

Observing and Documenting Young Children

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All high quality early childhood programs base their planning on the individual strengths, interests and needs of each child. A planned and systematic method of professional observation allows early childhood professionals to get to know every child in their program.

To plan, implement, and evaluate programming effectively, there must be a variety of formal and informal observation techniques in place that are used consistently.

Observations should include all areas of development—cognitive, language, social/emotional, fine motor, gross motor—and the children should be appreciated for their uniqueness. Observation results should be used as starting points for planning activities and in daily programming.

WHAT DO OBSERVATIONS TELL US?

Observations tell stories. Observations...

- tell how children learn
- show where the level of the learner is
- give an indication of where the child should be going next in their development and learning
- show how the child develops and maintains relationships with peers and adults
- demonstrate what each child is interested in learning about

DOCUMENTATION

Teachers learn quickly how important documentation is. Whether following the learning and growth of young children, the presence of new bruise or tracking a phone call with a parent, documentation is a very important part of an early childhood professional's experience. It is also the part that is tempting to put off. However, it is said that if we do not record our memories within a twenty-four hour span of time, our attention to detail begins to fail us. It is critical that we document our observations in a timely manner. It is a good habit to get into and to maintain.

NATURALISTIC OBSERVATION TECHNIQUES

Naturalistic observations are those observations that happen in child's natural environment. This could be as easy as jotting down observations on a notepad.

Formal Observations

- Occur in controlled settings
- Have more prescribed procedures
- Tend to use more standard statistical methods of collecting data

There are many, many ways to observe young children. There is no one or "right" way to document children's learning. Formal, objective observing is certainly not the only way to document young children's learning; however, it is a sound and valid system for early childhood educators.

The Three Stages of Formal Observation:

- Objective Observing
- Interpreting
- Implications for Programming

INTERPRETATION

All observations can and should result in some kind of interpretation - otherwise what is their use?

Interpretation:

- makes meaning of the observation
- puts the observation into perspective - relates it to what we already know
- helps to make sense of what we have observed
- raises relevant issues that require action
- gives the foundation for implementation of results of the observation
- links what you have seen to child development and teaching and learning theories

Guidelines for Interpretation:

- look for behavior that is repeated
- look for circumstances under which the repeated behavior occurs
- look for specific efforts the child is making to accomplish developmental tasks
- listen carefully to child
- in order to make an inference, the behavior upon which the inference is based on must have been seen and objectively recorded by the observer (Beaty, 1990).
- inferences and conclusions may only be made on the basis of MANY observations

Interpretation may include analysis, evaluation, making inferences and drawing conclusions.

You always need to ask is there evidence to support my inferences?

Drawing conclusions are the final step in interpretation. They come from reasoned judgments based on accumulated evidence and relevant knowledge of child development.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

From inferences you will...

- begin to establish hypotheses about the child and their level of learning
- use child development knowledge to establish an understanding of the child's strengths and needs
- establish programming based on individual strengths, challenges needs, and interests
- incorporate individual programming into the group programming
- allow for further observations to evaluate effectiveness
- continue the observation - interpretation - planning-observation cycle

GUIDELINES FOR HIGH QUALITY OBSERVING AND RECORDING OF YOUNG CHILDREN

Observations need to:

- be objective (record only the facts, avoid putting in your opinions)
- be specific (record every detail, don't omit anything)
- be direct (record the facts in the order in which they occur)
- be complete (describe appearance and actions in accurate and complete detail)
- record speech exactly as you hear it
- NOT interpret as you observe
- NOT record anything not observed
- Avoid subjective language (use words that describe not judge)