



Team Discussion Guide

Connecting the PICCOLO Tool to Practice



CONNECTING THE PICCOLO TOOL TO PRACTICE TEAM DISCUSSION GUIDE

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WHAT IS PICCOLO?

Parenting Interactions with Children: Checklist of Observations Linked to Outcomes (PICCOLO) is an observational measure of positive parenting interactions with children 3 months to 6 years old. The PICCOLO tool assesses and monitors the quality of parent-child interactions in four domains of developmental parenting that promote early childhood development- Affection, Responsiveness, Encouragement and Teaching (Montirosso et al., 2023). The four domains along with the behaviors associated with them are predictive of positive outcomes in cognitive, language and social-emotional development (Rohrman, 2020).

Key Findings and Benefits of Parent-Child Interactions

- **Brain Architecture: “Serve and Return”:** Positive, nurturing interactions—often called “serve and return”—are essential for building strong brain architecture. When an adult responds appropriately to a child’s cues (babbling, gestures or cries) with eye contact, words or a hug, it strengthens neural connections.
- **Secure Attachment and Trust:** When parents are responsive to their child’s needs, children form a secure attachment. This secure base fosters a sense of trust, safety and security, which allows children the freedom to explore their world.
- **Buffers Against Risk:** A nurturing relationship between a child and their primary caregiver acts as a powerful protective factor, helping mitigate the child from negative influences.
- **Cognitive and Language Growth:** Engaging in shared talking, reading and play activities increases a child’s vocabulary, early literacy and overall cognitive stimulation.
- **School Readiness:** Children who experience positive, nurturing interactions in early childhood develop stronger social-emotional skills, regulate their behavior better and are significantly better prepared to succeed in school.
- **Independence and Resilience:** Encouraging and supportive parenting helps children develop personal social skills, build independence and feel confident in trying new skills, leading to greater resilience.

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How PICCOLO Supports Our Work With Families

The PICCOLO tool helps users observe and reflect on everyday parenting behaviors that support their child's development. It is not a test, diagnosis, evaluation of parenting ability or a measure of love or commitment to a child, instead it is an opportunity to highlight and build upon parenting strengths. Here are a few ways the PICCOLO tool supports families and informs home visiting work:

- **Identifies Strengths:** Shows what families are already doing well and builds on existing strengths to enhance their confidence.
- **Guides Support and Next Steps:** Helps providers better support families with targeted, individualized support and intervention planning. It highlights strengths, guides reflection and informs planning.
- **Tracks Growth:** Collects data on changes in the frequency of positive parenting through multiple assessment opportunities.
- **Focus on Development:** Highlights parenting behaviors that are proven to support early brain development and school readiness.

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CONSIDERING CULTURE

PICCOLO is designed to be culturally responsive, recognizing that parents express affection, encouragement, responsiveness and teaching in diverse ways across cultures and families. When using PICCOLO, it is essential to approach each observation with respect for the family's cultural values, practices and lived experiences. Building familiarity and a trusting relationship with the family is a critical part of this process. To support an authentic observation, programs should consider administering PICCOLO only after the home visitor has established rapport and familiarity with the family.

Respecting Cultural Practices in Parent-Child Interaction

While core parenting constructs like sensitivity are universal, the behaviors used to express them are not.

- **Verbal Expression and Touch:** In some cultures, frequent verbal praise, overt positive expressions or physical closeness (Affection/Encouragement domains) may not be the primary indication of love or good parenting.
 - In cultures that prioritize collectivism (interdependence) over individualism, parenting practices often emphasize raising children to be cooperative, respectful and attentive to the needs of the family and community. As a result, parents may use less individualized verbal praise, instead communicating encouragement through inclusion, shared responsibilities, modeling or acknowledging the child's contribution to the group. In contrast, cultures that emphasize individualism may place greater value on frequent verbal praise, recognizing individual accomplishments and encouraging children to develop independence and express their unique abilities from an early age.
- **Responsiveness and Independence:** A parent from a culture that values interdependence might choose to continue feeding their child longer (an act of nurturing/caring) rather than encouraging immediate self-feeding (an act of independence often valued in individualistic cultures). In this context, the parent's actions should be understood as culturally driven and their child-rearing goals respected.
- **The Home Visitor's Role:** The home visitor must place the observed interactions in the context of the family's specific cultural beliefs, practices and values. Instead of viewing different styles as deficits, the home visitor should ask and learn about any style of interaction that may be based on culture to support the parent in a culturally attuned way. **Consider:** What is influencing parenting decisions? How does this fit with scoring specific observable behaviors?

