



Training Manual for the CHEERS Check-In

An Observational Rating Scale for Parent-Child Interaction

**Produced for Healthy Families America in collaboration with
LeCroy & Milligan Associates, Inc.**

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Training Manual for the CHEERS Check-In

An Observational Rating Scale for Parent-Child Interaction

The CHEERS Check-In (CCI) is a parent-child interaction observation tool designed to measure the quality of the relationship between parents and their infants, toddlers, and young children. CHEERS is an acronym for Cues, Holding, Expression, Empathy, Rhythm/Reciprocity, and Smiles. The CHEERS framework is covered in depth during HFA core training. HFA created the CHEERS Check-In (CCI) to measure staff observations that can support parents in developing healthy, nurturing relationships with their children.

The CCI can be used with parents of very young children to deepen their understanding of their child's behavior and to strengthen attachment and attunement. The CHEERS Check-In has been tested with children aged 2 months to 49 months. In order to accommodate this broad age range, the tool measures parent behaviors rather than child behaviors.

While the visit-to-visit CHEERS documentation focuses on the overall parent-child observations during the visit, the CHEERS Check-In (CCI) assigns specific ratings for behaviors that may help staff to discern subtle changes to celebrate and support.

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CCI Domains and Items

The CHEERS Check-In consists of sixteen items to be rated, which fall under the six domains of CHEERS. The domains represent observational areas that provide insight into the quality of parent-child interaction.

CHEERS Domains

Domain	Description
Cues	This domain reflects how the parent responds to behaviors that the infant/child uses to communicate. Examples include cues that invite the parent to engage, such as eye contact, smiles and coos, and cues that ask the parent to “stop” or help, such as crying, fussing, arching the back, looking away.
Holding & Touching	This domain reflects the presence and quality of spatial and physical contact that the parent has with the child. Spatial closeness includes whether parent is sitting close to child in a supportive manner or at the child’s level or physically is located across the room. The quality of physical contact can range from harsh, intrusive, or impersonal, to gentle, caring and nurturing.
Expression	This domain reflects whether the parent expresses themselves to the child, verbally or physically (body language), and whether they are responsive to the child’s efforts to communicate.
Empathy	This domain reflects the parent’s responsiveness to the child’s distress. It includes whether the parent responds and how the parent responds. It also includes the parent’s spontaneous efforts to encourage the child.
Rhythm & Reciprocity	This domain reflects how the parent supports the child’s play. Parents can make play safe and available to even very young children, by encouraging engagement with their environment and by responding to their child’s bid for playful engagement.
Smiles	This domain reflects the enjoyment the parent experiences in engaging or being with the child.

CCI Items

As shown in Figure 1 below, each CCI domain includes two to three items, and each item is rated on a 7-point scale. For each item there are four narrative “anchors” or descriptions of the kind of behaviors that should be reflected in a certain score. The anchors are at the 1-, 3-, 5-, and 7-points. Items 2, 4, and 6 allow staff to check each rating anchor, and assign ratings in between. This allows for stronger reliability of the tool. The italicized bold-faced words in the anchors assist staff in distinguishing the difference between each of the anchors.

Figure 1.

Family ID _____ Date of Observation _____
 Observer Name _____ Child's age _____



Cues: Responding to Cues

Recognizes and responds to cues in a sensitive manner

The parent...

C1 Responds promptly to the child's signals and cues

1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6 — 7

1 Parent does not respond to child's cues or signals.

3 Parent responds to child's cues or signals only occasionally or after a long delay; child's cues may become more extreme before parent's attention is captured.

5 Parent responds to child's cues or signals most of the time and after only a short delay.

7 Parent responds consistently and immediately to child's cues or signals.

C2 Responds appropriately to the child's signals and cues

1 — 2 — 3 — 4 — 5 — 6 — 7

1 Parent responds completely inappropriately to child's cues, ignoring them or responding with hostility or dismissively.

3 Parent responds somewhat inappropriately to child's cues, responding with little interest in what the child's behavior suggests he wants or needs.

5 Parent responds somewhat appropriately to child's cues, makes at least some effort to give the child what the child's behavior suggests he wants or needs.

