

Assessment as learning: ECEC *perceptions* of the CHEERS self-administered tool

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Relationship to previous research works

Children's eating and activity patterns are strongly influenced by early childhood social, cultural, and physical environments surrounding the eating-activity experience (Colquitt et al. 2016). Improving health behaviors requires assessment of the environmental context where these behaviors are learned (Story et al. 2008).

The *creating healthy eating and active environment scale* (CHEERS) was developed through a multi-agency collaboration (Lafave et al. 2016). CHEERS is a childcare tool that measures a program's eating and activity environment assessing strengths, opportunities, and gaps within the following constructs:

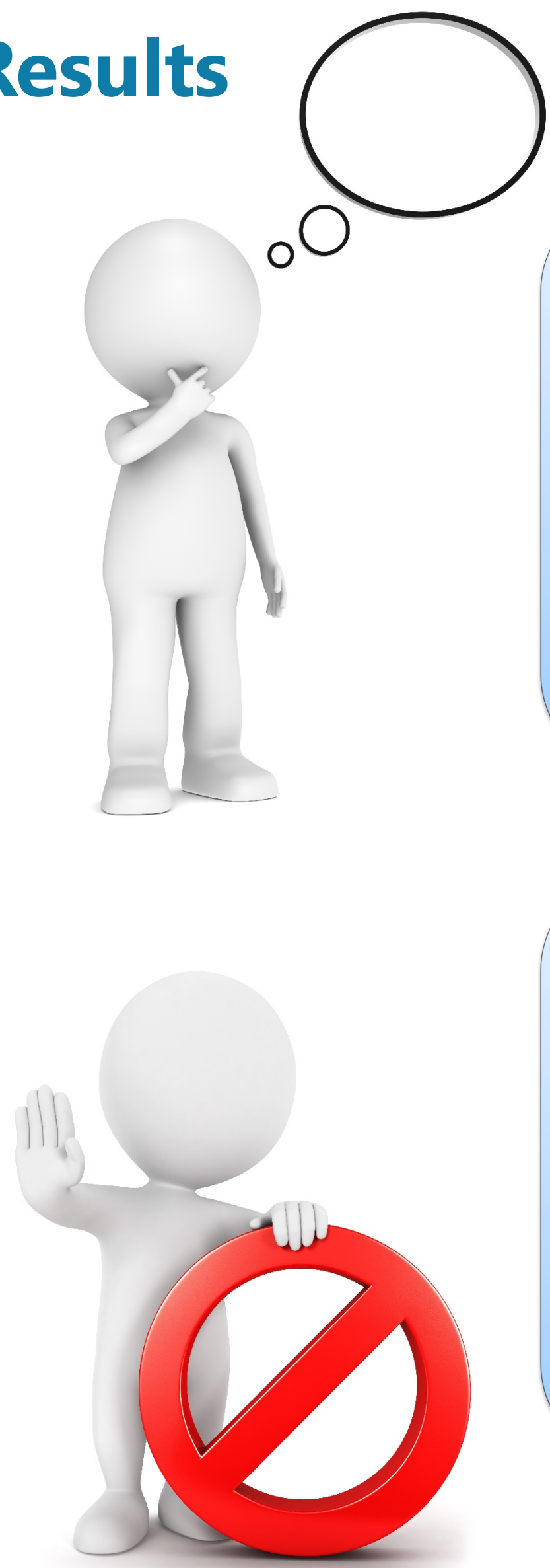
- ☐ Foods Served
- ☐ Healthy Eating Program Planning
- ☐ Healthy Eating Environment
- ☐ Physical Activity

Respondents answer 59 questions in the CHEERS scale and receive a personalized report based on these responses.

The CHEERS Report summarizes the responses in the survey and identifies one area of program strength (What is Going Well) and opportunity (What to Work On) for each of the constructs. The report provides (1) the link between the recommendation and child health with a reference to support evidence informed practice; (2) quick links to additional information and resources; (3) and how the recommendation connects to accreditation standards. Collectively they average together to give a snapshot of the childcare environment. The aim of this research was to capture how ECEC practitioners (educators, directors, and cooks) experience and make meaning of the CHEERS tool.



Results



Reflective Perception

- Curious to discover knowledge gaps
- Feedback report provides knowledge resource
- Contemplates potential next steps

Learner Perception

- Embrace knowledge gaps as opportunities
- Eager to extend personal knowledge
- Seeks out additional knowledge resources



Practitioner

Resigned Perception

- Uncomfortable admitting knowledge gaps
- Show no curiosity in exploring knowledge resources
- Status quo owing to being overwhelmed

Community Perception

- Seek community members for knowledge gap discussion
- Knowledge resource created through discussion
- Plans team approach to action plan



Paradigm, methodology and methods

This study took a phenomenographic approach (Barnard, 1999) within an interpretivist paradigm in order to uncover how educators made sense of the CHEERS tool in a public health context. Individual interviews were carried out with educators, directors, and cooks in five ECEC programs across Alberta ($n=15$). Interviews focused on perceptions concerning the sensibility of the CHEERS tool. The data was interpreted utilizing content analysis. The research protocol was approved by the MRU human research ethics board (#2015-56).

Discussion

This phenomenographic investigation provides an understanding of perceptions of the CHEERS tool and the different categories of description reflect the various ways in which ECEC practitioner's interact with the content. Multiple perspective combinations within an individual experience are possible.

Practitioners appear to be stimulated to professional growth (reflective, learner, community) or disengaged (resigned) in their exposure to the assessment.

Implications, practice or policy

- Optimal childcare nutrition and active environments require ECEC practitioner's to engage in continuous enhancement of their professional knowledge.
- The reflective, learner, and community perceptions enhance professional practice and advance child health and well-being.
- Providing support and clarifying centre priority on child health will nudge ECEC practitioner's towards intentionality in their behaviors and actions that optimize the childcare nutrition and activity environment.

References

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