BRIGHTSTARS "TIPPING THE SCALES" | VOLUME 3 | SACERS-U SPECIAL #1

TIPPING THE SCALES



IN THIS ISSUE

Accessibility

Materials

Furnishings

Frequently Missed Items

UNLOCKING THE SACERS–U CLASSROOM:
REFLECTING ON CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO MATERIALS AND FURNISHINGS

BY ROBERT HALLEY | NOVEMBER 13, 2026
PROGRAM ASSESSMENT SPECIALIST

ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility to materials and furnishings is one of the aspects of the SACERS-U that program staff have the most control. Daily schedules and materials available within the program play a large role in whether or not credit is given for accessibility. The Environment Rating Scales Institute (ERSI) defines accessibility as: "The term 'accessible' requires that children can reach and use materials by themselves, during the times that the materials are available for use." This means that materials are located on shelves that all children in the program can reach and are able to be freely chosen by children without verbal or physical barriers.

Accessibility to materials, furnishings, and space impacts 14 different items throughout the SACERS-U. However, not all items and indicators have the same accessibility requirements. For many indicators, ERSI includes the terms "accessible daily" or "accessible for free choice daily." This means that in order for programs to receive credit, assessors must observe that the materials are available to children for at least 30 minutes during the observation. Some indicators require only weekly access to materials, and a few are listed as monthly.

ERSI further explains that for school-aged children, "if materials are stored in closed spaces, they can be considered accessible only if it is observed that children can freely access and use these materials."

Some programs utilize large storage cabinets for their materials; in these instances, in order to receive credit children must be observed to be able to open those cabinets and access the materials. However, materials located on higher shelves (or even on top of the cabinet itself) and are out of reach of children are not credited as being "accessible" to children.

MATERIALS

The activities subscales are broken up into the following eight items: arts and crafts, music and movement, blocks and construction, dramatic play/theatre, language/reading activities, math/reasoning activities, science/nature activities, and cultural awareness. Each item requires appropriate materials related to the item topic be accessible to children; for example: drawing materials and paints for arts and crafts, unit blocks for blocks and construction, etc. Below is a list of material examples for each item; please note that this is not a comprehensive list, and programs should consult the SACERS-U for more information on required materials.

Item	*Categories & Examples of Materials*	*5-Level Requirements*
19. Arts and crafts	*Drawing materials:* Pencils, crayons, markers *Paints:* Watercolors, tempera, paint sticks *Collage:* Pompoms, sequins, ribbon, felt pieces *Sculpture:* Clay, playdough, wood or cardboard boxes for construction *Crafts:* Bracelets, fusion beads, weaving	**At least one type from three different categories of art materials accessible daily.**
20. Music and movement	*Recorded music:* CD Player/CDs, digital music device *Dance props:* Pom poms, scarves, "Dance, Dance, Revolution" game *Musical instruments:* Tambourines, wrist bells, triangles	**Materials from at least 2 of the 3 categories are accessible daily.**
21. Blocks and construction	*Blocks:* Unit blocks, foam blocks, hollow blocks *Interlocking materials:* Legos, Bristle Blocks, Lincoln Logs, K'Nex *Accessories:* People figures, animals, road signs, small wooden buildings	**Sufficient space and blocks/interlocking construction material for at least three children to use at the same time.**
22. Dramatic play/ theatre	**No categories* Dress-up clothes, costumes, props, puppets, doctor/ veterinarian kit, etc.	**Enough props representing at least 2 themes beyond traditional home living.**
23. Language/ reading activities	*Print materials:* Books, dictionaries, encyclopedias *Audio materials:* Books/stories on tape or CD *Games:* Pictionary, Taboo Jr., Junior Scrabble, Crossword puzzles	**At least 3 language games and 30 age-appropriate books accessible daily.**
24. Math/ reasoning activities	**No categories* ***For K:*** puzzles, number games, dominoes, board games (e.g. Chutes & Ladders) ***For 1st Grade and up:*** chess, checkers, backgammon, dominoes, board games (Stratego, Monopoly, etc.)	**At least 3-5 age-appropriate math games/activities accessible daily.**
25. Science/nature activities	*Equipment:* Aquarium, terrarium, measuring tools, magnifying glasses, magnets, scales, microscope, etc. *Materials:* Natural objects such as leaves and shells; living things such as plants; pets; realistic books, posters, pictures, and games about science/nature.	**A variety* of science/nature materials/activities accessible daily.** ****Note: the definition of "variety" for this indicator is based on the size of the group, abilities of the children, and types of materials used.***

FURNISHINGS

Outside of the Activities subscales, there are certain requirements for specific types of furnishings: routine care (item 5), learning and recreation (item 6), relaxation and comfort (item 7), and gross motor (item 8). Included below are the requirements at the 5-level of quality for each type of furnishing.

