

---

# Child Outcomes Summary (COS) Process Quick Reference Guide (Updated June 2026)

---

June 2026

## Overarching Goals of Early Intervention (EI) and Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE)

- To enable children to be active and successful participants in their homes, in childcare, in preschool, and in the community during the early childhood years and beyond.
- To enable families to provide care for their child and have the resources they need to participate in family and community activities.

## Why Measure Child Outcomes

- Receiving high-quality services enables many children to move closer to age-expected functioning than they otherwise would have. Measuring outcomes helps us understand if our programs provide services that make a difference for children and families.
- Documenting children's movement toward age-expected functioning provides evidence about the effectiveness of EI and ECSE at national, state, and local levels.

## What We Mean by Outcomes

- An "outcome" is a benefit experienced as a result of services and supports received. An outcome is not the receipt of services, and it is not satisfaction with services. Rather, it is what happens as a result of services provided.
- Given that services are only one factor that influences outcomes, services cannot guarantee any specific outcome for all children. Nevertheless, EI and ECSE programs strive to achieve positive outcomes for all the children and families they serve.

## The Three Child Outcomes

### *Federal Requirements*

States are required to report on the percentage of infants and toddlers with Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSPs) or preschool children with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) who demonstrate improvement in the three child outcomes:

1. **Positive social-emotional skills** (including social relationships)
2. **Acquisition and use of knowledge and skills** (including early language and communication, as well as early literacy for children ages 3–5)
3. **Use of appropriate behaviors to meet needs**

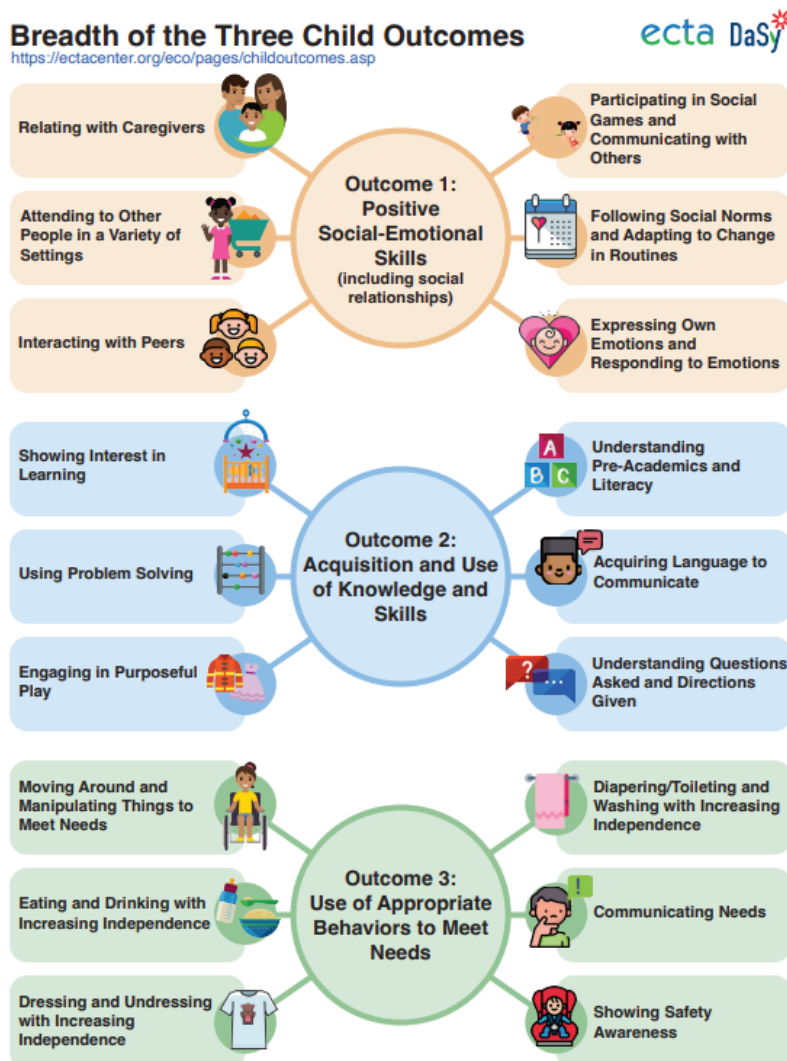
These are sometimes referred to as the three global early childhood outcomes.

