

FREE RESOURCE



Free QRIS Inspection Checklist

*Building Stronger Centers.
Creating Brighter Futures.*



WELCOME

Thank you for downloading this Child Care Quality Assessment Checklist.

This resource was created from real-world experience — not theory. It was built through countless months of planning, years of hands-on leadership, and over 17 years of navigating the challenges, setbacks, lessons, and victories that come with operating a successful child care program.

Like many owners and directors, I started in the trenches. I've felt the stress of inspections, staffing challenges, compliance demands, and assessment prep — along with the constant pressure to maintain excellence while serving children and families.

Through dedication, persistence, and a commitment to continuous improvement, I was able to successfully maintain a 3-Star Quality Rating at my own child care center in Memphis, Tennessee.

I understand how overwhelming the quality assessment process can feel when you're unsure where to start, what program evaluators are looking for, or how your program measures up. That's exactly why I created this checklist.

Tennessee's Star-Quality Child Care Program evaluates centers on quality indicators that extend far beyond minimum licensing requirements. The following pages are designed to help you honestly assess your program across the key areas evaluators review, identify opportunities for improvement, and develop a focused action plan before your assessment.

There is nothing to complete on this page. Instead, think of it as your roadmap to success.

As you work through this checklist:

- Be thorough.
- Be honest.
- Be detailed.
- Be willing to challenge your current systems.

The more accurately you evaluate your program today, the better prepared you'll be to exceed expectations tomorrow.

Remember, quality isn't achieved by accident — it is built through intentional actions, consistent leadership, and a commitment to excellence every single day.

Now let's get your center Two Steps Ahead of the competition.

Phil Rooks

Founder & Lead Consultant
Two Steps Ahead Consulting Group

LICENSING VS. QUALITY: KNOW THE DIFFERENCE

Most directors confuse two very different inspections — and it costs them stars.

Licensing answers one question: can you legally operate? It's the floor — the minimum to keep your doors open. **Quality rating (QRIS)** answers a bigger question: how good is the experience you provide? In Tennessee, that's the Star-Quality Child Care Program, and your star level affects your reputation, your enrollment, and in many cases your subsidy reimbursement.

The trap is assuming that passing licensing means you're ready for a quality assessment. They measure different things. This checklist focuses on the quality side — the indicators that move you from one star to three.

IMPORTANT NOTE

Tennessee's Star-Quality program is administered by the Tennessee Department of Human Services (TDHS). Specific indicators, point values, and assessment tools are updated periodically. Always verify the current Star-Quality standards and your assessor's approved tools with TDHS. This checklist reflects common quality indicators and is a preparation aid, not the official rubric.

How to use this checklist: Walk your center honestly, area by area. Check every box you can defend with evidence an assessor could see. Any box you can't check is a star you're leaving on the table — and a clear action item to work on before your assessment.

AREA 1 — LEARNING ENVIRONMENT & CLASSROOM QUALITY

Assessors spend significant time observing classrooms. The physical environment and how it supports learning is a major scoring area.

	Quality Indicator	Initials	Date
■	Classrooms are organized into clear, defined learning centers (blocks, dramatic play, library, art, science)		
■	Materials are developmentally appropriate and accessible to children at their level		
■	Materials reflect diversity (skin tones, cultures, family structures, abilities)		
■	Displays feature children's own work at child eye level, not just store-bought decor		
■	A written daily schedule is posted and visible in each classroom		
■	Soft elements and cozy spaces are available (reading nook, pillows, comfort area)		
■	Materials are rotated regularly and matched to current themes and interests		
■	Outdoor space supports gross-motor and learning experiences, not just free play		

AREA 2 — TEACHER-CHILD INTERACTIONS

The quality of interactions between teachers and children is one of the strongest predictors of a high rating. Assessors watch how staff talk with, listen to, and respond to children.

	Quality Indicator	Initials	Date
■	Teachers get down to children's eye level during conversations		
■	Staff use positive guidance language, not commands or criticism		
■	Teachers ask open-ended questions that extend children's thinking		
■	Staff respond promptly and warmly to children's needs and bids for attention		
■	Transitions are smooth, planned, and minimize waiting and idle time		
■	Teachers narrate and expand on what children are doing and saying		
■	Children are encouraged to solve problems and make choices		
■	Individual children's interests are recognized and built upon		

AREA 3 — CURRICULUM & LESSON PLANNING

Higher star levels require an intentional, written curriculum aligned to Tennessee Early Learning Developmental Standards (TN-ELDS), with documented planning.

	Quality Indicator	Initials	Date
■	A written, research-based curriculum is in use and aligned to TN-ELDS		
■	Weekly lesson plans are written, posted, and actually followed		
■	Lesson plans address all developmental domains, not just academics		
■	Plans include individualized accommodations for children who need them		
■	Activities are intentional and connect to learning goals, not just 'keeping busy'		
■	Lesson plans show a balance of teacher-directed and child-initiated activity		
■	Plans incorporate children's interests and family input		

AREA 4 — CHILD ASSESSMENT & DOCUMENTATION

Quality programs track each child's development and use what they learn to plan. Assessors look for an ongoing assessment system, not just one-time screenings.