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HOW TO USE THE DISCUSSION GUIDE?

What To Expect

The discussion guide is organized into clear sections that walk teams through key reflection points related to using the PICCOLO domains (affection, encouragement, responsiveness and teaching). Each section typically includes:

- A brief framing statement or purpose.
- Guiding questions for discussion.
- Space to reflect on practice, challenges and strengths.
- Optional scenarios or examples to apply learning.

Teams can expect a conversational format rather than a lecture. The goal is dialogue, shared understanding and consistency in practice—not evaluation. Conversations may surface differences in interpretation, cultural considerations and practical challenges. That is expected and valuable.

Ways It Can Be Used

The guide is flexible and can be adapted to meet your team's needs:

- **Team Meetings:** Use one section at a time during staff meetings to build shared understanding. Rotate facilitation to encourage ownership and diverse perspectives.
- **Onboarding New Staff:** Pair the guide with shadowing or reflective supervision. It helps new team members understand how your program interprets and applies the PICCOLO domains in real-world practice.
- **Focused Deep Dives:** Spend an entire session on one domain (e.g., responsiveness) or one theme (e.g., cultural alignment, scoring challenges). This allows for deeper reflection and calibration across staff.
- **Ongoing Practice:** Use scenarios or recorded examples (if appropriate and permitted) to discuss scoring differences and interpretation. The guide supports consistency without turning the conversation into a compliance exercise.
- **Deepen Understanding of Community:** The discussion guide encourages home visiting teams to reflect on how family strengths, parenting practices and parent-child interactions are shaped by each family's culture, community and lived experiences. Through collaborative discussion and shared perspectives, teams deepen their understanding of the communities they serve, strengthening their ability to interpret observations with cultural humility and build more responsive, relationship-based support for families.

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What This Discussion Guide Is — and What It Is Not

The discussion guide is a companion tool designed to:

- Support reflective practice.
- Strengthen team alignment.
- Encourage thoughtful interpretation.
- Support staff onboarding.
- Provide space to explore cultural considerations and real-life application.
- Build confidence in using the PICCOLO tool.

The discussion guide:

- Does not train staff in how to administer the PICCOLO tool.
- Is not officially endorsed by the PICCOLO developers.
- Does not replace formal PICCOLO training.

The emphasis is on dialogue, teamwork and strengthening practice—not certification or compliance.

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Using the PICCOLO discussion guide, participants will be able to:

1. Explain the purpose and core components of the PICCOLO tool.

- Describe how PICCOLO supports reflective observation of parenting behaviors and strengths.
- Articulate how the tool is intended to be used as a supportive, relationship-based practice rather than an evaluative measurement.

2. Apply PICCOLO scoring using family video examples.

- Observe and identify parenting behaviors across PICCOLO domains using family videos.
- Accurately score PICCOLO items and justify scoring decisions through group discussion.

3. Engage in reflective discussion and collaborative problem-solving.

- Participate in team-based conversations to compare observations, discuss differing perspectives and resolve scoring questions.
- Use discussion to deepen understanding of how context, culture and family circumstances shape parenting interactions.

4. Use PICCOLO as a tool for strengths-based conversations with families.

- Practice sharing observations in ways that are respectful, affirming and accessible to families.
- Demonstrate comfort explaining PICCOLO concepts and observations using family-centered, non-technical language.

5. Adapt the use of PICCOLO to reflect cultural, community and family values.

- Identify ways parenting behaviors may be expressed differently across cultures and communities.
- Discuss and practice flexible approaches to using PICCOLO that honor families' cultural norms, values and lived experiences.

6. Integrate PICCOLO into practice in ways that meet community needs.

- Reflect on how PICCOLO can be used within participants' specific home visiting models and community contexts.
- Identify strategies for using PICCOLO flexibly to support relationship-building, goal setting and ongoing family engagement.

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TALKING TO FAMILIES ABOUT PICCOLO

Tips to prepare for PICCOLO conversations:

- Understand the purpose of the tool.
- Know your program, model and organizational expectations and requirements.
- Explain the tool in clear, plain language and how it will support the family.
- Ask family's permission to implement a PICCOLO visit, schedule a PICCOLO visit in advance.

Activity

Understanding the purpose and organizational expectations of PICCOLO provides clarity on how to use the tool effectively. Clearly defining the *how*, *what* and *why* makes it easier for both providers and families to understand its purpose and value. Here are a few areas to consider:

Considerations	Notes
Program Requirements	
Timeline/Frequency	
Data Collection: What are you measuring?	
How will results be used internally? How will they inform services?	
How will results be shared with families? What conversations will you have?	