7 Parent responds sensitively and appropriately to child's cues, gives the child what the child's behavior suggests he wants or needs; explores other ways to meet the child's needs or soothe the child if one way does not satisfy.



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N/A Items

Two items in the CCI rely on a specific behavior to occur; these items each have a N/A or “not applicable” option for instances where the requisite behavior did not occur. For example, Item EX3, “Parent responds to child’s vocalizations”, has a N/A option for instances where the child does not vocalize. When N/A is indicated for an item, no numerical rating is assigned to the item.

Domain 1: Cues

In the Cues domain, the primary focus is on how the parent responds to behaviors that the child is using to communicate. Children may be asking for parent engagement through eye contact, smiling, cooing, babbling, or talking. Children may indicate the need for help or overstimulation through crying, fussing, arching their back, or looking away.

Item C1 considers how promptly the parent notices and responds to the child's cues.

C1: Responds promptly to the child's signals and cues						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Parent does not respond to child's cues or signals.		Parent responds to child's cues or signals only occasionally or after a long delay; child's cues may become more extreme before parent's attention is captured.		Parent responds to child's cues or signals most of the time and after only a short delay.		Parent responds consistently and immediately to child's cues or signals.

Item C2 looks at the appropriateness of the response. A lack of response to the child's cues would score a 1 on both questions.

C2: Responds appropriately to the child's signals and cues						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Parent responds completely inappropriately to child's cues, ignoring them or responding with hostility or dismissively.		Parent responds somewhat inappropriately to child's cues, responding with little interest in what the child's behavior suggests he wants or needs.		Parent responds somewhat appropriately to child's cues, makes at least some effort to give the child what the child's behavior suggests he wants or needs.		Parent responds sensitively and appropriately to child's cues, gives the child what the child's behavior suggests he wants or needs; explores other ways to meet the child's needs or soothe the child if one way does not satisfy.

Domain 2: Holding & Touching

In the Holding and Touching domain, both the presence of and quality of physical contact or spatial closeness between the parent and child is observed for. Please note: as children get older, the amount of physical contact/touch (HT) is not always be present, so if there are no concerns, this can be noted in the HT comment sections.

Item HT1 measures if the parent is initiating the physical contact with the child. It also includes spatial closeness and availability. There may be physical contact that is child-initiated rather than parent-initiated, and this item specifically addresses parent-initiated contact or closeness.

HT1: Initiates positive physical contact or spatial closeness with the child						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Parent makes no spontaneous effort to initiate positive physical contact or spatial closeness with child (holding or touching).		Parent rarely initiates positive physical contact or spatial closeness with child.		Parent initiates some positive physical contact or spatial closeness with child.		Parent frequently initiates positive physical contact or spatial closeness with child (holding and touching).

Item HT2 addresses the quality of the holding and touching that occurs. This item has a Not Applicable (N/A) option. If there is no physical contact between the parent and child during the observation, this box would be checked. Note: This item can be scored if there is physical contact, regardless of whether the contact was initiated by the parent or the child.

HT2: Engages in gentle holding and touching						
<input type="checkbox"/> N/A - parent did not engage in physical contact						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Parent touch or holding is cold; touch is harsh or rough.		Parent touch or holding is disinterested or routine; OR touch is not gentle or nurturing.		Parent touch or holding is gentle but not fully engaged.		Parent touch or holding is gentle, warm, and nurturing.

Item HT3 focuses on physical affection. If the parent has not engaged in any physical contact with the child then this item is rated a 1. If the parent has physical contact with the child, but does not show any physical affection, this can also be rated as a 1.

HT3: Parent shows physical affection (e.g., hugs or kisses)						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Parent does not touch the child in any way that expresses affection. Parent does not show physical affection.		Parent hugs or kisses child with moderate warmth OR otherwise touches the child with minimal expression of affection.		Parent hugs or kisses the child with warmth OR otherwise touches the child in a manner expressing affection.		Parent hugs or kisses the child with great warmth OR otherwise touches the child in a manner expressing great affection.

Domain 3: Expression

The Expression domain measures whether or not the parent is speaking to the child, using verbal or non-verbal expressions to interact with the child, and if the parent is responding to the child’s vocalizations.

