

Guidebook for EAPRS Direct Observation Tool

Revised: July 18, 2006

General Instructions

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With funding from the Active Living Research Program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Preparing for park observation

1. Be familiar with the observation tool and the definitions of elements and qualities/aspects
2. Things needed by observer:
 - Street map of area
 - Directions on how to get to park/playground
 - Blank observation tool forms
 - Clip board
 - Pens
 - Water
 - Sun protection (e.g., sunscreen, hat, sunglasses)
 - Comfortable shoes
 - Compass
3. To assist with estimating height of elements, it is helpful to take the following measurements beforehand:
 - Your total height: _____
 - Height to your knees: _____
 - Height to your waist: _____
 - Height to your shoulders: _____

Observation tool completion

1. **Be sure to provide an answer for each observation tool item**, where applicable.
2. To ensure that ratings are made independently, do not communicate with other observers about your observations in general or about a specific park or playground.
3. Bring **additional copies of Sections N and O**, Play set or structure features. Multiple play sets within the same perimeter are to be rated together. Additional play sets and structure features located within the park boundaries, but not in the same perimeter may be rated separately using the additional copies of Section N and O to make rating easier. This includes play sets and structures that may be located across the street and are part of designated park land. See perimeter definition in guidebook.

Observation strategies

1. Walk all paths their full length, including sidewalks that border or cut into park (until you are outside the park).
2. Walk all paved trails their full length.
3. Walk all unpaved trails their full length.
4. If applicable, drive on all roads within the park or that border the park
5. If applicable, walk around and through all parking lots
6. Use/try out all playground equipment
7. Sit on representative benches, picnic tables, and other sitting features in a given area (on trails versus in park versus near playground); if differences among seating, try all of them; if move to a different area of park, try them.
8. Walk around the available perimeter of the park in the pocket and community parks
9. Take 360 degree views from each access point
10. If available, use park maps and visit each feature specified on map.

General observation/rating philosophy

This tool is designed to allow for evaluation of the physical environment of parks and playgrounds, with an emphasis on evaluating physical elements and qualities with respect to their functionality or potential functionality (e.g., how an element is used or could be used). This is somewhat difficult, as these observations are not made regarding individuals actually using the element. For example, it is recognized that cleanliness does not always impact the actual functionality of an element, but cleanliness is rated because it is thought to potentially attract or detract individuals from coming to a park or from using an unclean element once in the park.

Ratings are also biased toward expected optimal functionality, even though this may not be in practice what commonly occurs. For example, the proximity ratings often encourage examining the shortest distance between two elements (e.g., trails and restrooms). It could be that one restroom is directly off the trail, but it is the only restroom on this 6-mile trail. Restroom proximity would still be rated as high, because there is the potential at the closest point to use this restroom easily.

In general, consider the functionality of an element or the functionality of the quality of the element when making ratings.

General Clarifications

Double rating – Proximities should be the only aspect that can be rated for more than a given element. For example, the same restrooms may be proximal to a trail and a playground and thus would receive presence and proximity ratings for these elements. However, the other aspects of these restrooms (e.g., cleanliness, condition) would only be rated once under restrooms. This includes trail exceptions.

Trail exceptions – Unlike the other major elements/areas, the sitting areas along trails will be rated separately from their counterparts within the rest of the park. Thus, if a bench, table, or other sitting element is identified as affiliated with a trail, then it should not be rated again in the overall park benches, tables, or other sitting elements. This does not apply to other aspects of the trails (phones, drinking fountains, restrooms, etc).

General Definitions (in alphabetical order)

Listed below are the basic definitions of the elements and qualities that are used to rate specific park elements. If a specific element requires an additional explanation of the aspect in order to complete the element's assessment, that definition is included in the following sections.

Elements

Access point – A distinct point or an area of entrance to a trail or path. Access points usually occur at the beginning or end of trails, but can occur in the middle. Access points often occur at transition points from other parts of parks (e.g., parking lots, roadways) and often have paths (either designated or user-made) leading up to them. Access points, similar to entrance points, are at least 100 feet apart from each other. Generally access points allow entry to park areas from non-park areas. Access points can allow entry from public or private property.

