

CHILD CARE

plus +

FALL 1998

Supporting Inclusion in Early Childhood Settings

Vol. 9, No. 1

+ Observing Young Children

There are a number of practical reasons to continually develop your ability to observe young children. Observation can tell you what a child knows how to do, what he likes to do, what he finds frustrating, how he feels about himself, and what would encourage his involvement. This information helps you draw valid conclusions about children's development, monitor children's progress, choose toys and play materials that are interesting and appropriate for each child, and arrange the environment to respond to children's real needs. Regular observation of each child can help you evaluate yourself and your program, make effective changes, and see progress. It also fosters your curiosity about and gives you opportunities to delight in young children's play and development.



When you use observation as a tool to identify a child's strengths and needs, you purposefully set aside the time to focus on one child. Ideally, you observe the child in different activities and at different times of the day to get the best overall picture of what the child can do. Remember that observation allows you to identify what the child does in your setting; this may be different from what the child does in another setting or from what the child's parent or therapist describes.

To improve your skills as an **objective** observer, consider accomplishing the following:

✎ Record your observations using words that *describe* actions rather than words that *judge* actions. For example, "She stomped her foot" rather than "She was really mad" or "He held onto his Mom and asked her not to leave" rather than "He is very attached to his Mom." Describing actions rather than judging actions may be harder than it sounds. Review your comments when you complete an observation and eliminate subjective or judgmental words or phrases.

✎ Gather observation records over time in order to see

trends and patterns in behavior. Limited observation time can lead you to faulty conclusions based on a bad day or a single point of upset in a child's life.

✎ Vary the times, activities, and even days of the week that you choose to observe a particular child. You need to get a picture of the whole child—in the morning and afternoon, at recess, circle time, and play time, and on Monday as well as Tuesday and Wednesday.

✎ Observation needs to be a part of the regular routine to truly remain objective and useful—while the child is having good days as well as during challenging times. Schedule observation moments in your daily plan so you do not limit yourself to picking up the pencil only when things go wrong.

It may be easier to practice the observation process with children who are familiar to you until you feel comfortable with the basic skills and with your ability to use the information to make modifications. After some practice, you can use this initial experience to observe children whose behavior may be less familiar. Experience makes it easier for you to observe and respond with adaptations for the child with developmental differences or behavior challenges. Be aware that some children's approach to play may be completely different from what you would expect. Whatever the differences or similarities, you can learn about what the child can do—as well as the specific approach he or she takes to doing it—through careful observation. + SAM/SLM

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+ FROM THE SOURCE

Observation and Intervention

Observation is the foundation for effective early intervention and special education. Observation is critical to the evaluation and assessment of young children's strengths and needs when delays in development are suspected. Specialists who diagnose children's disabilities use observation to compare children's current abilities to what is typically observed in other children at the same age and stage. Parents often participate in this information gathering because of their consistent observation of their child in the home setting. Early childhood professionals are becoming more active in referring children for identification of delays as they work with parents and service agencies to initiate developmental evaluations. Their careful observations are invaluable as they participate in IFSP or IEP team meetings and implement developmental goals during daily activities. Observation is essential in monitoring the ongoing completion and setting of developmental goals for young children. Team members who initially came together to identify developmental delay or disability in a particular child now use their observations to plan and modify appropriate, meaningful, playful, and individualized interventions. + SLM

+ MAKING IT WORK

Making Observation Easy

There is never a shortage of interesting situations to observe in early childhood programs, but it may be difficult to find time to observe. These suggestions may help:

- Use index cards to jot down your observations. They are small enough to fit in a pocket and sturdy enough to last through a day of playing.
- Start the day with a few index cards or pieces of paper and a pen in your pocket so that you are ready when an observable moment occurs.
- Keep extra pens handy, but out of reach of the children.
- Write down observations of individual children on separate pieces of paper so that each can be dated and put into the child's file.
- Review your roster frequently and be sure that you are observing each of the children on a rotating basis. + SAM/SHW



+ NOTES FROM HOME:

It Happened At An IEP Meeting

I was not sure whether Jurell would ever be able to pedal a tricycle, but I wanted it as one of the goals on his IEP. I had watched him crawl up onto the tricycle seat and push it slowly around with his feet on the ground, but he just sat there once his feet were on the pedals. And after he entered child care, he would sit on the trike and watch other children pedal around and around the perimeter of the play yard. I thought maybe I was expecting too much of him.

I invited his child care provider to his six-month goal review. She had observation notes from the past three months, and I thought the team could discuss how she could do more to work on his IEP goals. She couldn't come in the morning, so we arranged the staffing for after work. When it was the physical therapist's turn to discuss outcomes she was responsible for, she mentioned the tricycle riding. She had worked hard at his therapy sessions to help him achieve this goal, and she was sorry to report that he had not made much progress. There was a quiet melancholy all around the table as everyone thought about what to do next. When I glanced at the child care provider, her face was quite flushed; she was quietly paging through her notes. I was not the only one who noticed. The service coordinator asked her if she had any ideas about how to promote this skill in her program. She responded by softly saying, "I'm confused because we've been seeing Jurell pedal a tricycle consistently during outside play time for probably a week."