Item EX1 addresses if the parent is speaking to the child or making other vocalizations to the child during the interaction. If the parent is speaking only to the home visitor, but not to the child then this is scored as a 1. Other vocalizations can include singing, humming, and making sounds directed toward the child.

EX1: Speaks to child during interactions or activity						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Parent never talks or vocalizes to child during interaction.		Parent rarely talks or vocalizes to child during interaction.		Parent sometimes talks or vocalizes to child during interaction.		Parent regularly talks or vocalizes to child during interaction.

Item EX2 is focused on the use of expressions to initiate play. This may include a verbal invitation to play, offering a toy to the child, or using verbal expressions such as “hmmm” or “oh” as a child explores.

EX2: Uses expressions to initiate interactions and play						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Parent makes no verbal or physical effort to engage the child in interactions or play/ Expresses no interest in the child’s activities.		Parent rarely uses verbal or facial expressions, gestures, and other body language in an effort to engage child in interactions or play; parent’s verbal/ physical efforts to engage child are vague or relatively disinterested.		Parent occasionally uses verbal or facial expressions, gestures, and other body language to engage the child in interactions or play. Initiates positive play in an effort to engage child in interactions or play.		Parent regularly uses verbal or facial expressions, gestures, and other body language in a clear effort to engage child in interactions or play (e.g., verbally encourages child to play, offers toys, etc.); expresses delight in interactions or play.

Item EX3 is related to parent response to child vocalizations and has a Not Applicable (N/A) option. If the child did not vocalize during the observation, then this box would be marked. Otherwise the quality of the parent’s response to the child’s vocalization is rated from 1 to 7.

EX3: Responds to child’s vocalizations						
<input type="checkbox"/> N/A – child did not vocalize						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Parent ignores child’s efforts to communicate /does not respond with any vocalizations or speaks in a negative manner toward child.		Parent is not really interested in what the child is trying to communicate/response is in a vague or hostile manner. Speaks in a disinterested manner toward the child		Parent is somewhat interested in what the child is trying to communicate/response is in a positive manner; parent speaks with some pleasure toward the child.		Parent is clearly focused on/interested in what child is trying to communicate/ parent responds to child’s efforts to communicate; speaks in a very positive manner.

Domain 4: Empathy

The Empathy domain reflects the parent’s responsivity to the child’s emotional expressions. It includes both whether the parent responds and how the parent responds, as well as the parent’s efforts to encourage the child. Please note that this domain includes parents sharing child’s joy as well as co-regulating child’s emotions.

Item EM1 looks only at if the parent responds to a child’s emotions. This includes both positive and negative child emotions including fear, anger, distress, joy and pleasure. If the parent does not respond at all to the child’s heightened emotion or pleasure this is rated a 1.

EM1: Responds promptly to child’s emotions						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Parent does not respond to indications of child’s heightened emotional states (e.g. fear, anger, distress, joy).		Parent responds verbally or physically to indications of child’s heightened emotional state rarely or only eventually.		Parent responds verbally or physically to indications of child’s heightened emotional state usually and quickly.		Parent always immediately responds verbally or physically to indications of child’s heightened emotional state (e.g. fear, anger, distress, joy).

Item EM2 addresses the appropriateness of the parent response. If the parent did not respond to the child’s heightened emotional state or pleasure this is rated a 1 as they are discounting the child’s emotions.

EM2: Responds appropriately to child’s emotions						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Parent responds to child’s heightened emotional states in a manner that is hostile, sarcastic, or discounting toward child.		Parent responds to child’s heightened emotional states in a manner that is disinterested or more focused more on the parent’s interests than the child’s.		Parent makes some effort to regulate, comfort, or celebrate child’s heightened emotional states; parent’s emotional tone is mild.		Parent regularly responds to child’s heightened emotional states with clear attempts to regulate, comfort, or celebrate; parent’s emotional tone is warm and positive

Item EM3 addresses the parent’s use of positive language with the child. This can include praise, compliments, and encouragement. Examples include phrases such as “good job”, “look at you”, “you can do it”. If the parent speaks to the child, but does not offer specific positive comments to the child about the child then this is rated a 1.