Bollards/barriers -- a series of short posts set at intervals to delimit an area (as a traffic island) or to exclude vehicles from traveling. Other examples of barriers may include oversized flowerpots or short fencing that is not a complete perimeter.

Bordering aesthetics –consider the cleanliness, condition, fullness and color of the area immediately surrounding the element (within 50-100 feet radius around area).

Bridges (in play sets) - Bridges are non-flat; they either curve upwards or downwards, and also can be moveable. Bridges connect play set features. Platforms are >2ft. wide and also connect play set features.

Entrance – Similar to an access point, but is a distinct point or area of entry to a park. Entrances are often denoted by roadways (for larger parks), gates, or the beginning of pathways (e.g., steps leading into park, an opening in a fence that allows entry into the park from the surrounding neighborhood). Entrances should be at least 100 feet apart from each other (e.g., if there are 3 openings in a fence all about 10 ft apart from one another, then to ease the amount of counting, only count those 3 openings as 1 entrance).

Event postings- Event postings are any community events posted that may or not take place in the park.

Imaginary play structures - A structure that provides children with a component to be used for imaginative play (e.g., playhouse, play vehicle, animal). An imaginary play structure can be either attached or not attached to the play set. It may also be a defined space underneath the play set. Overall, to be evaluated as an imaginary play structure, it must be a 3 or more sided, enclosed structure.

Landscaping – Landscaping refers to trees, shrubs, flowers, etc that were seemingly planted or placed (e.g., open areas cleared around already existing trees, shrubs, etc) in the park by design. Thus, wooded areas are generally not considered landscaping. A “no” rating indicates that there is not landscaping; the vegetation is all natural. A rating of “yes” indicates that it is a completely man-made design.

Lighting – The presence or absence of artificial lighting (or its potential – light poles) that would allow use of the element at night.

Meadow - Land in, or predominantly in, grass; a tract of moist low-lying, usually level, grassland. Trees are not usually found in meadow areas, and the grass in meadow areas is much taller than that of an open space or mowed area. Meadow areas can be protected areas that parks designate as off-limits to the public, to protect the habitats of the animal or plant species that reside in that area.

Open space – Open space refers to non-tree, non-meadow, and non-parking areas that are not merely buffers between different park facilities. Open space must be able to be functional for recreation (e.g., Frisbee playing, tossing a ball, flying a kite) and is generally larger than 50 by 50 feet. Open space is not obstructed by man-made objects (e.g., art, benches) and natural elements should not substantially interrupt the space (e.g., rows of bushes). Open space is also not delineated (not marked or lined) for any specific use, as are athletic fields.

Perimeter – Perimeter is the border of a given area; perimeter is rated as present if there is a definitive structure or element (fencing, bushes/shrubs/tree line) that differentiates one area from another or contains an area. If areas appear to blend into each other or users from one area could easily encroach upon users from another area, perimeter is not present. Perimeter must enclosed most or all of a given area to be rated. Change in ground surface does not necessarily indicate perimeter (e.g., playground surface changes to open grass area is not an area with a perimeter).

Play set – The combination of two or more distinct pieces of playground equipment (e.g., attached slide and swings).

Pretend play panels –any panel that could be used in imaginative/creative play, i.e. steering wheel, counter w/ window cutout

Sound tubes –funnel tubes that when spoken into, can relay the speaker’s voice through to another tube to be heard by a second person; similar to tin can telephones.

Game panels –any panel that allows for a game to be played, i.e. tic-tac-toe, or a maze.

Water spray ground –water features that allow and are specifically designed for water play.

Path – A path is a distinct and designated route with the primary function of linking elements within the park, may be paved or unpaved.

Picnic Area - A picnic area is defined as where more than one picnic table, and at least one trash can, is grouped within 25 feet of one another.

