LENA®

Does an Early Childhood Program's Star Rating Reflect What Children Actually Experience?

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) were designed to help families identify high-quality child care programs and to support workforce development. These systems consolidate multiple quality indicators into a single rating.

But do these ratings reflect what individual children actually experience in terms of teacher-child interaction?

LENA researchers analyzed data to understand the relationship between QRIS ratings and conversational turn rates, a key indicator of child development outcomes.

Important Answers Through In-Depth Research

LENA examined baseline data from 1,417 infants, toddlers, and preschoolers across 227 classrooms in 98 different organizations. All children were participating in LENA Grow at the time of data collection. The analysis focused on conversational turn rates and how they varied by QRIS rating levels.

1,417
children

227
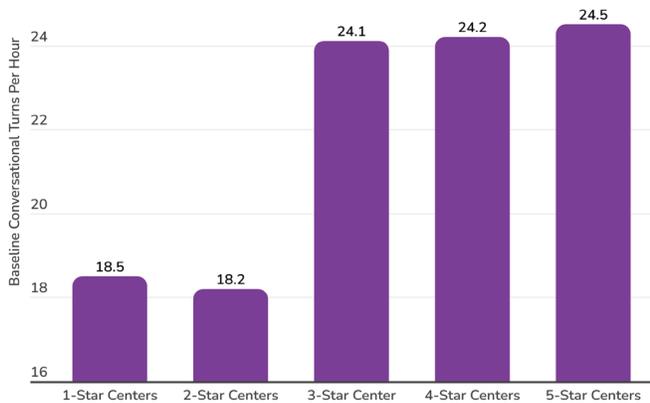classrooms

98
organizations

LENA Grow is a data-driven professional development program for early childhood educators. The program focuses on improving language environments and increasing teacher-child conversational turns. Conversational turns, also known as serve-and-return interactions, have previously been linked to brain structure[1] and function,[2] healthy social skills,[3] higher IQ scores,[4] literacy skills,[5] and preschool vocabulary.[6]

Average Baselines

When examining classroom averages, QRIS ratings showed some correlation with baseline conversational turn rates. 1-star centers averaged approximately 18 turns per hour, compared to 24 for 5-star centers.

However, the difference between 3-star, 4-star, and 5-star centers was minimal. **These three rating levels showed nearly identical average interaction rates**.

Note: States with a maximum rating of 3 stars were excluded from this analysis.

The Individual Child's Story

When researchers examined individual children's experiences within the same classrooms, they found significant variation. This was true even in 5-star centers.

Approximately **25% of children in 5-star centers** experienced fewer than 15 conversational turns per hour, below the national median for center-based care overall.

This means that a center's high QRIS rating does not guarantee that every child in that center experiences high levels of interaction.

What All of This Means

Even in 5-star centers, **1 in 4 fell below the national average for conversational turns.**

QRIS ratings provide useful information about program-level quality factors. However, these ratings have limitations in capturing individual children's daily experiences with adult-child interaction.

Research from Child Trends[7] and the Children's Equity Project[8] has raised similar concerns, noting that quality ratings "do not yield information on individual child experiences."

LENA Grow Results Across

While higher QRIS ratings correlate with somewhat higher average interaction rates, they don't ensure equitable experiences for all children within a classroom.

Quality Levels

Data revealed that teachers participating in LENA Grow increased conversational turns by approximately 16%, regardless of their center's QRIS rating.

1-star centers: ~16% increase in conversational turns

5-star centers: ~16% increase in conversational turns

This demonstrates that data-driven, job-embedded professional development programs like LENA Grow can improve teacher-child interactions across all program types and quality levels.
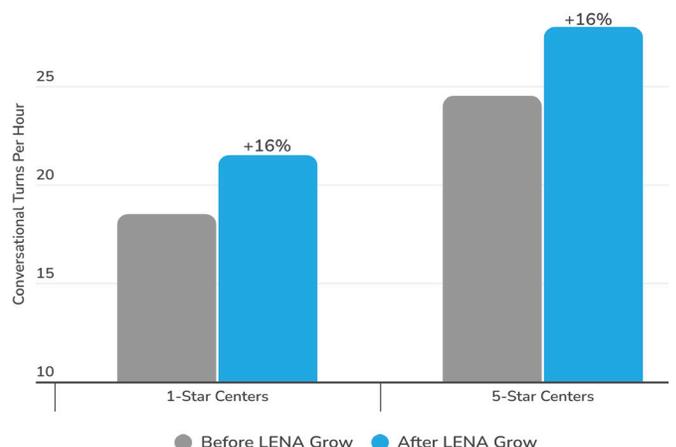
Implications for Early Childhood Programs

Understanding the gap between program ratings and individual experiences can help directors and administrators:

- Recognize that high ratings don't ensure high interaction for every child
- Use measurement tools that reveal each child's experience throughout the day
- Provide teachers with actionable data and coaching to increase interactions
- Focus professional development on responsive relationships, not just achieving ratings

QRIS ratings serve as one important quality indicator. Complementing these ratings with tools that measure individual children's experiences can help programs ensure every child receives the responsive interactions they need to thrive.

Key Takeaways

- QRIS ratings show limited correlation with conversational turn rates.
- Even in 5-star centers, 25% of children experience below-average interaction levels.
- Only 11% of children in top-rated centers reach optimal interaction levels (40+ turns per hour).
- **LENA Grow improves outcomes comparably across all QRIS levels.**

Citations

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