Family Child Care Settings:

Considerations for Organizations Conducting CLASS® Observations

Overview of Family Child Care Settings

Family child care (FCC) is a small but important sector of early care and education. Over 1,000,000 paid providers care for more than 3,000,000 children from birth through age 5 in family child care settings, both regulated and unregulated (OPRE, 2016). FCCs provide care to a significant portion of our youngest children (about 27% of infants and 24% of toddlers receiving childcare subsidies are cared for in an FCC setting). Family child care settings may be run by early childhood educators who own several programs and employ additional caregivers, or by providers who provide childcare in part to earn money while staying at home with their own young children. Family child care settings vary in terms of number of staff, number of children they serve, licensing, oversight, and quality. Further more, family child care providers often work alone and may not have access to colleagues in the same field. Long working hours and limited resources may prevent family child care providers from accessing traditional forms of professional development. This document details common considerations for organizations that are developing a plan for conducting CLASS observations in family child care settings. The guidance addresses which age level of the CLASS tool to use when observing multiple groups of children separated by age versus mixed-age settings, including the number of children who must be present in order to start the observation and what to do when children are resting or napping.

General Guidance for Observing in Family Child Care Settings

+ Ratio of providers to children: In family child care settings, the ratio of providers to children is usually lower than in center-based care, and group sizes are smaller. As a result, the observers may need to weight the educator's interactions with each child more heavily than an educator's interactions with an individual child in a school or center-based program.

+ Mixed age ranges: The age range of children present in a family child care setting may change from day to day as well as throughout a given day, with children of different ages attending on different days and at different times. Observers who are using multiple age levels of the CLASS tool must be careful to separate their observations for each age level. For example, if an observer is observing with the Infant tool, they must be certain not to take the provider's interactions with toddlers or preschoolers into consideration unless they affect the experience of the infant.

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+ Additional hours: Many providers offer early morning, late evening, and even overnight care (such as wraparound, extended, or flexible hours). This can lead to extremely longs for providers and children. Observers should contact the provider in advance to find out when the majority of children are likely to be present.

+ Space: Some family child care settings have a space set aside for childcare (for example, a finished basement or a large family room that has been converted into a childcare area), while in other settings, activities take place in the same space where the family lives. It is important to recognize that the observer is a guest in the provider's setting. Space may be limited and the observer may feel intrusive. Teachstone recommends that the observer find a place to sit or stand where they can see and hear without being disruptive, keeping in mind that they may need to move around.

+ Presence of unfamiliar adults: Family child care settings are likely to be visited less frequently by unfamiliar adults than school or center-based programs. As a result, children in family child care settings may be especially curious about CLASS observers. The observer should ask the provider to let the children know who they are and why they are there (for example, "to see how our day goes and see the activities we do during our time together"). The observer should reassure the provider that they will try to be as unobtrusive as possible and not interrupt any activities, and that they will gently redirect any children who approach them. To minimize disruptions to the routine, the observer should plan to arrive early to give the children time to get used to their presence.

+ Additional responsibilities: Family child care educators are running a business in addition to caring for children, and often are doing this single-handedly. They are responsible for changing diapers, cooking, and serving food, and may be caring for their own children. Observers may see educators complete various tasks during the observation.

+ Starting the observation: The observer should be aware that the educator may be the only adult present. It may take the provider a few minutes to answer the door if they are with children. Observers may wait to begin the observation after most of the drop-off routine is done to allow for the majority of the children to be present in the setting.

Approaches for Selecting the CLASS Tool

Families often rely on FCC settings to provide care for children who may be too young or too old for center-based care, such as infants and school-age children. Additionally, families may use an FCC setting to provide care and education to all of the children in their family, bringing siblings of different ages to the same location. This allows a family to place an infant, preschooler, and school-age child in the same program, whereas a center or school-based program might limit enrollment to children of a certain age. A CLASS observer might go to an observation in an FCC setting only to find that there are children representing the Infant, Toddler, Pre-K–3rd, and Upper Elementary CLASS tools present. There are several options for determining which CLASS tool to select in this type of scenario. The following section outlines these options and discusses the pros and cons of each. Because the overwhelming majority of CLASS observations in FCC settings are conducted as a part of a quality improvement systems that focuses on early care and education, the options presented below focus on the Infant, Toddler, and Pre-K CLASS 2008 tools and the Pre-K–3rd CLASS 2nd Edition tool. As organizations weigh options, it is important to keep in mind that the Infant CLASS may be used from 0–18 months, while the Toddler CLASS may be used from 15–36 months.