## Characteristics of the Three Child Outcomes

The three child outcomes encompass functional skills and behaviors that are meaningful for a child's participation in everyday routines. The outcomes are:

- **Integrated across domains:** They include skills that cross developmental domains to reflect the interrelated nature of how children develop, learn, and thrive.
- **Functional:** They focus on skills the child purposefully uses to complete tasks and meaningfully participate in the context of everyday life. They are not simply the presence or absence of isolated (or discrete domain-specific) skills often included in assessment tools. See also [Understanding Functional Skills: Background for the COS Process](#).
- **Global:** They represent universal benefits all children can expect from participating in the program, as opposed to IFSP outcomes or IEP goals, which are individualized.
- **Interdependent with family outcomes:** Positive outcomes experienced by the family serve to promote the child outcomes, and improved child outcomes benefit the family.

The [Breadth of the Three Child Outcomes](#) infographic shows the six "skill bundles" for each outcome, which are used throughout the COS process.



## Overview of the COS Process

- The [COS process](#) is a team process to discuss and rate a child's functioning on 7-point scale in each of the three outcomes. The process provides a consistent way for teams to rate the child's functioning relative to what is expected for a child of that age. The COS is not an assessment tool. Rather, during the COS process, the team reviews and synthesizes information about the child's functioning in each outcome.
- For federal reporting, COS team rating discussions must occur near program entry and again near program exit for all children who have received services for at least six months.
- Some states also collect ratings at interim intervals. Check state guidance for policies.

## *COS Rating Discussions*

- Through COS rating discussions, the team synthesizes information about the child's functioning, including how it varies at different times, with different people, and across places with different supports and expectations.
- The team considers the mix of functioning relative to age expectations and reaches consensus on a COS rating for each of the three global child outcomes.
- COS ratings represent snapshots that summarize the child's overall functioning at one given point in time.

See also [COS Data Collection and Guidance](#) for an overview of key practices and resources.

## *COS Teams*

- The COS process uses team-based approach to decision making. A COS team includes people who know the child well across the settings and situations where the child spends their time.
- The team usually includes all members of the child's IFSP or IEP team, including at least one family member.

Family members are critical members of the COS team because they know their child best and can provide examples of the child's functioning across routines and with different people. Families also can share how their context and culture shape activities and their expectations for the child.

## *What COS Team Members Need to Know*

Effective rating decisions incorporate the knowledge and perspectives of all team members. Collectively, the COS team members should understand:

- The content and [breadth of the three child outcomes](#)
- Age-expected child development
- The child's functioning across settings and situations
- Age expectations for child functioning within the child and family's community and culture
- COS rating criteria as shown in [COS Definitions: 7-Point Rating Scale Criteria](#) and the [COS Decision Tree for Summary Rating Discussions](#)

## Gathering Information About Child Functioning

COS team members gather, organize, and share meaningful information about the child's everyday functioning in a way that:

- Covers the [breadth of the three child outcomes](#)
- Focuses on current functioning with detail and context
- Includes multiple sources, methods, and settings and situations
- Allows the team to consider the child's functioning relative to what is age-expected as described in age-anchoring tools and resources

## Age-Anchoring Functional Skills

- In the COS process, team members "age anchor" the child's functional skills and look at the mix of skills the child uses to decide a rating.
- Age anchoring is the process of examining a child's current functional abilities, skills, and behaviors to determine how close that functioning is to expectations for their chronological age. The team references assessment tools and child development resources to identify the age when each skill is expected to emerge.
- The team should focus on functional abilities rather than isolated (or discrete) skills that the child may have demonstrated only during assessment.