EM3: Expresses positivity about the child to the child						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Parent does not offer any positive language (e.g., compliments, praise, encouragement) in speaking to the child.		Parent rarely uses positive language (e.g., compliments, praise, encouragement) in speaking to the child.		Parent sometimes uses positive language (e.g., compliments, praise, encouragement) in speaking to the child.		Parent regularly uses positive language (e.g., compliments, praise, encouragement) in speaking to the child.

Domain 5: Rhythm & Reciprocity

The Rhythm and Reciprocity domain reflects how the parent supports the child’s play. Parents can make play safe and available to even very young children, by encouraging engagement with their environment and by responding to their child’s bid for playful engagement.

Item RR1 measures if the parent is actively encouraging the child to explore by providing a “secure base” and being both physically and emotionally present during the exploration. If a parent is discouraging the child from exploring (physically and/or verbally) or is emotionally or physically unavailable to the child, then this is rated as a 1. If the parent is neither encouraging nor discouraging of the child’s exploration, then this is rated a 3. An example of a rating of 2 might be that the parent is not encouraging or discouraging and is also not emotionally available to the child.

RR1: Encourages exploration by the child						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Parent discourages child from exploring the environment; parent does not provide a stimulating or safe environment for the child to explore; parent is emotionally and physically unavailable during exploration.		Parent does not discourage or encourage child to explore the environment; parent provides an environment that is only mildly stimulating or is not entirely safe for the child to explore; parent is slightly emotionally and physically available during exploration.		Parent somewhat encourages child to explore the environment; parent provides an environment that is somewhat stimulating and essentially safe for the child to explore; parent is somewhat emotionally and physically available during exploration.		Parent actively encourages child to explore the environment; parent arranges the environment to be stimulating and safe for the child to explore without excessive parent intervention; parent is fully emotionally and physically available during exploration to provide a “secure base.”

Item RR2 focuses on the parent’s ability to let the child take the lead in play and exploration. If the play is fully parent directed without regard to the child’s interest or capacity to play, or if the parent corrects the child’s play without allowing for exploration, then this is a rating of 1. With very young infants, the play will be more parent directed by nature, but the level of sensitivity to the child’s play capacity and length of time spent with an object are the critical areas to measure for them.

RR2: Follows the child’s lead						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Parent typically tries to lead the child in play and imposes their own ideas or regularly corrects the child’s play ideas. Parent shows total lack of sensitivity to child’s play capacity, for example: often overstimulates child with too many new objects or activities; never changes the nature/ rhythm of play when child appears tired or over-stimulated; or often cuts time short when child needs time to engage with a new object.		Parent sometimes tries to lead the child in play and imposes their own ideas or sometimes corrects the child’s play ideas. Parent shows some lack of sensitivity to child’s play capacity, for example: sometimes overstimulates child with too many new objects or activities; does not typically change the nature/rhythm of play when child appears tired or over-stimulated; or; sometimes cuts time short when child needs time to engage with a new object.		Parent usually follows the child’s lead in play and rarely imposes their own ideas instead of building on the child’s play ideas; parent rarely corrects the child’s play ideas. Parent shows reasonable sensitivity to child play capacity, for example: only rarely overstimulates child with too many new objects or activities; eventually changes the nature/ rhythm of play when child appears tired or over-stimulated; or rarely cuts time short when child needs time to engage with a new object.		Parent always follows the child’s lead in play, building on or elaborating the child’s play ideas rather than imposing their own ideas; parent avoids correcting the child’s play ideas. Parent shows great sensitivity to child play capacity, for example: never overstimulates child with too many new objects or activities; quickly changes the nature/ rhythm of play when child appears tired or over-stimulated; or gives child sufficient time to engage with a new object.

Domain 6: Smiles

The Smiles domain reflects the enjoyment the parent experiences in engaging with the child.

Item S1 measures the parent’s level of enjoyment when interacting with their child. It is recommended to consider the entire observation as the parent may appear to be positive and excited during the first few minutes of interaction, but this may not be sustained throughout the time.

S1: Exhibits pleasure and excitement when playing with the child						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Parent displays negative expression when playing with the child; parent does not appear to enjoy being with child at all, does not smile or laugh during play.		Parent displays a generally disinterested expression when playing with the child; parent appears to enjoy being with child only mildly and rarely smiles or laughs during play.		Parent displays generally positive expression when playing with the child; parent appears to moderately enjoy being with child as evidenced by some smiles, laughter during play.		Parent displays very positive expression and excitement when playing with the child. Parent appears to greatly enjoy being with child as evidenced by frequent smiles, laughter, and inter-connectedness during play.

