

STRONG MINDS

Frequently Asked Questions

GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. What is Strong Minds?

Strong Minds is a voluntary quality rating improvement system that promotes high quality early care and education programs. **The goal of Strong Minds is to ensure all children arrive at kindergarten ready to learn.**

Strong Minds focuses on:

- improving child care programs' learning environment
- improving child care practitioners' quality and practice
- improving family engagement
- improving children's development and kindergarten readiness

Strong Minds recognizes program directors and family child care home operators as the leaders and change agents for their programs. Strong Minds is designed to encourage higher quality programs in their continuous quality improvement efforts by making a variety of supports available to them.

Supports available to **child care programs** include:

- reliable and valid program assessments
- child assessments
- navigation services
- targeted technical assistance
- tiered reimbursement supplements

Supports available to **child care practitioners** include access to a professional development system inclusive of:

- career advising
- SEEK scholarships
- formal and informal training
- community of practice
- registry membership
- salary supplements

Supports available to **families** include:

- involvement in their child's development through screening and assessment
- individualized instruction
- access to quality child care through Children's Services Council (CSC) Scholarships

Please note: participation in Strong Minds is contingent upon the availability of funding.

2. What are the qualifications for a program to apply to Strong Minds?

Strong Minds seeks programs that cultivate a commitment to ongoing professional development and continuous quality improvements. Potential programs are strongly encouraged to review the vision, mission, goals and guiding principles in the Strong Minds Provider Manual to ensure a good fit and successful participation. The Manual is available on the Children's Services Council website at <http://providers.cscpb.org/bequality>

In order to apply, programs must meet the following pre-entry criteria:

- Hold a School Readiness Contract with the Early Learning Coalition (www.elcpalmbeach.org) or a contract with Head Start and/or Early Head Start
- In good standing with applicable School Readiness, and / or Head Start / Early Head Start Contracts (In good standing for School Readiness is defined as no probation, termination for cause, emergency termination, revocation of eligibility, or suspected fraud within the last 12 months)
- No Class 1 licensing violations and no more than two (2) of the same Class 2 licensing violations within the last 12 months
- One hundred percent (100%) of professional staff are active members in the Palm Beach County Early Childhood Registry (www.pbcregistry.org)
- Agree to become accredited by a Gold Seal approved accrediting body within three years of achieving In-Network Status
- Agree to use Teaching Strategies GOLD Child Assessment System
- At least two (2) children enrolled (birth-5, not yet school age)

3. Does a program have to have a child care license for one year in order to apply to Strong Minds?

No. Although programs must be licensed, or license exempt, there is no requirement as to length of time a site has had a child care license.

4. How does a program apply to Strong Minds?

The online application for Strong Minds is available at www.earlylearningpb.org and accessible only when funding allows for new programs to be added to the Strong Minds Network. Programs with a School Readiness Contract with the Early Learning Coalition will use the same username and password they use to access the Early Learning Coalition Provider Portal.

5. How can we find out if applications are being accepted for Strong Minds?

If applications are not being accepted, you should see a note in the application section of the Strong Minds Portal and you will be unable to submit an application. When funding allows for additional programs, Strong Minds Navigators will send an email notification that applications are being accepted to programs that have School Readiness Contracts with the Early Learning Coalition. You may also contact a Strong Minds Navigator at 561-374-7521, 561-374-7586, or 374-7532.

6. What happens after a program applies to Strong Minds?

When a Strong Minds application is submitted, an immediate email is sent notifying the submitter that the application was submitted successfully. Within 10 business days, programs will receive an email Notification of Strong Minds Application Status. If all pre-entry criteria was not met, the program is ineligible and may reapply once all pre-entry criteria has been met, providing applications are being accepted. If eligible, the application status will be "Assessment Pending". Within 45 business days, the program will be contacted by the Children's Forum to schedule a program assessment.

7. What is the timeframe between application to Strong Minds and program assessment?

The usual timeframe between application and program assessment could be up to 60 business days.

8. Do participating programs have to reapply annually?

No, programs do not have to reapply annually; however, participating programs will confirm annually that they continue to meet pre-entry criteria, and if In-Network, that tiered reimbursement supplements are being used to improve program quality.

9. What can programs expect from Strong Minds?

- Provider-initiated supports and resources
- Automated application process
- User-friendly Strong Minds Portal
- Group, web-based and mobile career advising
- Professional Development scholarships
- ACHIEVE salary supplements for staff
- Tiered reimbursement supplement based on quality standards met
- Video libraries and tutorials
- Tutoring service

10. What can Strong Minds expect from child care programs?

- Directors and family child care home operators who lead their quality improvement efforts and set the direction for success

- Directors and family child care home operators who involve staff to promote active engagement in exceeding quality improvement goals
- Directors and family child care operators who invest in their own professional development and support their staff in ongoing professional development
- Directors and family child care operators who make use of available resources in an intentional manner that supports their overall strategic plan to improve outcomes for the children and families they serve
- Directors and family child care operators who are willing to use technology where necessary, appropriate, and more efficient
- Directors and family child care operators who can lead the way in quality improvement in child care programs in our county
- Directors and family child care operators who actively engage families in their children's learning and development