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A review of existing protocols indicates that these three approaches are the most commonly used. Each approach is accompanied by a list of pros and cons. Please note that children in FCC settings may be observed in both the morning and the afternoon depending upon nap schedules. Organizations should select one approach and maintain that protocol for the data collection period.

APPROACH ONE—MAJORITY AGE ENROLLED OR PRESENT

In this approach, observers select the CLASS tool that corresponds to the majority of children (birth to age 5) enrolled or present. See the note at the end of this section for additional information about this option. Examples:

+ There are three preschoolers, a toddler, and an infant. The observer uses the Pre-K CLASS tool or the Pre-K–3rd 2nd Edition CLASS tool.

+ There are three toddlers, two preschoolers, and two infants. The observer uses the Toddler CLASS tool.

+ There are three toddlers, an infant, and a preschooler. The observer uses the Toddler CLASS tool.

Pros: The observer use only one age level, ensuring coding is straight forward.

Cons: This approach may result in an observation that does not accurately represent the experiences of children who are not the majority age. In the first example stated above, the infant will be observed with the Pre-K tool, which is substantially different from the Infant tool. In addition, this approach requires that observers be certified in multiple age levels and places them in the position of having to adjust for each observation. It also does not take into consideration the fact that the majority age may change as children arrive or depart. Finally, because many FCC settings serve a small number of children, the majority age level may be only slightly more prevalent than the next most common age level (for example, a setting may serve two toddlers and one preschooler). In addition, the approach does not provide guidance on which age level to use if there are equal numbers of children at different age levels.

Note: Organizations that opt to select a CLASS tool based on majority age will need to decide whether to base this determination on the majority age of all enrolled children or on the majority age of children present on the day of observation. Considerations for each of these two options are outlined below.

+ **Selection based on the ages of children enrolled:** Selecting the tool based on enrollment allows for ease of scheduling. For example, if the setting serves two infants and four toddlers, the individual making the schedule knows to schedule a certified Toddler CLASS observer and does not need to worry about whether the observer is also Infant certified. This method of selection also allows the observer to know exactly what age level they will be observing, and removes the pressure of having to make last-minute, in-the-field decisions.

- **Selection based on the ages of children present:** Selecting the tool based on the majority age of the children present at the beginning of the observation allows observers to use the tool that most accurately reflects the ages of the children present during the observation. Enrollment in family child care settings may fluctuate, meaning that formal enrollment numbers may be out of date. Selection based on the ages of children present makes scheduling more difficult, as the organization may need to send out an observer who is certified on all of the CLASS tools. Observers may not know what age level they will be using until they arrive at the setting, which can be stressful.

APPROACH TWO—TODDLER CLASS TOOL

In this approach, observers use Toddler CLASS regardless of the composition of the children present, even if there are three infants and three preschoolers. An observer may also do this if there are an equal number of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

Pros: This approach simplifies the observation process and ensures that there are four full cycles instead of two or three at different age levels. In addition, this option makes pre-post comparison easier, as the same tool will be used for each observation. Because the Toddler CLASS tool incorporates some aspects of the Infant CLASS tool and the Pre-K CLASS 2008 or Pre-K–3rd CLASS 2nd Edition tools, there is broader applicability than either of the other two versions. This approach is fully useful if there are infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in the setting.

Cons: This approach means that some aspects of the other CLASS tools may not be captured. Results may not fully represent the experiences of infants and preschoolers in the FCC setting.

See Appendix A for additional information about how these tools relate to each other.

APPROACH THREE—ALTERNATE BETWEEN CLASS TOOLS

In this approach, observers alternate between CLASS tools, aiming for two or three cycles at each age level.

Pros: This approach allows the observer to capture the experiences of most of the children in the setting, but still produces independent scores for each age level. Observers can switch tools as children arrive, leave, or take naps.

Cons: This approach requires observers to spend more time observing while noting the experiences of children at each age level. Observers must be very flexible and comfortable with all early childhood age levels (a challenge for inexperienced coders). If there are infants, toddlers, and preschoolers present, observers must conduct nine cycles, which could be exhausting. Organizations may opt to use this approach only when two ages are present. If three ages are present, the organization may opt to conduct two cycles for each of the age levels, or they may choose to conduct the observation over the course of two days, observing two age levels on the first day and one on the second. It is not advisable for an observer to complete cycles on the same age level on two separate days. If an observer cannot complete the required number of cycles for an age level on a given day, they should go back another day and start the observation for that age level over.