Item S2 refers to the parent’s tone of voice during the observation and ranges from hostile to warm.

S2: Speaks in a warm tone of voice						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Parent speaks to child in a hostile tone of voice.		Parent speaks to child in a vague or disinterested tone of voice.		Parent speaks to child in a neutral tone of voice.		Parent speaks to child in a warm tone of voice.

Item S3 refers to the parent’s affect toward the child during the observation. If the parent is showing active disinterest in the child through their speech or actions this is rated a 1. This could include ignoring the child’s bid for attention or moving away from the child. If the parent is indifferent to the child by responding only as much as is necessary to the child, this is rated a 3.

S3: Exhibits positive affect with the child						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Parent communicates active disinterest in being with the child, either verbally or physically (e.g., avoids being near child, tells child to go away).		Parent communicates indifference to being with the child, either verbally or physically (e.g., avoids looking at child, makes no effort to interact with child).		Parent expresses some interest and enjoyment in being in the child’s presence (e.g., shares looks with child, smiles occasionally at the child).		Parent expresses clear, positive interest and enjoyment in being in the child’s presence (e.g., claps hands, starts conversations, smiles frequently at the child).

Administering and Scoring the CCI

- The HFA Best Practice Standards require that sites utilize the CHEERS Check-In (or other validated parent-child interaction tool) a minimum of once per year during the first three years of life (standard 6-3.D). Since children grow so quickly and parents will be gaining PCI skills, HFA recommends its use two to four times per year of life. In addition, it is recommended that the first CHEERS Check-in tool be completed at around 4 months of age since attachment patterns begin to become established between 6 and 8 months.
- The tool is designed to reflect a brief period of interaction between the parent and child during a home visit, typically 5-10 minutes. Do not rate the entire home visit, only the specific observation period. With such a limited time period, there may be some areas of CHEERS that are not observed. If a CHEERS behavior is not observed, and there are no concerns because of the shortened observation time, please make a note of this in the comments section so that supervisors and staff can discuss.
- The CHEERS Check-In is designed to be completed based on the observation of a primary caregiver with one child. If there is more than one caregiver or child, focus the observation on one adult and one child only.
- Ideally, during the observation, staff should sit back and stay out of the interaction, allowing the parent and child to play together. To the degree it is possible, the home visitor should set up the environment so that there are no excess distractions (televisions, radios, and other distractions so the play is not interrupted).
- The CHEERS Check-In is not a replacement for the CHEERS observation completed at each home visit. However, when the CCI is administered on a visit, narrative CHEERS documentation does not need to be completed.
- The CHEERS Check-In tool should be rated outside of the home as soon as possible following the visit. The home visitor may find it helpful to take a few notes but should wait to rate the tool until after the observation period ends so they do not miss an important behavior.
- During supervision, staff should reflect on the areas of CHEERS that may need strengthening and develop ways to support the parent. These can be included in the HFA Service Plan.

Introducing the CHEERS Check-In to Families

It is important to let parents know that you will be observing for parent-child interaction ahead of time. Together with the parent, think about what activity or activities the parent would like to do with the baby. It is helpful to ask the parent what types of activities he or she is most comfortable with when playing with the baby.

Here is one way to introduce the CHEERS Check-In observation:

“Next week, when I come, we are going to make sure that you and your child have a full 6 to 8 minute time period in which you both can just play and be present with each other – without my interference. When you are done, we can talk together about what the experience was like for you. Please feel free to:

- *Choose whatever activity you would like to do with your child,*
- *It can be a favorite activity you and your child like to do together, or*
- *An activity that is part of your regular routine, or*
- *I could bring an activity that you think you would both like to do!”*

When preparing to administer the tool, be flexible and reschedule if the child is fussy, tired or not feeling well or if parent is not comfortable at this time. Take time to introduce the process once more on the day of the visit:

“As we discussed last week, today, I am going to be quiet and let you and your child play together, without me interfering in your play, in whatever way is most natural for both of you. After about 6 -8 minutes or whenever it is comfortable for you, we can re-connect.”

