is designated as "Washington's Birthday" in section 6103(a) of title 5 of the United States Code, which is the law that specifies holidays for Federal employees. Other institutions such as state and local governments and private businesses may use other names such as "President's Day".