

Considerations for Observing in Family Child Care Homes

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Overview of family child care homes

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 29% of infants and 25% of toddlers receiving child-care subsidies are cared for in an FCC home). Family child care homes may be run by early childhood educators who have several classrooms and employ additional caregivers, or by providers who provide child care in part to earn money while staying at home with their own young children. Family child care homes vary in terms of number of staff, licensing, oversight, and quality. Furthermore, 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 spells out some of the considerations that organizations may need to address when developing a plan for conducting CLASS observations in family child care homes. Topics to be covered include: general guidance for observing in family child care homes, selecting which age level of the CLASS tool to use in mixed-age settings, the number of children who must be present in order to start the observation, and what to do when children go down for naps.

General guidance for observing in family child care homes

- **Ratio of providers to children:** In family child care homes, the ratio of providers to children is usually lower than in center-based care, and group sizes are smaller. As a result, the provider's interactions with each child are weighted more heavily than a teacher'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 home 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 when assigning codes.
- **Wraparound hours:** Many providers offer early morning, late evening, and even overnight care. This can lead to extremely long days 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 homes have a space set aside for child care (for example, a finished basement or a large family room that has been converted into a child care area), while in other homes, 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 home. 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 homes are likely to be visited less frequently by unfamiliar adults than school or center-based programs. As a result, children in family child care homes 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 providers are running a business in addition to caring for children, and often are doing this single-handedly. They are responsible for diapering children and cooking and serving food, and may be caring for their own children along with the others.
- The observer should be aware that the provider may be the only adult present and it may take a few minutes to answer the door if they are feeding or diapering a child.
- The observer should always be cognizant of the fact that they are a guest in the provider's home.

Determining which age level of the CLASS to use

Families often rely on FCC homes to provide care for children who may be too young or too old for center-based care, such as newborn infants and/or school-age children. Additionally, families may use an FCC home to provide care and education to all of the children in their family, bringing siblings of different ages to the same FCC home. This allows a family to place a newborn and a 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 home only to find that there are children representing the Infant, Toddler, Pre-K, K-3, and Upper Elementary CLASS present. There are several options for determining which age level of the CLASS 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 homes are conducted as a part of a Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) that focuses on early care and education, the options presented below focus on the Infant, Toddler, and Pre-K CLASS. 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.

A review of existing protocols reveals that there are three approaches most commonly used. These approaches are listed below. Each approach is accompanied by a list of pros and cons. Please note that infants and toddlers in family child care homes may be observed in both the morning and the afternoon.

Option 1

Select the version of CLASS that corresponds to the majority of children (birth–age 5) who are either present or enrolled (see notation at the end of this section for additional information about this option). Examples:

- There are 3 preschoolers, 1 toddler, and 1 infant. The observer uses the Pre-K CLASS.
- There are 3 toddlers, 2 preschoolers, and 2 infants. The observer uses the Toddler CLASS.
- There are 3 toddlers, 1 infant, and 1 preschooler. The observer uses the Toddler CLASS.

Pros: This approach requires that the observer use only one age level, which makes coding more straightforward.

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 homes 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 home may serve 2 toddlers and 1 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.

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 home serves 2 infants and 4 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 allows observers to use the tool that most accurately reflects the ages of the children present during the observation. Enrollment in family child care homes may fluctuate, meaning that 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 home, which can be stressful. In addition, because children arrive and depart at different times, the majority age of the children present may change throughout the day.*

Option 2

Alternate between age levels, aiming for 3 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 age levels as children arrive, leave, or go down for naps
- Cons: This approach requires that observers spend more time observing as they work to capture the experiences of children at each age level. To use this approach, observers must be very flexible and comfortable with all early childhood age levels, which can be a challenge for inexperienced coders. If there are infants, toddlers, and preschoolers present, this approach would require that observers conduct 9 cycles, which could be exhausting. Organizations may opt to use this alternative only when two ages are present. If three ages are present, the organization may opt to conduct only 2 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.

Option 3

Select Toddler CLASS.

- With this approach, the observer uses Toddler CLASS regardless of the composition of the children present. An observer may do this even if there are 3 infants and 3 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 4 full cycles instead of 3 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 version of CLASS incorporates some aspects of Infant CLASS and some aspects of Pre-K CLASS, it has broader applicability than either of the other two versions. This approach is particularly useful if there are infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in the home.
 - Cons: This approach means that some aspects of Infant and Pre-K CLASS may not be captured. Results may not accurately represent the experiences of infants and preschoolers in the FCC home.

Whichever option you select, keep in mind the amount of time required to complete each cycle: **Infant CLASS** requires 15 minutes to observe and take notes and 10 minutes to code; **Toddler CLASS** requires 15–20 minutes to observe and take notes and 10 minutes to code; **Pre-K CLASS** requires 20 minutes to observe and take notes and 10 minutes to code.

This table summarizes the information above.