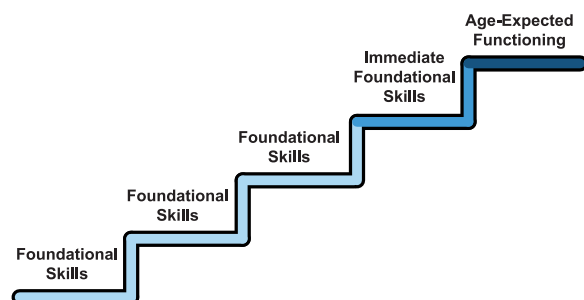
For more information, see [Age Anchoring Guidance for Determining Child Outcomes Summary \(COS\) Ratings](#) and [Age Anchoring Best Practices](#).

COS ratings represent the mix of the child's AE, IF, and F skills across the full breadth of the outcome:

- **Age-Expected (AE)** skills are those in the broad range of what is expected for the child's chronological age.
- **Immediate Foundational (IF)** skills are those appearing just before age-expected functioning in the sequence of development.
- **Foundational (F)** skills are two or more steps away from age-expected functioning in the developmental progression. These skills are often seen much earlier in the sequence of development and form an important foundation for IF and AE skills.

The general pattern in development is that the simplest skills emerge first and usually are maintained. More complicated skills build on those early skills and emerge later. Think of it as a staircase:

Some skills emerge early and become more refined but are not replaced by a new skill. Examples include making eye contact, walking, or eating with a spoon. Skills that emerge early and persist are not sufficient evidence of age-expected functioning. For example, a 4-year-old's eye contact with an adult does not provide sufficient evidence for age-expected functioning because eye contact emerges much earlier. The team would need to identify skills expected to emerge around the child's age for the child's functioning to be considered age-expected.



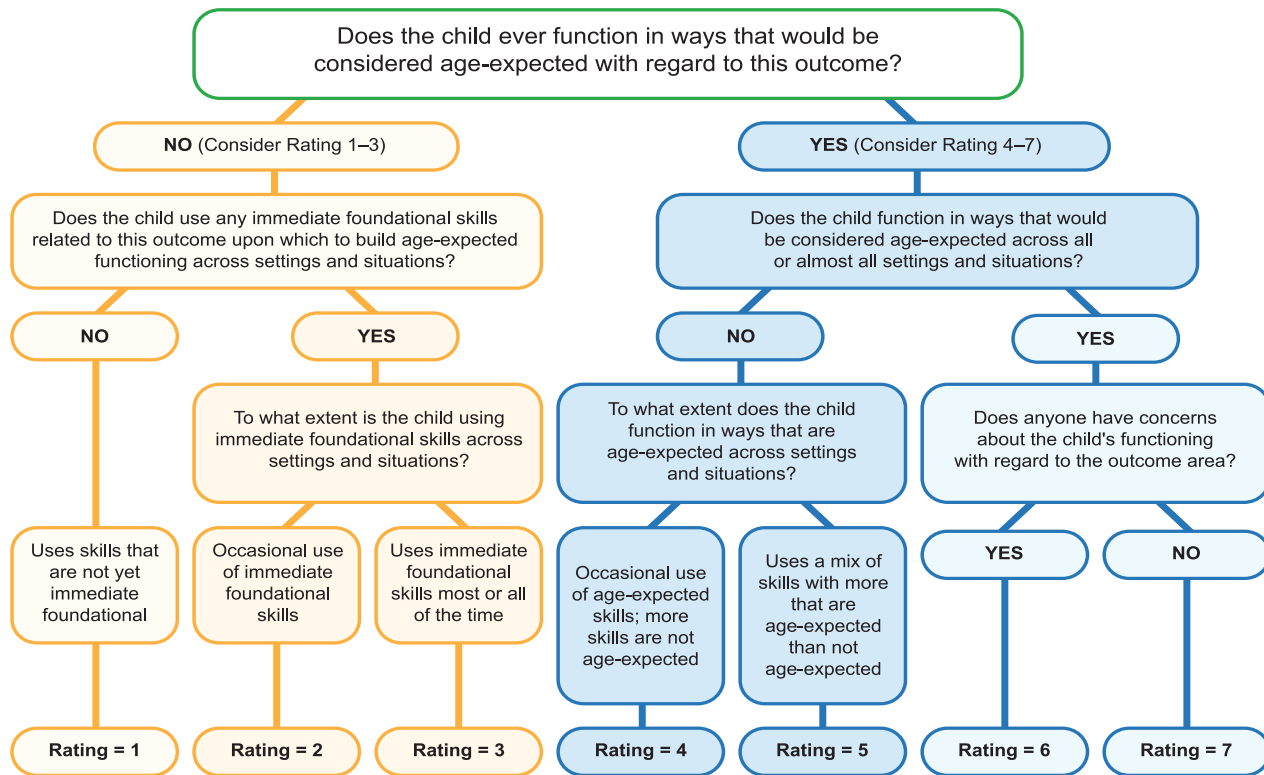
## Applying Rating Criteria to Reach Consensus on a COS Rating