SUMMARY: APPROACHES FOR SELECTING THE CLASS TOOL

Approach	Pros	Cons
Majority age enrolled	+ Ease of scheduling + Observers only need to use one tool	+ Children present may not reflect the majority enrolled or expected to attend
Majority age enrolled	+ Observers only need to use one tool	+ Observers may not know which tool to use until arrival
Toddler CLASS tool	+ Observers know which tool they will use going into the setting and do not have to make an in-the-field decision + Observers only need certification on one age level + Continuity between Toddler CLASS tool and Pre-K CLASS 2008 or Pre-K–3rd 2nd Edition tools ensures that more sophisticated interactions of older children are captured	+ The Toddler CLASS tool may not accurately capture interactions if they majority of children are infants or preschoolers
Alternate between CLASS tools	+ Observer does not have to decide which age to use + Can capture more information + Observer captures some data for all ages present	+ Observers may need guidance if there are children in all age levels + Conducting observation cycles across age levels requires flexibility and may be exhausting + Observers must be reliable on all age levels, and must be able to shift their focus as they alternate between the tools + Fewer cycles for each age

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APPENDIX A—COMPARISON OF CLASS TOOLS

The CLASS system assumes that with effective educator-child interactions psychological processes remain the same but the form of behavior changes, and this is true across all age levels. While specific examples may vary based on children's ages, there is an underlying similarity in the kinds of interactions that promote growth and development. The dimensions used in CLASS to define and assess effective educator-child interactions are similar across the infant, toddler, and preschool periods. This similarity allows for the use of Toddler CLASS in mixed-age settings, serving infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. This document outlines the similarities between the tools, using Toddler CLASS as a point of reference.

The Toddler domain of Emotional and Behavioral Support and the Pre-K CLASS 2008 and Pre-K–3rd CLASS 2nd Edition domains of Emotional Support share the dimensions of Positive Climate, Negative Climate, Educator (Teacher) Sensitivity, and Regard for Student (Child) Perspectives. In addition, the Toddler tool includes the dimension of Behavior Guidance in the first domain, in recognition of the active role that toddler teachers have in promoting children's self-regulation. The Behavior Guidance dimension aligns more closely with the Pre-K CLASS 2008 and Pre-K–3rd CLASS 2nd Edition domains of Classroom Organization, and will be discussed below.

The first two indicators in Behavior Guidance align well with Behavior Management, while aspects of the last indicator in Behavior Guidance align with both Behavior Management (lack of disruptive behavior) and Productivity (minimal wandering and minimal waiting), making a strong connection between the tools across these age levels. When comparing Toddler and Infant CLASS, the dimensions of Positive Climate and Teacher Sensitivity are quite similar to the dimensions of Relational Climate and Teacher Sensitivity. In addition, there are similarities between the dimensions of Facilitated Exploration and Facilitation of Learning and Development.

The last two dimensions in the Toddler domain of Engaged Support for Learning, Quality of Feedback and Language Modeling, map directly onto the same dimensions in the Pre-K CLASS 2008 and Pre-K–3rd CLASS 2nd Edition domains of Instructional Support. In addition, the Toddler indicator expansion of cognition maps onto Concept Development in the Pre-K CLASS 2008 and Pre-K–3rd CLASS 2nd Edition tools. In addition, the Toddler indicator of expansion of cognition—which is in the dimension of Facilitation of Learning and Development—also maps onto Concept Development.

The Infant CLASS tool has one domain and four dimensions similar to dimensions that are similar in the Toddler CLASS tool. The dimensions are incorporated as follows: Relational Climate is aligned with Positive Climate. Educator (Teacher) Sensitivity is aligned with Educator (Teacher) Sensitivity. Early Language Support is aligned with Language Modeling, and Facilitated Exploration is aligned with Toddler Facilitation of Learning and Development and Regard for Child Perspectives.

What can I observe and code in a family child care home?

Observers will observe and code nearly all activities, including:

+ Outside time

+ Snack and mealtimes

+ Bottle feeding

+ Preparing for nap

+ Diapering/toileting for infants/toddlers

+ Hand-washing and other daily routines

+ Transitions

Observers will not observe and code the following:

+ Nap time when all children are sleeping

+ Bathroom time for preschool-age children

How many children need to be present in order to start the observation?