Swings (baby) - Baby swings are to be rated when the child needs to be set into the swing (has leg holes in swing), or can also be found as curved “pumpkin” seat style. Strap swing refers to the traditional style of swing where a strap (usually one foot wide) of material is available to sit on.

Trail – A route used for walking, biking, rollerblading, running, etc. A trail is distinct from a path by its intent and predominant use. A trail is primarily intended for active recreation, whereas a path is intended to link different areas/functions of a park. Although a trail can link areas, this is not the primary intention or use of a trail.

View Content - Can indicate the different type of views available (outside the park boundaries) by responding "yes" to each category that qualifies. A park that overlooks a river that has bridges spanning across it would be rated as “yes” in “water areas” and “other” content categories.

Water areas - Include lakes, rivers, streams, ocean waters, and other aesthetically pleasing water areas

Cityscape areas – Include skyscrapers, buildings, and other aesthetically pleasing city scenes

Natural areas – Include mountains, wooded areas, marshes, wetlands, deserts, and other aesthetically pleasing natural settings

Other areas – Include bridges, airport landing strips (can watch planes take off and land); Choose other only when the view does not fall into the other categories.

Views of outside park - Views of outside park are to be rated only if there is elevation in the park, or if elevation exists relative to visible areas outside park. A view exhibits an appealing subject/location. For example, it would NOT be considered a "view" to be able to look at a water treatment plant.

Wooded Areas - A wooded area is characterized by a dense growth of trees and underbrush covering a tract of land. The trees that occupy a wooded area are not ordered in a way that would suggest a man-made placement or landscaping.

Qualities

Accessibility (water) – how easily can the body of water be accessed? Consider grade to shoreline, how easy to touch water, obstructions on shoreline. A value of ‘3’ would indicate that it is easy to get to the water and to touch it at some point along the water edge; a value of ‘2’ would indicate that you can get to the water and touch it, but it requires some balance (e.g., due to steep slope) or considerable leaning; a value of ‘1’ would indicate that you essentially cannot touch the water without risking danger or falling in.

Cleanliness – the general aesthetic of the element; things that make elements less clean include graffiti or other writing, dirt, broken glass, lack of routine maintenance/cleaning (e.g., painting) and/or debris/litter. Cleanliness is generally not a matter of functionality and usually could be corrected relatively easily with appropriate maintenance. A value of ‘1’ indicates a very unclean element or one that appears to be poorly maintained (e.g., a lot of missing or peeled paint off of a painted element) or if the majority of the representatives of this element are poorly maintained. A value of ‘2’ suggests some lack of cleaning maintenance for an element or an approximate equal mixture of well and poorly maintained representatives of the element. A value of ‘3’ indicates mostly or all of the element representatives are in good aesthetic condition (free of dirt, debris, completely painted if applicable). A value of ‘3’ includes elements that have received gentle use. In other words, an element does not have to look brand new to receive a value of ‘3’ – some

wear (e.g, shoe scuff marks, scratches from play) are to be expected. Also consider the type of debris/litter that is left behind. Only include natural debris such as leaves if there is an overabundance that shows lack of maintenance. DEAL BREAKERS-automatic rating of 1 if there is evidence of one of the following items: broken glass, condoms, non-tasteful graffiti (i.e., sexual in nature, swear words or explicit phrases), drug paraphernalia & possible other examples that would make it less likely that parents would let their children play there with those items present. Also 1= poorly maintained or very unclean with a high number level of "2" graffiti; 2 = not severe transgressions; a lack of maintenance, moderate amount of litter/debris, and innocent graffiti (i.e., "Sara was here," "Randy + Sandy = forever"); 3= mostly or all of the element is free of litter/debris & in good aesthetic condition. Note that beer cans and cigarette butts are not considered DEAL BREAKERS. Consider these items as any other type of litter.

Colorful – Having 3 or more distinct, vibrant colors present. Having 3 or more neutral shades does not qualify as colorful (e.g., a combination of dark brown, tan, and a hint of hunter green would NOT be rated as colorful).