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Activity: Build Your Own Script

- **Goal:** Practice explaining the PICCOLO in a clear, respectful, family-centered way.
- **Prompt:** How would you explain PICCOLO to a caregiver in your own words?

Remember, the purpose of the tool is not to get a perfect score but to identify the parent's strengths and to share those with families.

Instructions: In pairs or small groups, create a short script that includes three core components:

1. **Inform** – Share what to expect, the purpose, and how it helps.
2. **Invite** – Ask permission and acknowledge choice.
3. **Ask** – Check for questions, concerns or preferences.

Using script, role play:

- Roles: Home visitor and caregiver.
- Scenarios:
 - Caregiver feels hesitant or nervous.
 - Caregiver is confused about the purpose.
 - Caregiver does not want to participate or be filmed.

Reflections:

- What language helped reduce anxiety?
- How did the home visitor center caregiver choice and autonomy?
- What did you do or hear that you will take with you?
- What did you do or hear that you would do differently?

Appendix: Example script and/or a worksheet script.

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OBSERVING PICCOLO

Tips for observing PICCOLO parent-child interactions:

- [Choose a video from the PICCOLO library](#) or one of your own.
- Watch video in pairs or a group.
- The questions and prompts provided are not a script or checklist, but a framework to help interpret what is observed through the PICCOLO. They support the identification of parenting strengths and meaningful parent-child interactions. The goal is to spark reflective dialogue and inform future conversations with parents when sharing observations and feedback.

What is the purpose (for your program) of observing parent-child interactions?

Did the family's cultural practice(s) influence the interaction in ways that aligned with or differed from the PICCOLO? If they differed, what evidence or process did you use to determine the most appropriate score?

Consider your own values, beliefs, and bias. How might that impact what you observed?

When a parent does not want to be recorded, what are respectful alternatives/strategies?

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Find 2 to 3 strengths in the recording (be specific and detailed).

The positive parenting behavior(s) I observed were...

1.

2.

3.

The child responded to the behavior(s) by...

What impact do these parenting behaviors have on...

- **Child's development**

- **Social-emotional development**

When and where could the parent/caregiver do more of these behaviors?



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SCORING PICCOLO

Tips for Scoring

- Culture and context matter.
- A single 10-minute observation is a snapshot, not the whole picture.
- Try not to schedule the PICCOLO for the first couple of visits before getting to know the family.
- Option to use the 29 things handout (appendix) to help with scoring, instead of the checklist tool.

Considering Cultural Context When Scoring

The PICCOLO domains (affection, encouragement, responsiveness and teaching) do not encompass all positive parenting behaviors or important cultural practices. This misalignment can make scoring challenging. For example, a parent may not use a warm tone of voice, yet the child smiles, engages or moves closer—offering important information about the relationship that may not fit typical expectations.

As a team, consider how you will approach situations where cultural practices and the tool's indicators don't fully align. Discuss how you will interpret behaviors thoughtfully and consistently.

Remember, the purpose of the tool is not to get a perfect score but to identify the parent's strengths and to share those with families. Use this as an opportunity to learn more about their parenting strengths, knowledge, practices and cultural values.

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Activity: Practice Scoring

- Focus on one PICCOLO domain at a time.
- Watch video: Think about your learning style. Is it helpful to watch the video all the way through or do you prefer to pause and document as you go?

OR

- Use the 29 things handout and place tally marks next to each behavior and how many times you observed the behavior. If you have no tally marks the score is “0”, if you have 1-2 tally marks the score is “1” and if you have multiple tally marks of 3 or more, the score is “2”.

Reflection Questions

- Are there behaviors you were unsure how to score?
- What strategies support scoring accuracy?
- Which interactions are harder to observe?
- Were there any behaviors that were influenced by culture?
- Did you notice any of your values or bias impacting how you scored?

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SHARING RESULTS WITH FAMILIES

Tips for Sharing Results

- Share results in a strength-based, culturally responsive way.
- Avoid over-interpreting scores.
- Use questions and prompts from *Recording and Observing PICCOLO* section as guidance for conversation with families.

The Value in Sharing Strength-Based Results

Sharing results with families helps build trust in the parent–home visitor relationship. It creates an opportunity to recognize what parents are doing well and celebrate their strengths.

Parenting is complex, and caregivers may not always see how they are supporting their child's growth and development. Reflecting on strengths increases awareness of their positive impact and encourages those behaviors to continue.

This conversation can also guide goal setting. Together, you can build on strengths and identify areas the family wants to strengthen.