	Quality Indicator	Initials	Date
■	An approved child assessment tool is used (verify current TDHS-approved list)		
■	Each child is formally assessed at least three times per year (fall, winter, spring)		
■	Ongoing observation notes and work samples are collected for each child		
■	Assessment results are used to inform individual and classroom planning		
■	Developmental screenings are conducted and documented		
■	Assessment information is shared with families during conferences		
■	A portfolio or record travels with the child's progress over time		

AREA 5 — FAMILY ENGAGEMENT & PARTNERSHIP

Family partnership is a distinct scoring area in most quality systems. Assessors look for genuine two-way engagement, not just one-way newsletters.

	Quality Indicator	Initials	Date
■	Parent-teacher conferences are held at least twice a year and documented		
■	Families receive regular communication (daily sheets, app, newsletters)		
■	A family handbook is provided and acknowledgment is on file		
■	Families have meaningful opportunities to give input (surveys, advisory group)		
■	Family events and engagement opportunities are offered through the year		
■	Resources and referrals are available to support families' needs		
■	The program reflects and respects the cultures of enrolled families		

AREA 6 — STAFF QUALIFICATIONS & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Staff education, credentials, and ongoing training are weighted heavily in star ratings. This is often where centers can gain points fastest.

	Quality Indicator	Initials	Date
■	Staff meet or exceed required education and credential levels for their roles		
■	An annual professional development plan exists for each staff member		
■	Staff complete required (and ideally additional) annual training hours		
■	Training is documented and kept current in each staff file		
■	Staff are supported toward credentials (CDA, degrees) where applicable		
■	New staff complete a documented orientation before working with children		
■	Regular staff meetings and reflective supervision occur and are documented		

AREA 7 — PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION & LEADERSHIP

Strong business and program management underpins every high rating. Assessors look for written policies, sound records, and intentional leadership.

	Quality Indicator	Initials	Date
■	Written program policies and procedures are current and followed		
■	A program self-assessment and continuous improvement plan is in place		
■	Staff receive written job descriptions and regular performance feedback		
■	Financial and enrollment records are organized and current		
■	A staff handbook is provided and acknowledged		
■	The program has a written mission and philosophy that staff can articulate		
■	Health, safety, and emergency procedures are documented and practiced		

HOW TO READ YOUR RESULTS

Count the boxes you could honestly check across all seven areas. There are 53 indicators total. Use this rough guide to gauge where you stand:

YOUR SCORE	WHAT IT MEANS
45–53	You're in strong shape. Focus on documentation and polish before your assessment.
35–44	Solid foundation with clear gaps. Target the unchecked areas over the next 60–90 days.
25–34	Meaningful work ahead. Prioritize the lowest-scoring areas and build written systems.
Under 25	Start with the fundamentals: written curriculum, assessment, and family engagement systems.

WHERE TO START

Your lowest-scoring area is your biggest opportunity. Pick the single area where you checked the fewest boxes and build that system first. One area at a time is how every high-rated center got there — including mine.

THE 90-DAY PATH TO A HIGHER STAR RATING

If you want to raise your rating, here's the sequence I'd follow — the same approach I used to reach and hold 3 stars:

STEP 1. Score yourself honestly

Complete this checklist and total your boxes by area. Be tough on yourself — assessors will be.

STEP 2. Pick your weakest area

Choose the single lowest-scoring area to attack first. Don't try to fix everything at once.

STEP 3. Build the written system

Most lost points come from missing documentation. Put the policy, plan, or record in writing.

STEP 4. Train your team

A system only counts if staff use it. Walk your team through it and practice together.

STEP 5. Document the evidence

Keep examples an assessor can see: lesson plans, assessment records, conference notes, photos.

STEP 6. Re-score and move on

Re-check that area, then repeat the cycle with your next-weakest area.

THE BIG TRUTH ABOUT STAR RATINGS

A higher star rating isn't about working harder on assessment day — it's about building quiet systems that run every day. Once they're in place, your rating takes care of itself.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

If this checklist showed you where to focus, here are three ways I can help you build the systems that earn stars — whenever you're ready.

1. Start with the Quickstart Kit

The Quickstart Kit gives you ready-to-use templates and systems — curriculum plans, assessment tools, family engagement materials — to start closing your quality gaps immediately.

2. Go deeper with the Blueprint Course

The Blueprint Course walks you through building every system a high-rated center needs, step by step — from classroom quality to administration.

3. Get personal help

Want a partner in raising your rating? Book a discovery call and we'll map the fastest path from your current stars to your goal.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Ready for your next step? Visit www.twostepsaheadconsultinggroup.com to explore the Quickstart Kit, the Blueprint Course, and the Business Mastery Membership — or to book a discovery call. Let's take your center two steps ahead.

Two Steps Ahead Consulting Group

Building Stronger Centers. Creating Brighter Futures.

www.twostepsaheadconsultinggroup.com

© Two Steps Ahead Consulting Group. This checklist is provided for educational purposes and reflects general quality indicators commonly used in childcare quality rating systems as of publication. Tennessee Star-Quality standards and approved assessment tools change; always verify current requirements with the Tennessee Department of Human Services. This guide is not legal advice and does not guarantee any specific rating outcome.