When observing in center and school-based programs generally wait until 50% of the children are present. However, the smaller numbers of children typically enrolled in family child care homes may make this rule problematic. Upon arrival, observers should ask the educator about the number of children expected for the day of the observation. Many children do not attend FCCs full time, and enrollment may vary from day to day. The observation can begin if one child is present, however if drop-off occurs at a similar time for the expected children, observers may wait until most of the children have arrived to begin the observation.

What should the observer do when children rest or sleep during nap time?

Unlike preschool children, who typically all rest or nap at the same time, infants and in some cases toddlers will rest or sleep when it is clear they need rest or sleep. Determining when to continue the observation depends upon the approach being used. If observers are using one CLASS tool (approach one or two), the observation can continue as long as one child in any age group is awake and transitioning to or from nap time. If following option three in this handout, alternating between age levels, then the observation can continue if one child is the target age group is awake and transitioning to or from nap time.

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How does alternating between age levels work?

Start with the tool that addresses the majority of the children present, provided that they are awake and present in sufficient numbers. An observer who is alternating between ages must be flexible. For example, if the infants rest or nap, the observer should switch to the older age level. If ten minutes have passed, the observer may code the Infant cycle. If not, the observer will not code that cycle but will start a new cycle when the infants wake up. When they arrive at the FCC setting, observers should ask the educator about the general schedule to get a sense of when the infants generally rest or sleep and plan accordingly, understanding that schedules in family child care settings are often flexible.

When alternating between CLASS tools (approach three), how should an observer view, note, and code the educator's interactions with children who are not within the target age group?

When alternating between age levels, keep your observation and notes focused on the specific age level you are observing in the moment (such as observing and taking notes on interactions with infants when using the Infant CLASS tool). Adult interactions with children of other ages should only be taken into account if they affect the experience of children in the target age group. Examples during an Infant CLASS cycle:

+ The educator puts the baby she is feeding on a play mat to help a preschooler in the bathroom. The educator continues to monitor the infant and show awareness of needs, but the infant spends a significant portion of the observation phase with minimal facilitation or language. Although the Relational Climate and Teacher Sensitivity dimensions could still be scored high, the dimensions of Facilitated Exploration and Early Language Support may be negatively impacted.

+ Alternatively, the educator puts the baby down on a play mat and then continues to include the baby in the interactions with the preschooler such as using self-talk or encouraging the infant to reach for a toy. In this instance, there is continued facilitation and language and dimension scores may be positively impacted.

How should an observer account for interactions between children in the target age group and older children (kindergarten through 3rd grade) in the home?

Interactions with older children such as school-age children who are present before or after school should be considered in the interactions according to the observation approach selected. For example:

+ If using majority age, the school age children should be included in the count and the observer should use the Pre-K or Pre-K–3rd tool according to whichever their organization is using.

+ If using Toddler, the interactions with the school age children will be included with the Toddler tool similar to the preschool children.

+ If alternative age groups, the school age children should be included when the observer is coding the preschool aged children and the observer should use the Pre-K or Pre-K–3rd tool according to whichever their organization is using.

How should an observer account for interactions between children in the target age group and older children (4th and above) in the home? Examples:

Interactions with children in 4th grade or above should be taken into account in coding only if they enhance or detract from the experience of children in the target age group. Examples:

+ A preschool-aged child greets an 5th grade sibling who walks into the FCC setting after school. The educator greets the sibling by name and then sits down to play with both the preschool-aged child and elementary-aged sibling. These interactions may positively impact the codes.

+ A teenager who lives in the home serving as a family child care setting blasts the television making it hard for the educator to hear children's bids for attention. This interaction would negatively impact the codes.

Similarly, how should an observer account for interactions between children being observed and adults who are not direct care educators?

The observer should weigh the interactions of each adult based on the number of children with whom they are working, the amount of time they spend with the children, and their responsibility for the activities. The interactions of non-caregiver adults, such as parents dropping off their children or family members who live in the home, should be taken into account in coding only if they enhance or detract from children's experiences.

+ Example: A grandmother who does puzzles with preschoolers while the educator sets out lunch is enhancing the preschoolers' experiences.

+ Example: A neighbor who engages the educator in a long conversation which takes the educator's attention away from the children is detracting from their experiences.

What should observers do if the educator is not there?

Response: If the educator is absent, the observation will need to be rescheduled for a day when they are likely to be there. If rescheduling is not an option, the observer should check in with the person who is coordinating the observations to identify a replacement observation.

What if another adult such as a therapist or visitor is leading the main activity?

Response: If another adult who only occasionally works with the children is leading the group or activity in the setting, wait until an educator who typically works with the children resumes teaching to observe.

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