<i>Approach</i>	<i>Pros</i>	<i>Cons</i>
<i>Majority age enrolled/expected</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Ease of administration</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Children present may not reflect the majority enrolled/expected</i>
<i>Majority age present</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Ease of administration</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Additional children may arrive after observation begins, altering ratios</i>
<i>Alternate between 2 age levels</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Observer does not have to decide which age to use</i> ● <i>Can capture more information</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Observers may need guidance if there are children in all 3 age levels</i>

<p><i>Alternate between 3 age levels</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Observer captures some data for all 3 ages present</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Conducting 9 observation cycles across 3 age levels requires flexibility and may be exhausting</i> • <i>Observers must be reliable on 3 levels, and must be able to shift their focus as they alternate between the tools</i> • <i>Fewer cycles for each age</i>
<p><i>Toddler</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Observer knows which tool they will use going in and does not have to make an in-the-field decision</i> • <i>Observers only need certification on one age level</i> • <i>Continuity between Toddler & Pre-K ensures that more sophisticated interactions of older children are captured.</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The Toddler CLASS may not accurately capture interactions if the majority of children are infants or preschoolers</i>

See Appendix A for additional information on how Toddler CLASS incorporates aspects of both Infant and Pre-K CLASS.

Appendix A

Comparison of Infant, Toddler, and Pre-K CLASS

All CLASS age levels are predicated on the assumption that there is heterotypic continuity in effective teacher child-interactions across 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 teacher-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 domain of Emotional Support share the dimensions of Positive Climate, Negative Climate, 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 domain 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 Toddler and Pre-K 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 domain of Instructional Support. In addition, the Toddler indicator expansion of cognition maps onto Concept Development in the Pre-K tool. 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 has one domain and four dimensions similar to dimensions in the Toddler CLASS. The dimensions are incorporated as follows: Infant Relational Climate is combined with Positive Climate and is shared by all three age groups, Infant Teacher Sensitivity is shared by all three age groups, Infant Early Language Support is combined with Language Modeling and is now shared by all three, and, lastly, Facilitated Exploration is shared with Toddler Facilitation of Learning and Development.

Appendix B

FAQs

What can I observe in a family child care home?

Observers will watch 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 watch 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?

A general rule of thumb for observing in center and school-based programs is to 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 provider about the number of children enrolled for the day of the observation. Many children do not attend FCCs full time, and enrollment may vary from day to day. If enrollment is 5 or fewer children (birth–age 5), the observation can begin when one child is present. If enrollment is 6 or more infant–pre-K children, the observation can begin when 50% of the enrolled children are present.

What should the observer do when children go down for a nap?

Unlike preschool children, who typically all go down for a nap at the same time, infants and in some cases toddlers will go down for their naps when it is clear that they need to rest. Determining what to do at these times will depend on which approach the observer is using.

- Option 1: Majority age
 - If there are 5 or fewer children enrolled, the observation may continue as long as one child is awake. If there are 6 or more children enrolled, the observation may continue as long as 50% of the children are awake. If more than 50% of the children go down for a nap, the observer must stop and use the 10-minute rule to determine if the cycle is codable. The observation may continue once 50% of the children are awake.

- Option 2: Alternate between age levels
 - If the observer is conducting an Infant cycle and all of the infants go down for a nap, the observer should end the cycle and begin observing another age level. If there are 3 infants and 2 go down for a nap, the observer may continue with the observation as long as the third infant is awake. Note that the observer should continue to observe as the provider prepares the children for nap and helps them settle down. Depending on children's sleep cycles, an observer may need to alternate age levels more than once.
- Option 3: Toddler
 - If there are 5 or fewer children enrolled, the observation may continue as long as one child is awake. If there are 6 or more children enrolled, the observation may continue as long as 50% of the children are awake. If more than 50% of the children go down for a nap, the observer must stop and use the 10-minute rule to determine if the cycle is codable. The observation may continue once 50% of the children are awake.

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 go down for a nap, the observer should switch to the older age level. If 10 minutes have passed, the observer may code the Infant cycle. If not, the observer will need to start another cycle when the infants wake up. When they arrive at the child care home, observers should ask the provider about the general schedule to get a sense of when the infants generally go down and plan accordingly, understanding that schedules in family child care homes are often flexible.

How should an observer view, note, and code the provider's interactions with children who are not within the age level of the tool they are using to observe (only applicable when observers are using option 2: alternating age levels)?

When observing with Infant CLASS, only focus on the infants. When observing with Toddler CLASS, only focus on toddlers. Adults' interactions with children of other ages should only be taken into account if they enhance or detract from the experience of children in the target age group.

- Examples during an Infant CLASS cycle:
 - The provider puts down the baby she is feeding to help a preschooler in the bathroom. The infant is no longer benefiting from interactions with the adult, and the codes may be negatively impacted.
 - The provider is feeding a baby when a preschooler approaches. The provider engages the preschooler in a conversation about what she is doing with the baby. The infant benefits from this additional exposure to language, and the codes may be positively impacted.

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

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

- An elementary-aged sibling of a preschool age child comes to the FCC home after school. As she walks in the door, she greets each child by name and then sits down to play with them. These interactions may positively impact the codes.
- A teenager who lives in the home blasts the television and consistently ignores children's bids for attention. These interactions negatively impact the codes.

Similarly, how should an observer account for interactions between children in the target age group and adults who are not direct care providers?

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 provider sets out lunch is enhancing the preschoolers' experiences.
- Example: A neighbor who engages the provider in a long conversation which takes the provider's attention away from the children is detracting from their experiences.