The team reaches consensus on a COS rating by working through the questions on the decision tree. The rating can be a number ranging from 1 to 7, or it can be a culminating descriptor statement selected from seven statements adopted by some states to represent each of the ratings on the scale. Two resources can help teams identify the rating that best describes the child's functioning relative to what is expected for their chronological age:

- [COS Definitions: 7-Point Rating Scale Criteria](#) provide criteria for each point on the rating scale based on the mix of AE, IF, and F skills observed in the child's functioning.
- [COS Decision Tree for Summary Rating Discussions](#) guides rating discussions and decision-making as teams apply the criteria from the definitions.

For more information about an approach to identifying ratings without using numbers, see the [Table At-a-Glance: COS Ratings, Culminating Descriptor Statements, and Documentation](#) near the end of this document. See also [Culminating Descriptor Statements: An Alternative to COS Rating Numbers](#).

### The COS Decision Tree



The [COS Decision Tree for Summary Rating Discussions](#) is not a script. It guides COS team members through a series of questions where they discuss examples of the child's functioning and that helps them apply the criteria for each of the seven points on the rating scale.

The first question on the decision tree asks if the child “ever” functions in ways that are age-expected with regard to this outcome. Note that “ever” means the child has an AE skill in their repertoire and uses it in a meaningful way with some consistency (that is, at least occasionally), even if it is not observed in every setting or situation. “Ever” does not mean the child has performed an AE skill once in their life.

See also [Answering the "Ever" Question on the Decision Tree: Key Points and Practice Scenarios](#).

## ***COS Ratings and Eligibility***

Ratings on the COS 7-point scale are **independent of eligibility** for EI or ECSE services.

Some children who are eligible for IDEA-funded services may have ratings of 6 or 7 in one, two, or even all three of the outcome areas at entry. Examples of children who could demonstrate age-expected functioning across all or almost all settings and situations include children with sensory impairments who function at age-expected levels with assistive technology in place and children with diagnosed conditions for whom delays are likely to emerge later in development.

## ***The Progress Question for COS Exit Ratings***

Most of the COS process is identical for entry and exit ratings. Each COS rating describes the child's functioning at that point in time. For the exit rating, after reaching consensus on the rating, COS team members also answer a yes/no question about whether the child has made “any progress” relative to their own functioning at entry for each outcome. Note that “any progress” is defined as whether or not the child has acquired even one new skill or behavior related to the outcome since the entry rating.

Because age expectations change as the child gets older, the child could have made progress even if a rating is the same or lower than at entry. If the child has acquired new skills, the answer to the progress question is “yes” regardless of the rating.