Please note: While it is important to explain to parents that you will be observing them and their child, there is no need to tell the parent(s) that you are rating their interaction with their child.

Completing and Using the CCI Ratings

Rate the CCI items immediately after the home visit. Ratings will initially take about 10 to 15 minutes to complete, and even less time after staff become more familiar with the items in each domain. To rate the CHEERS Check-In, the home visitor can simply circle the number on the scale that best reflects the behavior they have observed, checking N/A when relevant, or use the scoring sheet at the end of the tool to write in each rating. The following information should also be completed at the top of the form before or immediately after completing an observation:

- Family ID: the child’s or parent’s identification number.
- Home visitor/Observer: the name of the person who is doing the observation.
- Date: the date you observed the parent-child interaction.
- Child’s age: the child’s date of birth.

Additional information necessary for your program may also be included.

Rating CCI items

The CCI uses a scale from 1 to 7 for each item in the tool. In general a rating of 1 indicates an area with an immediate need for support, while a rating of 7 indicates an area of great strength within the family. Each family will have areas where they score higher or lower than other families, however it is important to remember that each family is unique and a rating of 4 on a question might indicate an area in need of support for one family and an area of on-going improvement for another.

Of the possible 7 item scores, four are designated as “anchors” and provide detailed descriptions corresponding with each of those numbers. Please note that the bold-faced words in each of the four anchors help to differentiate between the ratings. In some cases, there is more than one behavior to consider when applying a rating. This is when the CCI items without anchors can be especially useful (2, 4, 6). When considering which rating to assign, follow the anchors as literally as you can. Ratings within 1 point of each other indicate an acceptable level of agreement (reliability).

Calculating Domain Scores

The domain scores (C,H,E,E,R,S) are calculated by taking the average of the items within the domain. For example, ratings of 3 and 5 on the two Cues questions gives an average of 4 for the domain: $(3 + 5) / 2 = 4$. For the questions with an N/A option, if this is checked and there is no score for that item, then the domain score is the average of the remaining two questions instead of three. For example: the Holding/Touch section includes one item marked NA; score. If the NA option is checked on HT2, and HT1 is rated a 2; HT3 is rated a 4, you would add 2 + 4 and divide by two items instead of three: $(2 + 4) / 2 = 3$. Domain scores can range from 1 to 7.

CCI Tool Total Score

The total score for the CHEERS Check-In is the sum of each domain score and will range from 6 to 42. At this point in time, a “cut-off” point for parent-child interaction ratings has not been studied. HFA plans to conduct additional research on the use of the CCI.

Using the CCI tool to support families

Any item rated with a “4” or less is a potential target for additional support to the parent. Ways to support parents in increasing positive parent-child interactions include the use of the Reflective Strategies, curriculum activities, tools introduced in Core training such as What I’d Like for my Child, the Values activity, in addition to supporting parents in developing protective factors (particularly the Social and Emotional Competence of Children). Results of the CCI can also become a part of the family’s HFA Service Plan. Additionally, activities such as the ASQ-3 and ASQ:SE-2 can be integrated into the overall approach of building on parental capacities. Some of the “5” ratings might indicate emerging strengths and can be supported using SATP when observed. So, “5” ratings should also be included in home visit planning and discussed in supervision. It is important to remember that this screening is only a moment in time and high or low ratings in any domain should be reinforced or addressed over time.

Items rated as 6 or 7 are definite strengths for the parent and should be noted with parents using ATP or other Reflective Strategy. These should be clearly pointed out to the parents following the completion of the CCI as well as during subsequent visits.

As with the individual item ratings, each domain score offers opportunities for increasing positive parent-child interactions and should be reviewed and discussed in supervision along with the item scores. Domain scores of 4 or less should be addressed using Reflective Strategies, curriculum, and other parent-child activities as mentioned above. Domains that reflect scores of 6 or 7 are also major strengths for the parent and should be noted.

Supervisors can use the overall or total score to:

- Confirm reliability among staff members when using the CCI as a group (when working with an HFA team, staff’s total scores per family should be similar),
- Identify which family may need the strongest support in promoting positive parent-child interactions, and,
- Determine how a family’s patterns change over time (increasing scores may show a parent’s progress in PCI, while decreasing scores may indicate new challenges or responses to a new developmental stage).