When used this way, PICCOLO becomes more than a screening tool—it becomes a meaningful resource for supporting positive parent–child interactions.

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Reflection Prompts

- What language keeps the focus on family strengths while supporting the child's development, parenting behaviors and the parent-child relationship?
- How do we explain that scores reflect only **observed behaviors**, recognizing that that parents may demonstrate additional strengths and parenting behaviors in other interactions that were not observed?
- How does culture shape how results are understood and received?

Discussion: Incorporating Observations Into Conversation

Below are questions that will prepare you for sharing results with families:

- What strengths (2-7) do you see in the parenting behavior?
- How did the child respond?
- How does this interaction support development?
- How can identified strengths guide goal setting?
- How can areas of growth inform future home visits?
- How do we keep culture and family priorities central?
 - What were the family's reflections from this process? What did they learn?
 - What does the family want to focus on moving forward? What support would they like?

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COMMON CHALLENGES AND PROBLEM-SOLVING

Listed below are the four PICCOLO domains (affection, responsiveness, encouragement and teaching). Each domain includes a potential challenge and a suggestion for how to navigate the challenge. When going through each domain, consider if this reflects the families you serve; any impact or tension these challenges have in implementing or scoring PICCOLO; and alternative ways to navigate the challenges that recognize the strengths of the parent and child.

Affection

- **Cultural Nuance:** Some cultures may not consider frequent physical closeness or verbal praise to be indicators of strong parenting or essential for healthy child development.
- **Challenge:** A parent loves their child deeply and expresses that love in ways that are meaningful within their cultural practices, rather than through the specific affection behaviors identified in PICCOLO.
- **Problem-Solving:** Reframe affection as connection. Ask the parent, *“In your family, how do you show your child they are special?”* Look for subtle cues like eye contact, smiling or gentle handling.

Responsiveness

- **External Stress:** Parents facing external stress such as housing or food insecurity may be in survival mode, making it hard to be attuned to a child’s cues.
- **Challenge:** When families are navigating challenges such as housing or food insecurity, parents are often focused on meeting immediate needs.
- **Problem-Solving:** These stressors can temporarily affect their capacity to consistently notice and respond to their child’s cues, even while remaining deeply committed to their child’s well-being.
- **Note:** *The goal is not to be responsive 100% of the time. Even the most responsive parents will miss or misread their child’s cues. Parents who are experiencing stress can still be responsive, but it may be more challenging to attune to their child’s cues.*

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Encouragement

- **Independence vs Interdependence:** Some cultures emphasize cooperation, humility and respect over independence and individual choice.
- **Challenge:** A parent quickly steps in to complete a task for the child rather than encouraging the child to try on their own.
- **Problem-Solving: Explain the “Why.”** Connect exploration to child development. *“When he bangs those blocks, he’s actually learning about cause and effect—he’s a little scientist!”* **OR** affirm the parent’s intention and care by highlighting what they are already doing that supports their child’s development rather than suggesting a different parenting style.

Teaching

- **Teaching vs Observational Learning:** In some cultures, parents see themselves as their child’s teacher, creating opportunities targeted towards the child, focused on the child that focus on skill development while other cultures may value learning through observation and participation in daily life.
- **Challenge:** A parent may not sit on the floor to play or label objects but instead includes the child in everyday routines where the child listens and watches the parent.
- **Problem-Solving:** Affirm the parent’s approach and connect it to development. *“Children learn in many ways. When she watches you cook and helps with small tasks, she’s learning language, coordination and responsibility. Learning through everyday experiences is powerful.”*

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CULTURAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Language Barriers and Identity

- **Issue:** If the home visitor and parent don't share a primary language, the PICCOLO scores may be inaccurate or artificially low because the nuance of the interaction is lost.
- **Problem-Solving:** Use qualified interpreters, bilingual staff or trusted community members who speak the family's primary language to support accurate understanding. Whenever possible, partner with individuals who are familiar with the family's cultural and linguistic context. This helps ensure that meaning, tone and intention are accurately interpreted so strengths are recognized and scored appropriately.

Physical Space and Privacy

- **Issue:** Overcrowded homes or the presence of extended family members can make a parent feel "on stage" and act unnaturally.
- **Problem-Solving:** Find a "sacred space." Even if it's just a corner of a room or a rug, define that area as the "Play Zone" for the session to create a sense of focused privacy.