## **Effective Documentation of COS Ratings**

Documentation stands as a record of the team's decision-making and provides evidence to support the selected rating. Effective documentation shows to what extent the team has applied the rating criteria appropriately and allows others to verify the accuracy of the COS rating. Effective documentation for each outcome's rating:

- Identifies functional skills the child uses and how consistently the child uses them, across everyday settings and situations
- Describes skills in terms of age anchoring (AE, IF, F) in a way that supports the rating
- Focuses on the child's current functioning relative to what is expected for a child that age, not how much progress the child has made
- Identifies information and sources contributing to the rating

Documentation for the yes/no progress question at exit describes the nature of the child's progress.

See [Effective Documentation of COS Ratings](#) and the table at the end of this document for the kind of evidence to record on the COS form by each rating number.

For more information, see the [COS Form with Instructions](#) and [COS Rating Fidelity Tool](#).



## Table At-a-Glance: COS Ratings, Culminating Descriptor Statements, and Documentation\*

### Overall Age-Expected Functioning

| Rating   | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Example Culminating Descriptor Statements                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Effective Documentation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>7</b> | Child functions in ways that are age-expected in all or almost all everyday situations that are part of the child's life. No one on the team has concerns about the child's functioning in this outcome area.                                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relative to other children <b>[Name]</b>'s age, there are no concerns. <b>[Name]</b> has all of the skills that we would expect of a child their age for <b>[Outcome]</b>.</li> <li>For <b>[Outcome]</b>, <b>[Name]</b> has age-expected skills, with no concerns.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides examples of the child's age-expected (AE) functioning.</li> <li>Indicates COS team members have "no concerns."</li> <li><b>Evidence includes only age-expected (AE) functioning, and no immediate foundational (IF) or foundational (F) functioning.</b></li> </ul>                        |
| <b>6</b> | Child's functioning generally is considered age-expected, but there are some significant concerns about the child's functioning in this outcome area. Although age-expected, the child's functioning may border on not keeping pace with age expectations. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For <b>[Outcome]</b>, <b>[Name]</b> has similar skills as same-age peers. However, there are concerns with <b>[functional area of concern, quality, or lack of skill]</b>. The team should continue to monitor progress in this area.</li> <li>Aside from the concern regarding <b>[Name]</b>'s <b>[functional area of concern, quality, or lack of skill]</b>, they demonstrate skills expected of a child their age for <b>[Outcome]</b>.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides examples of the child's age-expected (AE) functioning.</li> <li>Indicates COS team members have concerns and what those concerns are.</li> <li><b>Evidence includes only age-expected (AE) functioning, and no immediate foundational (IF) or foundational (F) functioning.</b></li> </ul> |

### Some Age-Expected Functioning

| Rating   | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Example Culminating Descriptor Statements                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Effective Documentation                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>5</b> | Child functions using a mix of skills, with more skills that are age-expected than not age-expected, across settings and situations in this outcome area. Child's functioning might be described as like that of a slightly younger child. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>As a <b>[age in months]</b> old child, <b>[Name]</b> has many skills expected of their age. For <b>[Outcome]</b>, the skills they demonstrate are slightly below what is expected for their age.</li> <li>Relative to same-age peers, <b>[Name]</b> shows many age-expected skills, but continues to show some functioning that might be described like that of a slightly younger child for <b>[Outcome]</b>.</li> <li><b>[Name]</b> is mostly where we would expect them to be at <b>[age in months]</b> old. This means that most of <b>[Name]</b>'s skills are expected at this age for <b>[Outcome]</b>, but they do not yet have all of the age-expected skills.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides examples of the child's age-expected (AE) and not age-expected (IF, F) functioning.</li> <li><b>Evidence includes more functioning that is age-expected (AE) than not (IF, F).</b></li> </ul>    |
| <b>4</b> | Child occasionally uses age-expected skills across settings and situations in this outcome area. More functioning is not age-expected than is age-expected.                                                                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At <b>[age in months]</b> old, <b>[Name]</b> shows occasional use of some age-expected skills, but more of their skills are not yet age-expected for <b>[Outcome]</b>.</li> <li>At <b>[age in months]</b> old, <b>[Name]</b> shows occasional use of age-expected skills, but has more skills that are expected of a younger child for <b>[Outcome]</b>.</li> <li><b>[Name]</b> has a few of the skills we would expect for <b>[Outcome]</b>, but shows more skills that are not yet age expected.</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides examples of the child's age-expected (AE) and not age-expected (F, IF) functioning.</li> <li><b>Evidence includes more functioning that is not age-expected (IF, F) than is (AE).</b></li> </ul> |