Reducing Observer Bias

When staff observe the parents, they are working with using any measurement tool, it is common to see some issues of bias. This is normal since staff form strong relationships with families in order to facilitate positive growth and change and have much more information about the family than what occurs in the 5-10 minute observation period. When first learning the tool, it is useful to review multiple videos of parents that staff are not working with to practice the ratings and improve agreement among the team (also known as reliability).

Observer bias can also result from other factors, including:

- Initial decisions: If you rate an early domain positively or negatively, such as C or HT, it can increase the tendency to rate all the domains in the same direction.
- Other Bias: This can include attraction to the parent, dissimilarity to the parent, stereotypes or cultural bias, perceptual bias, staff attachment styles, and relationship bias.

To reduce bias as much as possible, it is helpful to videotape the observations and review them with staff in supervision; to use the CCI on shadowing visits and compare ratings, or to add regular team reviews of parent-child interaction videos to meetings. It is important to discuss potential staff bias during reflective supervision as well as how each parent's perception could impact the observation.

Using Video to Administer the CCI

An alternate way to administer the CHEERS Check-In tool is through the use of video recording. When video is used, it is important to share the videos with parents once completed, or to record the interaction using the parent's phone. There are several advantages to using video for the CHEERS Check-In tool:

- Sharing and rating the video with your supervisor to develop staff skills in rating the 16 items
- Being able to notice positive change over time
- Showing the parent the moments where the parent is being fully present or responsive to baby/child.

When using video with the CHEERS Check-In, here is a way to introduce the process:

“Today, we are going to make a movie of you and your child playing together. I am going to stay quiet and out of the camera so that the movie captures your moment with your child. I will give you a copy of the recording, and over our time together, you will be able to create a video memory book that you can keep to reminisce about how important you have been to him in his life.”

It may be helpful to take the video back to the office so that you can review and select specific parts of the clip to share with parents. Here are some ways you can explore the CHEERS Check-In experience with families when you are ready to share the positive video clips.

When sharing your thoughts about the CCI tool with parents, remember:

- Be non-judgmental and open
- Be curious (What might the parent have been experiencing in this moment?)
- Be collaborative- support the parent in discovering their own knowledge

This applies whether you are simply observing or using video as part of the administration of the Tool.

Here are some sample questions you may use to collaboratively support the parent (or develop your own):

- How typical was this interaction today?
- What did you notice, or what stood out to you?
- What do you think your baby was thinking/feeling?
- What were you thinking/feeling?
- Did anything surprise or concern you?
- What moment did you most enjoy?
- What did you learn anything about yourself or your child while watching this video?
- Going forward, what would you like to do more of with your baby?
- When watching this clip, what did you learn about your relationship together (if videotape was used)?

Adapted from the Early Relational Health Screen (David Willis et al., unpublished manuscript) and with input from Kate Rosenblum, PhD, at www.zerotothrive.org

Validation Research on the CHEERS Check-In

Two studies have examined reliability and validity of the CHEERS Check-In (CCI) observational tool. In both studies, videos of parent-child interaction were provided by families enrolled at seventeen HFA sites in six states who agreed to assist with the study, and by investigators at Tufts University from a prior study of HFA participants. The initial study¹ (n=115 parent-child dyads) showed acceptable reliability for the tool overall and for each domain. The second study² (n=192 dyads) generally confirmed these findings with a larger sample and explored psychometrics for children of different age and cultural groups.

Participants in study 2 included 190 mother-child dyads, and two father-child dyads. Children ranged in age from 2 to 49 months, with a median of 12 months. Cultural groups represented in

¹ LeCroy & Milligan Associates, Inc. (2017). Healthy Families America CHEERS Check-In: Validation of an Observational Measure of Parent-Child Interaction. Tucson, AZ: Author.

² LeCroy & Milligan Associates, Inc. (2018). Healthy Families America CHEERS Check-In: Further Validation of an Observational Measure of Parent-Child Interaction. Tucson, AZ: Author.

study 2 included African American, Asian, American Indian, Caucasian, Hispanic, mixed race, and others. Groups with sufficient numbers for comparison analysis included African American, Caucasian, and Hispanic children. Nine of the videos were in Spanish, the remainder were in English.

