

Manitoba daycare see low scores in personal-care categories^[1]

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Source: Winnipeg Free Press

Format: Article

Publication Date: 4 May 2015

AVAILABILITY

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EXCERPTS

New data suggest Manitoba's daycares are often of middling quality and do badly at basic germ control, toilet procedures and snack time.

On a scale of one to seven, last year, Manitoba's daycares scored an average of 4.7 on a checklist used continent-wide to rate cleanliness, educational programs and supervision of children. A score of three is considered minimal, while five is considered good.

Now, Manitoba is about to do away with the mandatory use of the quality checklists.

The checklists, called ECERS and ITERS or the early childhood and infant/toddler environment rating scales, were given to the Winnipeg Free Press following an access-to-information request. More than 400 detailed scores were released covering two years, but the Manitoba government refused to release the names of individual daycares.

Manitoba's daycares scored particularly low — an average of just 3.2 last year for preschool children — on personal-care routines such as meals, nap time and toileting; and health and safety practices such as germ control and playground precautions. The rating for infant and toddler programs was even worse.

But the province's daycares did well in the "interaction" categories, which look at how staffers show warmth and respect for children, help kids learn to use toys and encourage socialization. For preschoolers, the average in that area was close to six out of seven and for babies and toddlers the score was even higher.

The province and daycare directors caution ECERS is only a tool, one that goes above and beyond annual inspections by provincial regulators, public health officials and firefighters. Manitoba is known to have some of the toughest regulations in Canada.

Margaret Ferniuk, director of Manitoba Early Learning and Child Care, said the overall ECERS and ITERS score isn't necessarily the most important measure. Instead, what matters is the way each daycare uses the information to set goals and make improvements.

Several daycare directors said they've recently been told the province is planning to make ECERS and ITERS optional, as part of a new way to evaluate quality.

Despite repeated requests for information, the province was evasive about its new approach to ECERS and ITERS. In an interview, Ferniuk said the province is moving to a risk-based approach, but declined to elaborate. Asked again for more information, the province was no less vague.

But in a notice sent to daycare directors recently, the province said it would be moving to a quality enhancement plan that would look at the entire centre rather than each program, such as the infant or preschool programs, in isolation. Centres will set from one to three goals and may get help from the province to meet those. All, some or none of the ECERS checklist could be used.

Daycare directors, most of whom don't want the environment-rating scores made public because the evaluation methods are so complex, said the checklists offer a good reality-check.

"It's a very good tool, a good across-the-board guide," said Don Milberg, longtime executive director of Pinkham Day Care on Pacific Avenue.

But ECERS and ITERS can also be too rigid in some areas. It can be unrealistic for busy staff to wash their hands for 10 seconds after wiping a nose or applying sunscreen to each child. And many centres squeezed into strip malls or community clubs won't have the space, natural light or outdoor areas to win top scores.

Milberg said his centre always loses points for not having bathroom doors built wide enough for a wheelchair, not having a generous enough square footage per child and not giving new staff three to five days of transition time into the daycare. An acute shortage of early-childhood educators makes that very difficult.

Pinkham has scored anywhere from 4.3 to 5.7 on its ECERS and ITERS checklists. Given some of the limitations of his centre, Milberg said

Pinkham could never score much higher than a 6.3.

-reprinted from Winnipeg Free Press

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