I was so proud of the team for their response to this news; they were very excited and discussed at length the positive impact being with other children is having on Jurell. And I was glad I invited the child care provider to Jurell's IEP meeting, so we could get a true picture of what he can do! +

+ SPOTLIGHT: Observation Guidelines

1 Set realistic expectations for how and when to observe. Be realistic about your abilities. It is neither practical nor necessary to observe a child for large blocks of time. It may be best to set aside five or ten minutes during different parts of your routine on a regular basis. Many people find it simpler to observe outdoor play when they can step back from interacting with the children more easily. Look for five minutes during snack time and other group activities when children are engaged and will not be easily distracted by your taking notes about what they are doing. If you try to observe a child for a whole morning, it is unlikely that you will be able to accomplish the task without having someone take over duties during that time.

2 Write down your observations. Having a written record of your observation is imperative and can be used in many ways. You can easily use a written record to communicate with families and other specialists who work with the child. Ideally, you should record what you see *during* the observation or immediately afterwards. It is surprising how often subtle—but important—thoughts that occur as you watch a child are forgotten if you wait to write them down later. It is often helpful to file these records in the child's permanent file so that they are readily accessible.

3 Be objective. Record what you see, not what you think you see. Think of yourself as a play-by-play sports announcer. You simply report what you see as accurately as possible. Avoid recording any assumptions about what the child may feel or intend. When you see a child hit another child, you might assume anger or frustration as the motivating factors. But what you really see is hitting. Try to get past the temptation to record that Ashley *loves* playing with the blocks, and simply say that Ashley played with the blocks for 20 minutes, stacked them up three or four blocks tall and knocked them over, picked them up, stacked them, and knocked them down again.

4 Observe again and again and again. You will need to do ongoing observations of a child before developing an understanding of the child's behavior. At any given time a child may be overly excited, tired, bored, anxious, or

irritable, and the observations you record may not be typical or reliable. Because you will use this record as a way to plan activities, be sure you have sufficient and accurate information. You can document and respond to changes in children's behavior over time by observing the child during the same kind of activity several times over the year; the ongoing development you discover by keeping these records would be hard to document on a one-time assessment.

5 Trust what you see. Your instincts as an early childhood professional are one of your best assets. Trust what you notice during your observation, even if it appears unlikely. For example, if you see a child who, from your past experience, does not know colors, now spontaneously sorting blocks by color,

you have learned something important about this child's skills. On the other hand, if the physical therapist has told you that she has mastered the skill of getting herself in and out of her wheelchair, you should not assume that the child can use the skill in your program unless you see her exhibit the skill. Keep in mind, this does not mean that the physical therapist is wrong, it simply means that you have not observed the action or skill in your setting.

6 Use the information. As fascinating as it may be, your observation is not worth much in and of itself. Unless you *use* the information you collect, observation is a waste of time and energy. The value of recording observations lies in your using the information to plan activities that are relevant for the child or modify your program in some way to reflect what you have learned about the children as a group. Information obtained through your careful observations can be quite valuable to communicate with families and specialists and can give them a better understanding of what the child does in your program. For example, you have observed Moesha having a very difficult time during art activities that involve drawing. Since you know that Moesha has very limited vision, you use the information you gained from your observation to include tactile materials for making pictures (glitter, fabric scraps, pipe cleaners, popsicle sticks, glue, feathers) instead of just relying on the crayons and paint the children have always used to create pictures. + SAM/SHW

OBSERVATION GUIDELINES

- ★ Set realistic expectations.
- ★ Write it down.
- ★ Be objective.
- ★ Observe again and again.
- ★ Trust what you see.
- ★ Use the information.

+ What do I do when . . . ?

QUESTION: I'm excited by the observation records I'm collecting each week. I'm learning so much about the children. Are there guidelines for sharing this type of information?

ANSWER: You bring up an important point about observing young children—respecting their privacy, typically referred to as maintaining confidentiality. Maintaining confidentiality begins whenever you get ready to observe a particular child. The notes you take most likely have the child's name on them. Until you have completed your observation and placed your notes in the child's file, these notes should be kept in an observation folder or tucked in your pocket. Never leave your observation notes where other parents or visitors to your program may accidentally see them.

It is only natural after you complete your observation to see its value to other individuals who are involved with the child, especially the parents. Sharing information—both positive AND negative—about any child with individuals other than the parents requires written parent permission. This applies to parent newsletter articles about individual children's accomplishments as well as to taking pictures of children during various activities for the bulletin board or a program scrapbook.

Sharing observations with other staff members in a center, with the child's next caregiver or teacher, or with specialists (therapists, speech clinicians, psychologists, nurses) should also be done only with parent's permission. Obtaining parent permission at the time a

child is initially enrolled is a planful and organized way to prepare for using and sharing your observations. + SLM

Child Care plus+ staff are available to answer questions, brainstorm, problem-solve, and provide resources and information about observing young children.

Call 1-800-235-4122

+ RESOURCE REVIEW

Child Care Information Exchange magazine's "Beginnings Workshop" for November 1996 is a collection of articles about observing children. Articles include: *Observation: the Primary Tool in Assessment* by Kay Stritzel Rencken; *To See Each Child with Wisdom, Humor, and Heart* by Sally Cartwright; *You've Got the Records: Now What Do You Do with Them?* by Nancy Balaban; and *Observations Are Essential in Supporting Children's Play* by Gretchen Reynolds. *Observing Children* is available for \$5.00 from Exchange, PO Box 3249, Redmond, WA 98073 or call (800) 221-2864.

CHILD CARE plus+ is designed to support inclusion of children with disabilities in early childhood settings by supporting child care providers, parents, and community service providers including social workers, therapists, physicians, teachers, and administrators.

CHILD CARE plus+ is published quarterly. Subscription price is \$ 5.00 per year (four issues). Contents may be reproduced without permission; please include reference.

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