



Early Care and Education Glossary

The Early Care and Education (ECE) field is filled with industry jargon and complex terminology that can be confusing to even those who have worked in this area for a long time. Use Advocacy & Communication Solutions' Early Care and Education Glossary to become familiar with the most-often used terms to improve communication and advocacy! If you have any questions, please [contact us!](#)

Check out other ACS glossaries on topics including [Health and Human Services](#), [Workforce Development](#), [Engaging Your Community](#) and [K-12](#).

1. Accreditation

Accreditation is a process through which child care programs voluntarily meet specific standards to receive endorsement from a professional agency. The National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC), National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), and the National Accreditation Commission for Early Care and Education Programs (NACCP) are among the organizations that offer accreditation programs for child care.

2. Assessment

Assessment refers to the methods or tools, such as standardized tests, used by educators to monitor, measure, and document a child's readiness for kindergarten or academic performance, progress, skills, and educational needs of students.

3. Career Pathways

Career pathways define the sequence of education, training, and experience organized as a series of steps leading in succession to higher credentials and employment opportunities. A career pathway may outline the positions, salary, and training required to advance in an occupation.

4. Certification

Certification is the process of meeting a prescribed set of standards. These standards require teachers to demonstrate an understanding of developmental changes and adapt curriculum to address cognitive, language, physical, and personal development. Early childhood certification varies by state.

5. Child Care

Child care is the non-parental care of young children that takes place in facilities outside the home or residence of that child, or schools. The regulation of child care in the U.S. occurs primarily on the state level.

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6. Child Care Provider

- a. **Home-Based Child Care Provider** is a provider or organization that provides early childhood education and care in a residential setting.
- b. **Center-Based Child Care Provider** is a provider or organization that provides early childhood education and care in a commercial setting, such as schools, churches, or other non-residential facilities.
- c. **Family, Friend, and Neighbor Care** refers to child care provided by relatives, friends, or neighbors in a home-based setting. Family care may be regulated or unregulated, paid or unpaid, listed or unlisted.

7. Child Development

Child development is the process by which children acquire skills in the areas of social, emotional, intellectual, speech and language, and physical development, including fine and gross motor skills. The Center for Disease Control outlines [developmental milestones](#) in how they play, learn, speak, act, and move (crawling, walking, etc.).

8. Credentials

Credentials are the academic degrees, licenses, or certifications earned by those who complete state or federal requirements to become an early childhood educator.

9. Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)

Developmentally Appropriate Practice is an approach in early learning that respects both the age of the child and the individual child's developmental needs in a comprehensive way (cognitive, emotional, and physical).

10. Early Childhood Education/Early Care and Education/Early Childhood Care and Education

These terms are often used interchangeably to describe early learning programs, including home-based, center-based, and family-based care, as well as school-based preschool programs to foster development and prepare children for kindergarten and life. These programs can be privately run, operated by a local school system, or operated through a federally-funded program like Head Start. Sometimes, these terms are used to describe a comprehensive approach that is inclusive of physical and behavioral health care, and social-emotional development to support kindergarten readiness.

11. Early Childhood Educator

An early childhood educator is a member of the early childhood education profession, including individuals who provide direct services to young children and adhere to the guidelines established by the profession.¹

12. Early Head Start

Created in 1994, Early Head Start is a federally funded community-based program for low-income families with pregnant women, infants, and children up to age 3. Early Head Start links families and children with valuable services such as medical, mental health, nutrition, and education in a variety of settings including home-based, center-based, and home visitations.

¹As determined by [Power to the Profession \(P2P\)](#). P2P is a national collaboration of experts brought together to define the early childhood profession by establishing a unifying framework for career pathways, knowledge, and competencies, qualifications, standards, and compensation for all early childhood educators who work with children birth through age eight across a variety of early learning settings.

13. Early Intervention

Early intervention refers to programs focused on providing specialized supports for the developmental, health, mental, and emotional needs of children from birth to kindergarten. Early Intervention may include speech therapy, physical therapy, or other types of services based on the needs of the child and family.

14. Head Start

Head Start is a federal program that promotes school readiness for children ages 3 to 5 from low-income families through a variety of service models based upon the needs of the local community. Services may be provided in child care centers, schools, or family child care homes. Some Head Start programs also provide home-visiting programs, wherein staff goes to the residence of the family to assist parents with the development of their children.

15. High Quality Preschool

In high-quality preschools, children develop positive relationships with each other and their teachers. Teachers have the skills, knowledge, and experience to set up classrooms, curriculums, and activities to promote child development and school readiness. Although quality standards vary by state, research² shows there are several core elements of high-quality preschool.^{3,4}

16. Home Visiting

Home visiting programs focus on linking qualified professionals with families, within the families' residences, to help strengthen the child-parent relationship and ensure that parents, particularly low-income parents, have the tools necessary to assist in the proper development of their children's education and health. Such services may be provided as early as prenatally and (in some states) for children ages up to age 5.

17. Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

IDEA is federal legislation ensuring that students with disabilities are provided a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) tailored to meet their individual needs. Federal funding is attached to IDEA to assist schools in providing services for students with disabilities. but it remains a subject of debate over whether such funding is truly adequate. IDEA governs how states, territories, and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children, and youth each year.

18. Kindergarten

Kindergarten refers to a school or class that delivers curriculum and activities designed to enhance language, numeracy, social-emotional, and social skills that prepare children for school. States vary in their requirements in regard to kindergarten entrance age, offering full-day VS. half-day programs, and mandatory attendance.

²The Learning Policy Institute outlines much of that research here: <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/building-blocks-high-quality-early-childhood-education-programs>.

³See the QRIS definition below and the [Build Initiative](#) for how states are improving quality of preschool.

⁴The National Association for the Education of Young Children's Comprehensive [10 NAEYC Program Standards](#) outline core elements of high-quality preschool.

19. Knowledge and Competencies

Core knowledge and competencies define what adults who work with young children need to know, understand, and be able to do in order to ensure that children have the best possible environments, experiences, and relationships in which to grow and learn. Currently, each state develops its own core knowledge and competencies for early childhood educators.

20. Licensing

States are responsible for licensing preschool programs, which may be the responsibility of the Department of Education, Health and Human Services, or Health, depending on the structure. There are no national licensing standards, so requirements vary across different states. Licensing may include provider training requirements, teacher-to-child ratios, transportation requirements, parental rights, and facility standards.

21. Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program

MIECHV is a voluntary program for families with children ages birth to 5, which focuses on evidence-based home visitation models. MIECHV is administered by the Health Resources and Services Administration, an agency housed within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. MIECHV programs connect families with health, social service, and child development professionals to support preventive health and prenatal practices, breastfeeding, developmental milestones, and positive parenting techniques.

22. Pre-Kindergarten/Pre-K/Preschool

These terms are often interchangeable and refer to programs that prepare young children (ages 3-5) for kindergarten. Eligibility and age specifications of these programs vary by state, tribe, territory, and/or local communities.

23. Professional Development

Within the context of early childhood education, professional development (PD) refers to training, education, or support activities intended to prepare individuals for work with or on behalf of young children and their families, and ongoing experiences to enhance this work. PD opportunities improve the knowledge, skills, practices, and dispositions of early childhood professionals.

24. Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) / Quality Improvement Rating System (QIRS)⁵

QRIS/QIRS is a systemic approach to assess, improve, and communicate the level of quality in early and school-age care and education programs.⁶ QRIS/QIRS awards quality ratings to early childhood education programs that meet a set of defined program standards. By participating in their state's QRIS/QIRS, early education providers embark on a path of continuous quality improvement. QRIS/QIRS are composed of five common elements: program standards; **supports for programs and practitioners; financial incentives; quality assurance and monitoring; and consumer education**. QRIS/QIRS programs are administered by individual states and may be funded in part by the federal Child Care and Development Fund ([CCDF](#)).

⁵Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS) is the general term used nationally to refer to quality improvement frameworks within early education programs. Some states (such as Arizona, Idaho, and Montana) or local programs use Quality Improvement Rating System (QIRS) instead, with a focus on improvement before rating.

⁶The Build Initiative provides [tools and resources](#) to support the development and strengthening of QRIS.

25. Sliding Fee Scale

Sliding fee scale is a formula for determining the child care fees or copayments that families pay their child care provider, usually based on family income. The sliding fee scale may be determined by the individual program, or by each state, territory, or tribe (for the federal child care subsidy).

26. Social-Emotional Development

Social-emotional development refers to the developing capacity of the child from birth through 5 years of age to form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways; and explore the environment and learn—all in the context of family, community, and culture.⁷

27. Subsidized Child Care

Subsidized Child Care Programs help low-income families pay for child care. Programs include federal and state government assistance and grants, military family assistance, tax subsidies, and employer subsidies. The way states, territories, and tribes allocate funds and determine eligibility for subsidies may vary.

28. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF)

TANF is a federal program administered by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services that provides time-limited, financial assistance for families with children. Funding is provided to states, territories, and tribes to provide assistance to families, promoting job preparation, work, and marriage. States, territories, and tribes may exercise flexibility in the administration of TANF programs, such as determining eligibility, the type and amount of payments available, and the type of services provided.

29. Title 1 for Early Childhood Education

Title 1 Part A of the Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act ([ESEA](#)), as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act ([ESSA](#)), provides financial assistance to local educational agencies with children from low-income families to help ensure all children meet state academic standards. Federal funds are allocated to states based on the number of children below a specific poverty threshold, as determined by the census and spending per pupil in that state.

⁷Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning.