## Not Yet Age-Expected Functioning

| Rating   | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Example Culminating Descriptor Statements                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Effective Documentation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|----------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>3</b> | Child uses immediate foundational skills most or all of the time across settings and situations. Child does not yet function in ways that would be considered age-expected in this outcome area. Functioning might be described as like that of a younger child.                                                                                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relative to same-age peers, <b>[Name]</b> is not yet using skills expected for their age. However, they use many important and immediate foundational skills to build upon for <b>[Outcome]</b>.</li> <li>For <b>[Outcome]</b>, <b>[Name]</b> has nearly age-expected skills. This means that they don't have the skills we would expect of a child their age yet, but they have the immediate foundational skills needed to build upon to achieve age-expected skills.</li> </ul>                                                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides examples of the child's immediate foundational (IF) functioning, and if present, foundational (F) functioning.</li> <li><b>Evidence includes more immediate foundational (IF) than foundational (F) functioning, or only immediate foundational (IF) functioning. Evidence includes no age-expected (AE) functioning.</b></li> </ul> |
| <b>2</b> | Child occasionally uses immediate foundational skills across settings and situations. Child does not yet function in ways that would be considered age-expected in this outcome area. More functioning reflects skills that are foundational than are immediate foundational.                                                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At <b>[age in months]</b> old, <b>[Name]</b> shows occasional use of some immediate foundational skills, but more of their abilities are foundational skills for <b>[Outcome]</b>.</li> <li>Relative to same-age peers, <b>[Name]</b> is showing some nearly age-expected or immediate foundational skills, but has more skills that developmentally come in earlier for <b>[Outcome]</b>.</li> <li>For <b>[Outcome]</b>, <b>[Name]</b> has some immediate foundational skills which will help them develop more age-expected skills.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides examples of the child's immediate foundational (IF) and foundational (F) functioning.</li> <li><b>Evidence includes more foundational (F) than immediate foundational (IF) functioning, and no age-expected (AE) functioning.</b></li> </ul>                                                                                         |
| <b>1</b> | Child only uses foundational skills across settings and situations. These foundational skills are crucial to build immediate foundational skills. Child does not yet function in ways that would be considered age-expected or immediate foundational in this outcome area. Child's functioning might be described as like that of a much younger child. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relative to same-age peers, <b>[Name]</b> has the very early skills for <b>[Outcome]</b>. This means that <b>[Name]</b> has skills we would expect of a much younger child for this outcome.</li> <li>For a <b>[age in months]</b> old, <b>[Name]</b>'s functioning resembles that of a much younger child. They show some foundational skills, but not yet immediate foundational or age-expected skills for <b>[Outcome]</b>.</li> </ul>                                                                                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides examples of the child's foundational (F) functioning.</li> <li><b>Evidence includes only foundational (F) functioning, and no immediate foundational (IF) or age-expected (AE) functioning.</b></li> </ul>                                                                                                                           |

\*Table At-a-Glance: COS Ratings, Culminating Descriptor Statements, and Documentation available at <https://dasycenter.org/cos-kc/practitioners/resources/>.



---

## Suggested Citation

DaSy Center & ECTA Center. (2026). *Child Outcomes Summary (COS) Quick Reference Guide*. SRI.

---

## About Us

The contents of this document were developed under a grant, #H373Z240001, and a cooperative agreement, #H326P220002, from the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education. However, the content does not necessarily represent the policy of the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government. DaSy Center Project Officers: Meredith Miceli and Alexis Lessans. ECTA Center Project Officer: Julia Martin Eile.

Find out more at [dasycenter.org](https://dasycenter.org) and [ectacenter.org](https://ectacenter.org)

---