The "Expert" Problem

- **Issue:** In many cultures, the "Specialist" is viewed as an authority figure to be deferred to. The parent may stop interacting and wait for you to "teach" the child.
- **Problem-Solving:** Explicitly hand over the toy/book. Say, *"You are the expert on your child. I'm just here to see how you two work your magic together."*

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OTHER VIDEO OR OBSERVATION RELATED CHALLENGES

The Challenge	Possible Problem-Solving Strategy
“Wonderful Parent, Low Score”	Focus on the specific behavior, not the person. Say: <i>“This tool looks at very specific behaviors in a 10-minute window. It doesn’t measure the entirety of your parenting.”</i>
“It didn’t happen in the video”	Only give points to behaviors observed in the PICCOLO interaction. It can be challenging to know a family’s strengths, but not include them in the score. This does not mean the parent never demonstrates those behaviors. Instead, treat the observation as a moment in time and score only the strengths you directly observed to maintain the tool’s reliability.
Recording Refusal	Build trust first. Offer to do a “practice” recording that you delete immediately or explain that the video helps you learn how to be a better specialist.
Sharing Results Respectfully	Highlight 2-3 strengths of the parent or parent-child interaction. When thinking about areas of growth, ask the parent if there is any area that they want to explore and grow in.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Script Worksheet

Invite:

- Affirm something specific you've noticed about the parent-child interaction.
- Express interest in focusing on their strengths.
- Signal collaboration ("together," "if you're open").

Prompt Starters:

- "I've noticed..."
- "I really appreciate how you..."
- "Would you be open to..."

Inform:

- Share the purpose (highlight strengths in interactions).
- Clarify what it is not (not a test, not grading).
- Briefly explain the process (10-minute everyday activity, may include recording and review later).
- Emphasize how it supports their goals.

Prompt Starters:

- "This tool helps us look at..."
- "It focuses on things like..."
- "It's not about..."
- "We would simply..."

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Ask Offer Choice and Control:

- Check comfort level.
- Offer options for activity.
- Reinforce autonomy.

Prompt Starters:

- “How does that feel to you?”
- “Would you like to try this?”
- “What activity would feel most natural?”
- “Would you prefer to think about it first?”

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Appendix B: Script

"I'd like to invite you to try something called the PICCOLO. It's a short way for us to notice the everyday things you already do with your child that support their learning and development. If you're open to it, we'd record a few minutes of you and your child playing or doing a routine together, nothing special to prepare.

We would watch the video together, and I'd share strengths I noticed and how your interactions support your child. The video is just for this purpose, and you can stop or say no at any time. Does that feel okay to you?"

"I use a tool called the PICCOLO to notice the everyday things you already do that support your child's development. If you're open to it, we'll record a few minutes of you and your child playing or doing a routine together and then watch it to highlight strengths. You can say no or stop at any time."

"Thank you for doing that. As we watch this together, I'll point out strengths I notice in how you and your child interact and how those moments support their learning and connection. I'm also interested in what *you* notice about your child or yourself."

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Appendix C:



29 THINGS PARENTS DO THAT PREDICT SCHOOL READINESS

Below are 29 things parents do with their young children, ages 10-47 months, that predict one or more of the following outcomes when children are old enough to start kindergarten:

Cognitive skills (problem solving, reasoning, science, and math readiness)

Vocabulary (word knowledge, language ability)

Literacy skills (recognizing letters, linking speech sounds to letters, recognizing text)

Social skills (emotion regulation, low rates of aggression)

Our research, on over 4,000 observations of almost 2,000 families, shows that very few parents do all of these things, but all parents do some of these things. And the more parents do these things, the better their children do on school readiness assessments. PICCOLO™ is an observational measure of these behaviors.

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. Speak warmly | 16. Encourage child to do things with toys |
| 2. Smile at child | 17. Support child's choices |
| 3. Praise child | 18. Help child do things on his or her own |
| 4. Stay physically close to child | 19. Verbally encourage child's efforts |
| 5. Say positive things to child | 20. Offer suggestions to help child |
| 6. Interact in positive ways with child | 21. Show enthusiasm about what child does |
| 7. Show emotional warmth | 22. Explain reasons for something to child |
| 8. Pay attention to what child is doing | 23. Suggest activities to build on what child is doing |
| 9. Change activities to meet child's interests or needs | 24. Repeat or expand child's words or sounds |
| 10. Be flexible when child changes interests | 25. Label objects or actions for child |
| 11. Follow what child is trying to do | 26. Engage in pretend play with child |
| 12. Respond to child's emotions | 27. Do activities in a sequence of steps |
| 13. Look at child when child talks or makes sounds | 28. Talk about characteristics of objects |
| 14. Reply to child's words or sounds | 29. Ask child for information |
| 15. Wait for child's response after making a suggestion | |

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