Comfort – the general comfort of the sitting element. Considerations include the evenness of the seat surface material, the type of surface material itself, the presence/absence of back support, height of sitting element from the ground. Seat width should also be taken into account; it must be wide enough for an adult to sit on. A bench that is uncomfortable to sit in even for a short period of time or a bench without back support will generally receive no higher than a '2' rating (PEX scaling). If an adult cannot sit on the element with ease or success then it would receive a rating of '1'.

Condition - the general state of an element; most condition assessments are element specific, but include missing or broken pieces, age of the element, rust, and/or evidence of vandalism(NOT GRAFFITI); anything that may compromise the operation of the element. For living elements (e.g., trees), condition refers to the seeming health or aliveness of it/them (PEX scaling); no rotting or wilting, foliage should be appropriate color, and should be pruned with no missing sections. A value of '3' indicates completely functional and in good to excellent working condition for the element(s). A value of '2' indicates partial functioning of an element or partial or lack of functioning of one or more of the elements if more than one representative of the element is present (e.g., 5 benches). A value of '1' indicates lack of function for the element or all the representatives of the elements.

Content – one sign or piece of art can have multiple contents or these contents can be spread across multiple signs.

Continuity –the general continuity of the surface throughout the length of the path. Considerations include change in surface material, patched sections of path, or missing sections of paved path that are not also paved. A trail or path that has more than two surface materials would be considered a 'no' rating.

Coverage/shade –whether trees or other natural elements and/or man-made elements are or could provide shade/coverage to users to get out of the sun. Coverage must be directly over the element in order to be considered coverage. Coverage does not have to completely cover the element in order to be indicated, but needs to cover enough of the element so that the element could be used whole or in meaningful part and remain covered.

Landscaping/grass- Landscaping/grass to be rated in this section are only landscaping or grass elements that exist outside of wooded or meadow areas.

Legibility –the general readability of a sign, event posting, or map. Considerations include print size, e.g. how well can the print be read from 20 feet from the element?

Linear versus loop (trail quality) – a linear trail is a trail that begins and ends at different points regardless of the route that it takes; a loop trail is a trail that begins and ends at the same point (or within 100 feet of the same point) or that loops back to itself at some point along the way

Obstructions –these include trees, shrubs, overgrown vegetation, and other things that intrude upon the trail or above the surface; anything to reduce trail width. Park users could not easily move obstructions off the trail or easily walk around; do not include small twigs, rocks, or small areas of mud. Things such as large fallen trees, large boulders, or overgrown vegetation that impedes progress would receive a ‘1’ rating, while things such as empty trash cans or small trees roots would receive a 2.

Openness/visibility – the visibility of that element to/from other elements or seating areas around that element; things that are secluded and isolated by dense trees/shrubs and other elements would score low on openness/visibility.

Percent lit – refers to how much of the feature is lit by the man-made light sources that are available to illuminate the feature.

Proximity – the distance between two elements or areas, measured as the shortest distance unless otherwise specified. For example, the proximity of a trail to a bathroom would be the shortest distance between the trail and a bathroom, regardless of the length of the trail. Use common, everyday known lengths to assist with making the estimations. Some suggestions are:

Mini-van/large SUV – 17 ft.

Stride length (as measured from heel of one foot to heel of the other foot after taking a single step) – 3-4 ft.

Two-car garage door – width = 16 ft.

Football field – width = 160 ft.

Smoothness –the general state of the surface of the path; consider holes, cracks, and/or tree branches underneath a paved or unpaved path surface. Additional considerations for unpaved paths include the distribution of mulch/wood chips or gravel. An even distribution of these materials would score high on smoothness.

Water taste/cleanliness –how good does the water taste? Is it easy to distinguish any stray odors or tastes, such as sulfur or chlorine in the water? Does the water run clear when the fountain is turned on?

Water coldness –how cold is the water that runs when the fountain is turned on for 10 seconds?

Water pressure –how well does the pressure from the fountain push the height of the arc of water for a park user to drink from it?

Width –any time a width measurement is requested, always rate according to the average width of the element.