11. What can parents expect of programs participating in Strong Minds?

- Well-managed early care and education settings where nurturing staff provide engaging opportunities to learn
- Staff who engage in ongoing professional development to improve their skills
- Staff who recognize the family as the child's first teacher by engaging them in their child's learning and development
- Care that reflects respect for cultural diversity and individuality
- Higher quality program
- Children who will be better prepared for kindergarten

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

12. How are programs assessed?

Programs are assessed by professional program assessors from the Children's Forum. They use the following valid and reliable program assessment tools:

- Infant - Toddler Environment Rating Scale – R (ITERS-R)
- Toddler Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)*
- Pre-K Classroom Assessment and Scoring System (CLASS)
- Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale – R (FCCERS-R)

*Toddler CLASS is used in classrooms wherein the majority of the children are between the ages of 15 and 35 months, and in most circumstances is used for informational purposes only and not used toward eligibility for Strong Minds. Child care programs that serve only children in this age range are encouraged to contact a Strong Minds Navigator for additional information.

13. How often are program assessments done?

Formal program assessments are done randomly every other fiscal year. The fiscal year is October 1 through September 30. For example, programs that were assessed for eligibility for Strong Minds during fiscal year 2014-2015 (between October 1, 2014 and September 30, 2015) will undergo a renewal program assessment in fiscal year 2016-2017 (between October 1, 2016 and September 30, 2017).

14. How will the Pre-K CLASS Assessments be conducted?

Pre-K CLASS assessments will be conducted for 50% of the preschool classes during four twenty-minute cycles, with ten minute breaks in between cycles, and outdoor time is generally not assessed.

15. For centers, how many classrooms will be assessed?

Fifty percent (50%) of the classrooms with children 35 months and under will be assessed and fifty percent (50%) of the classrooms where children are 36 months and older will be assessed. The classrooms assessed are selected randomly by the assessment team prior to arrival.

16. Are all program assessments done in one day?

The Children's Forum will complete all assessments in one day whenever possible.

17. Can the assessment be rescheduled if the lead teacher is absent in one of the selected classrooms?

No. The unannounced program assessment will take place as scheduled, even if one or more staff is not present. The expectation is that intentional, higher quality programs maintain quality even when there is a floater or substitute present.

18. How will personal care routines be counted on the ERS for Strong Minds?

The entire ERS scale (ITERS-R and FCCERS-R) will be scored during the time of observation. For eligibility in Strong Minds, an average score will be calculated based on seventeen (17) items from five (5) Subscales of the ITERS-R and FCCERS-R that are linked to child outcomes. **(Please see Table 1 below)** The complete ERS scale scores will be issued for information on improving environments and developing continuous quality improvement plans.

TABLE 1

Expert-Combined ITERS Items (17) recommended (according to research article)	Subscale	Correlating FCCERS Items (17)	Subscale
Indoor Space	Space & Furnishing	Indoor Space used for children	Space & Furnishing
Furniture for Routine Care and Play	Space & Furnishing	Furniture for Routine Care, Play and Learning	Space & Furnishing
Provision for Relaxation and Comfort	Space & Furnishings	Provision for relaxation and comfort	Space & Furnishing
Room Arrangement	Space & Furnishing	Arrangement of indoor space for child care	Space & Furnishing
Display for Children	Space & Furnishing	Display for Children	Space & Furnishing
Helping Children Understand Language	Listening and Talking	Helping Children Understand Language	Listening and Talking
Helping Children Use Language	Listening and Talking	Helping Children use language	Listening and Talking
Using Books	Listening and Talking	Using Books	Listening and Talking
Fine Motor	Activities	Fine Motor	Activities
Promoting Acceptance of Diversity	Activities	Promoting acceptance of Diversity	Activities
Supervision of Play and Learning	Interaction	Supervision of Play and Learning	Activities
Peer Interaction	Interaction	Interactions among children	Interactions
Staff-Child Interaction	Interaction	Provider-Child Interaction	Interactions
Discipline	Interaction	Discipline	Interaction
Schedule	Program Structure	Schedule	Program Structure
Free Play	Program Structure	Free Play	Program Structure
*Provisions for Children with Disabilities	Program Structure	*Provisions for children with disabilities	Program Structure

IMPORTANT NOTE: Although the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R) is not used for program assessment, programs are strongly encouraged to become familiar with this assessment tool because it provides a strong foundation that contributes to overall program quality. Find out about the ECERS-R at www.forumpac.com and www.ersi.info.

19. Are program assessments conducted during the summer and/or spring break?

Yes, assessments are conducted year-round, including spring break. The expectation is that intentional, higher quality programs maintain quality year-round.

20. How can I learn more about the program assessment tools that are used to assess programs?

View videos and explore links at www.forumpac.com. Visit www.teachstone.com for information on the CLASS. Visit www.ersi.info for information on the Environment Rating Scales.

21. The eligibility criteria for Strong Minds shows certain scores on program assessments. Since 50% of the classrooms will be assessed, will the scores be averaged, or does *each classroom* that is assessed have to meet the scores for eligibility?