Inter-rater Reliability: The CCI demonstrated good inter-rater reliability (alphas ranged from 0.79 to 0.95), and internal consistency ($\alpha=0.93$) overall. Within groups, a few items fell below the acceptable range for a few groups (e.g., children aged 18-23 months, Hispanic participants). These differences are challenging to interpret given the small group sizes, and should be examined with a larger sample.

Concurrent Validity: The study assessed concurrent validity by rating each PCI video using the CCI and the PICCOLO³, a well-validated PCI observation tool. The total CCI score was most strongly correlated with the Affection subscale of the PICCOLO ($r=.719$), and also significantly correlated with the Responsiveness subscale ($r=.586$). The correlation with the Encouragement subscale ($r=.455$) was just below the range considered acceptable.

For each CCI domain, correlations in the acceptable range were obtained with at least one of the PICCOLO subscales, with the exception of the CCI Holding & Touching domain. This domain is not addressed in the PICCOLO, therefore this result is not surprising. Within age and culture groups, as reported above, results were not as strong, but generally followed a similar pattern.

Conclusions: The CHEERS Check-In tool demonstrates good reliability and validity overall. Due to small sample sizes, caution is warranted in interpreting results for age and cultural groups. These should be examined in subsequent studies, but they do not greatly impact the overall reliability of the instrument. Further research into the potential reasons for the differences within the domains by age and culture will require a much larger sample size as well as the collection of qualitative feedback from observers. The full study report is available by request; contact Kathryn Harding at kharding@preventchildabuse.org.

³ Cook, G. & Roggman, L. (2009). PICCOLO (Parenting Interactions with Children: Checklist of Observations Linked to Outcomes) Technical Report. Logan: Utah State University, Early Intervention Research Institute.

Resources for Training and Utilization of the CCI

Training Resources for the CCI can be found in the Network Resources section of the Healthy Families America website (Figure 2): <https://www.healthyfamiliesamerica.org/network-resources/>

Figure 2.

CHEERS Check-In (CCI) Tool Initial Training

CHEERS Check-In (CCI) Tool Initial Training

Helpful information:

- The CHEERS Check In Tool is a validated Parent Child Interaction Tool. HFA Best Practice Standards require use of a validated Parent Child Interaction tool once each year of the child's life from birth to age three. (6-3.D)
- HRSA has approved the CCI for use with MIECHV Benchmark Measure 10: Parent-Child Interaction.
- This training is intended for new users of the CCI Tool and prepares users to implement the tool in their work with families at HFA sites. After completing this training, staff and supervisors can access HFA CCI Live Practice Sessions for additional practice in observing parent child interactions and using the CCI Tool to rate these interactions.
- HFA recommends The CHEERS Check-In (CCI) Tool be used with the primary caregiver and their child twice per year, with the first administration by 4 months of age, and use the results to inform service planning and monitor progress of families.

What you'll need to complete this training:

- The CHEERS Check-In (CCI) Tool itself: You'll want 2 copies per trainee (download through link below)
- **The CHEERS Check-In Reliability Worksheet**
- **The CHEERS Check-In Manual**
- **The CHEERS Check-In Data Form**
- **The CHEERS Check-In administration and scoring instructions**

In addition to the Initial Training and materials supporting this training, HFA has a number of follow-up training videos and recordings of live practice sessions to support ongoing learning in administering and rating the CCI.

If you are a HFA affiliate and need help accessing Network Resources, please email hfamail@preventchildabuse.org.

The CHEERS Check-In Development Team

LeCroy & Milligan Associates, Inc.

Craig LeCroy, MSW, PhD
Darlene Lopez, MA
Sonia Cota-Robles, JD, PhD
Alyson Hempsey, MSW
Veronica Salaiz
Frankie Valenzuela
Rosalita Campos.

Healthy Families America

Kate Whitaker, MsEd IMH-E® (IV)
Kathryn Harding, MA
Brianna Stormer, MSW
Tracie Lansing, MSW

Consultants

Robert Weigand, MSW, IMH-E® (IV), Cowden Distinguished Principal Lecturer of Family & Human Development
Barbara Weigand, MSW, IMH-E® (IV)