

# Asking Why:

## Understanding the Intent behind Each Standard



By Rachel Robertson, Professional and Quality Improvement Consultant

Anyone who has children or has worked with young children knows that one of their favorite questions is “why”: Why is the sky blue? Why is the blanket soft? Why do we have to chew with our mouths closed? Why do you have a headache?

Adults often forget how important this simple question can be. An ideal time to ask “why” is when a program is pursuing accreditation. Pursuing accreditation is many things: exciting, challenging, tiring, stressful, and validating. Those pursuing accreditation spend months, or years, evaluating standards against their current practices, and making efforts to create change and improvements to align the two. However, in their efforts to meet standards, staff often make adjustments, add materials, and create procedures without ever stopping to ask “why”:

- Why do I need materials that represent diversity in the classroom?
- Why do I need to ask open-ended questions?
- Why do I need to have process art on the walls?

Instead, staff members make the adjustments, perhaps focusing more on passing and meeting the standards than truly understanding them, or perhaps feeling uncomfortable at admitting they don’t know why the standard is important. While these reasons are understandable, they are not ideal. Accreditation is about both the improvement process and the end result. Knowing why standards exist and the goal for each standard will ensure staff sustain quality and continue to develop their own approach to early childhood with or without a measurement of success.

### Strategies for Asking and Answering Why

**Involve staff.** Provide staff a copy of the observation tool, review it together, and ask them why each standard might

be included. Have them work in teams at a staff meeting, or a few staff meetings, until everyone understands the rationale and goal of the standard and indicators. After they understand the standards, staff can more effectively complete the observation tool.

**Use early learning standards.** Provide staff with access to state early-learning standards. In many cases, this research can answer “why” and compliments the message accreditation standards send.

**Consider assessments.** Review the assessment tools used in your program with staff. Ask them to pair each criterion on the assessment to a developmental task or milestone appropriate for the age group, such as: What learning are we assessing when we observe a child following three-step directions? Making these connections will help align classroom activities with standards.

**Focus on the process.** Introduce accreditation as a quality improvement process and treat it as such. Focusing only on the end result will distract staff from the true meaning and intent of the standards. The document collection and classroom observations are tools to “prove” you meet the standards, not the primary focus.

Every day we provide environments and experiences that interest, engage, and provide a world of wonder for children. We know this is how children learn best. Encouraging staff to ask why provides a similar experience for them and ultimately results in professional growth that impacts children in your program for years to come.

Rachel Robertson is a Professional and Quality Improvement Consultant and Trainer supporting early childhood programs and staff as they meet their quality enhancement goals. She speaks nationally at conferences, staff development events, and training seminars. She is the author of numerous articles and books, including a series for military families ([www.survivingdeployment.com](http://www.survivingdeployment.com)) and co-author with Miriam Dressler of *Prove It! Achieving Quality Recognition for Your Early Childhood Program*.