Each classroom that is assessed must meet the eligibility scores; scores will not be averaged among all classrooms assessed.

NETWORK STATUS

22. If a program does not meet the eligibility requirements for In-Network status, does that mean the program is not eligible to participate in Strong Minds?

No. Programs that meet the pre-entry criteria and receive program assessments are assigned a status of In-Network, Promising, or Emerging within Strong Minds. Programs with Promising and Emerging status are eligible for a variety of supports that participating programs may access, excluding the tiered reimbursement supplements.

23. Where can I find out more about the different statuses within Strong Minds?

Please see the Strong Minds Provider Manual available on the Children's Services Council website at <http://providers.cscpsc.org/bequality>.

24. Can you explain Promising status?

Strong Minds recognizes that many programs may demonstrate strengths during the program assessments and score just below the thresholds established for In-Network status. For these programs, Promising status allows an opportunity for technical assistance for up to six months and allows for a program to request re-assessment when they believe they are ready. ACHIEVE salary supplements are also available to programs with Promising status for practitioners who meet eligibility.

25. If my program participates with Promising status, what happens if my program does not score within In-Network status when it is re-assessed?

Programs with Promising status that do not achieve In-Network status at re-assessment will exit the system and may reapply one year from the reassessment date provided applications are being accepted and the program meets pre-entry requirements.

GOLD CHILD ASSESSMENT

26. Why is use of the GOLD child assessment system required?

Research suggests that child outcomes improve when teachers teach based on the needs of the children in their classroom. Through observation and documentation, the GOLD child assessment system shows what children know and can do and what adjustments can be made to promote /extend development. It will also allow us to assess how our new Strong Minds system is progressing towards the goal of school readiness. Learn more about GOLD at www.teachingstrategies.com.

27. Will laptops be included when programs with In-Network status are phased in to use the GOLD child assessment system?

Yes, laptops will be included, based on availability of funding.

28. Will programs have access to training to use the GOLD?

Yes, training will be available as programs are phased in.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

29. How does a program get technical assistance started?

Participating programs are eligible for targeted technical assistance once a Strong Minds Agreement has been reviewed, signed and submitted to Children's Services Council. The request for technical assistance is initiated by the center Director or family child care home Operator, who contacts a Strong Minds Navigator by phone to discuss and request technical assistance. The Navigators forward the request to the TA Manager, who assigns a Technical Assistance Specialist to your program.

TIERED REIMBURSEMENT SUPPLEMENTS

30. Are there spending guidelines regarding how we must use the funds received through tiered reimbursement supplements? Yes. Tiered reimbursement supplements are reserved for programs that have achieved In-Network Status (both Tier 1 and Tier 2). The Tiered Reimbursement Supplements are provided to help offset the cost of quality and are to be used for the sole purpose of improving the quality of the early care and education program. Programs are encouraged to accomplish this through staff development, retention efforts, and programmatic enhancements that are tied to child outcomes. Programs are also advised to retain receipts for purchases made using Tiered Reimbursement Supplements in the event of a random audit.

Items that are not permissible are:

- The purchase of real property
- Medical equipment, services or treatment

- Mortgage payments, interest payments, financing agreements, or long term vehicle leases
- Staff entertainment expenses
- Alcoholic beverages
- Late fees/Financing fees
- Florida state sales tax on purchases made

31. If we are a program with In-Network status, do we receive a reimbursement for each birth-5 year old child enrolled, or only for the children who receive School Readiness funding?

Reimbursement supplements will be made for each child birth to 5 (not yet school age) who attends Monday through Friday between the hours of 6am and 6pm, up to the program's licensed capacity.

32. If my licensed capacity is six children, but I care for eight children between 6am -6pm Monday through Friday because two children leave at 2pm and two other children arrive at 2:30pm, will the tiered reimbursement supplement be paid for eight children daily?

No. While it is possible to care for more than your licensed capacity throughout the day because not all children are in care at the same time, the tiered reimbursement supplement will not be paid for a number of children that exceeds the licensed capacity of the program. In this situation, the reimbursement supplement would be paid daily for six children.

33. How does Strong Minds determine how many children are enrolled in our program for the tiered reimbursement supplement?

Programs submit child enrollment numbers upon initial entry and again in April and October, which is used to determine the number of children enrolled. The child enrollment numbers submitted in April will be used to calculate the tiered reimbursement supplements for April through September, and the child enrollment numbers submitted in October will be used to calculate the tiered reimbursement supplements for the months of October through March. Instructions are included when you receive the notification of In-Network status.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

34. When can a program begin accepting children with CSC Scholarships?

A program may begin accepting children with CSC Scholarships when it has an active CSC Scholarship Agreement with the Early Learning Coalition. Only programs with In-Network status are eligible for CSC Scholarship Agreements.

35. How can we find out more about Strong Minds?

Find out more by visiting the Children's Services Council website at <http://providers.cscpb.org/bequality> where you can access the Strong Minds Provider Manual and the Information Session power point presentation, and/or contact the Strong Minds Navigators, who are available to answer your questions, at strongminds@cscpb.org