Routine care

- Tables and chairs that are child-sized for 75% of children (elbows rest comfortably on tables, knees fit comfortably under tables, feet comfortably on floor when sitting in chairs, etc.).
- Individualized storage for children's personal belongings (cubbies, lockers, baskets, etc.).
- Adaptive furniture for children with disabilities, if needed.

Learning and recreation

- To meet requirements at the 3- and 5-levels of quality, at least 2 furnishings for learning and 2 furnishings for recreation are required. At the 7-level of quality, at least 3 furnishings of each type are required.
- Examples of furnishings for learning include play kitchen units, bookshelves, computer desks, sand/water/sensory tables, woodworking bench, etc.
- Examples of furnishings for recreation include table tennis, foosball table, basketballs & hoops, bean bag toss*, computer lab, music/dancing*, etc.; sufficient, convenient storage for materials (shelves, cabinets, etc.).
    - *These must include furnishings to go along with materials; bean bags and music by themselves do not count as furnishings.

Relaxation and comfort

- At least three (3) soft furnishings.
- At least one (1) soft furnishing large enough for several children to use in their play.

Gross motor

- Stationary equipment stimulating at least five (5) skills. Examples include climbers, slides, swings, tunnels, etc.
- Portable equipment stimulating at least five (5) skills. Examples include balls, hula hoops, bean bags, etc.

FREQUENTLY MISSED ITEMS

There are some indicators within the activities subscales which are often overlooked, resulting in lower scores for programs despite children having access to high-quality materials and activities. Frequently missed indicators for each item are listed below.

19. Arts and crafts: *5.3 Very few activities require following an example – School age children often like to draw in coloring books or on printed coloring pages. This by itself would not be enough to lose credit at this indicator; however, in order to receive credit, programs also need to offer children open-ended art materials and activities.*

20. Music and movement: *5.2 Various types of musical experiences are accessible – This indicator requires that materials from at least two of the three required categories are accessible to children (recorded music, dance props, and/or musical instruments). No specific number of materials is required, as long as the materials are plentiful enough so that children do not have to compete over their use.*

21. Blocks and construction: *5.3 Accessories of various types to use with blocks or interlocking construction materials – There must be at least three (3) different types of accessories available to children for use with blocks and/or interlocking construction materials. Examples of different types of accessories include vehicles, people, animals, road signs, and small wooden buildings.*

22. Dramatic play/theatre: *5.2 Staff extend dramatic play by offering suggestions, finding appropriate space, and assisting development of dramatic roles – To receive credit at this indicator, staff are required to play a more active role in children's play; simply facilitating children's play is not enough. Staff can join in children's pretend play, assist children with finding additional space for more active dramatic play, help find materials for creating props for stories and plays, etc.*

23. Language/reading activities: *3.2 Staff are responsive and participate in language games when appropriate – To receive credit, staff must be observed participating in language games with children. Examples include (but are not limited to): helping children select a game and setting it up, explaining the rules and helping the children begin the game, playing a language game with one or more children, or initiating an informal rhyming game with interested children. Please note that assistance with language/reading homework does not count towards this indicator.*

24. Math/reasoning activities: *3.2 Staff provide help when asked by children – To receive credit, staff must be observed interacting with children around the use of a math/reasoning material. Examples include (but are not limited to): helping a child select a math game and setting it up, asking a child math/reasoning questions while they use a math material, or participating in a math game or activity with one or more children. Please note that assistance with math/reasoning homework does not count towards this indicator.*

25. Science/nature activities: *3.2 Some science/nature books used to extend children's information – At least one instance of staff using nature/science books to extend children's information must be observed to receive credit at this indicator. Examples include (but are not limited to): using a science/nature book to answer children's questions, discussing a current nature/science topic of interest by using a book to share information with children, or using companion books that come with nature/science materials that explain what the materials are.*

26. Cultural awareness: *5.2 Non-sexist materials visible – At least two (2) materials are required at this indicator. Examples include (but are not limited to): books about famous female scientists, display pictures of male nurses and female doctors, and people figures for female firefighters, police officers, etc.*

