

## Watching to learn—observing with a purpose

We are constantly observing, from the time we were infants we have used observation to learn, to build our knowledge, and to better understand the world around us and the people in it.

As we build relationships with children in our care, observation along with our knowledge of child growth and development provides us with information we need to help children succeed. Observation provides opportunities for us to think deeper and gain a better understanding of the impact of our actions and programs on children.

Observation isn't about just watching what a child or children do, it is watching to try to understand them, to get a glimpse into what they are feeling and experiencing, what brings them joy, what makes them sad, what interests them, what makes them mad. It is to see their successes and their struggles. The end result is more often about changing us than it is changing the child.

We are constantly observing! We are making modifications by what we are seeing and hearing. We are keying into conversations, conflicts and activities to see when and if there is a need to intervene. We watch for interests, struggles, relationships, who needs help and what help they need. The only thing we are not doing is documenting this.

Observation is as much as attitude s as it is a process. We all can see the “why” of observation, but struggle with the “how” of observation. Who has time to observe when we are in the thick of program? But when we shift our attitude from the documentation of observation as just another thing we have to find time to do to one of seeing observation as an opportunity to better help the kids in our program it becomes an integral part of our daily work.

### **What do we gain from observation?**

Through a systematic and purposeful approach to observation we get to know children—what they like, what skills they have, what they are learning to do, how they engage and interact with other children, how they respond to conflict or stress. We gain a picture of that child that guides our interactions and how we can best offer help and guidance.

### ***By observing we learn:***

- The general health and physical development
- Temperament
- Skills & abilities
- Interests
- Culture and home life
- Approach to learning
- Use of language
- Use of body language
- Social interactions with peers and adults

With the knowledge gained through observation we are better able to appreciation and respect each child as a unique individual and can intervene in ways that enable children to be successful.

### **Observation with documentation**

Think of observation as a three part process—the physical observing is only the first part, recording what we are seeing and hearing is the essential middle of the process with the last part being analyzing and using observation to inform our actions.

### ***A moment in time***

Each observation we do captures a moment in time—it is a snapshot—one of many that we take to put into a photo album. No one observation or snapshot gives us a complete picture. Only with multiple observations over time with accompanying documentation of those observations are we able to see a child's growth and progress. Without the documentation of what we have seen and heard we have nothing to compare.

When we formulate a plan or action based on one observation—we can be very wrong. How many times do we base our opinion on a first impression and miss an opportunity to get to know that person or to learn from them?

The more observations we do and the more varied they are helps put together a more complete picture—like a puzzle, we need all the pieces. Watch in varied situations. For example:

- Social setting
- Time of day
- Preferences (type of activity—interest centers)
- Chosen/required activity

### **Observing in and out of the action**

Often we think of someone external sitting with pad and pencil watching what is going on, removed from the action. The role of the observer is to watch and record what they are seeing and hearing. This is more often true for formal assessment observations by an external rater or for clinical studies done for research or specific child assessments by clinicians. While there are more limited opportunities for program staff to step out of the program and do this kind of observation, it can be highly valuable when analyzing an element of the program or working with a specific child.

This type of observation generally includes the following elements:

- The name and age of the child/children
- The observer's name
- The date and time of the observation
- The purpose/focus of the observation
- The setting, where the activity is taking place that you are observing
- What you are seeing
- What you are hearing

While these more formal and lengthy observations may not often be possible, take a breather and step back from the action at the program and observe one or two of the children. It is surprising what can be discovered in just three to five minutes. A quick note jotted in your own shorthand can serve as a reminder to write up more fully later.

Most of our observations are done while actively engaged with the children during program. Don't minimize the importance of the observation you are making while participating. We are constantly observing to monitor what is going on in the program. You are listening to children and noting who

is doing what. These are things that you will act on right away to correct or change course. At other times you will be doing more focused or intentional observations to be followed up later. You are making mental notes, but the difficulty is remembering and finding ways to record what you see so you don't have to rely solely on your memory. A small notebook in your back pocket is great for jotting down a few words as a reminder to write about your observation at the end of program. To make the follow up easier to remember, a standard form may be developed with key prompts that allows you to recall more fully what you observed. These can be the basic who, what, when and where.

Index cards or post-its can provide a quick reference.

Your lesson planning sheet may be used to jot quick notes following an activity —x and y worked together—z liked this—stayed for whole time, B was disruptive. These may all be cues to follow up with.

The key to observation is that it is on-going. You have a room full of children that you are actively engaged with, give yourself permission to know that you won't see everything—if you miss something today, there is tomorrow.

### **Objectivity vs Subjectivity**

As much as possible consider yourself like a camera—recording only what is seen and heard. While we all strive for objectivity in our observation, we do bring ourselves into the picture. We bring our culture, our beliefs about child rearing, our life experiences, feeling and emotions, our interests, and temperament into the observation. Rather than ignore these, use them as filters and acknowledge their impact on how you see and feel about an observation. Often two individuals observing the same thing and documenting will have differing perspectives on what would be considered “facts”.

### **When and Why to observe**

There are many reasons to observe, some are focused on program elements that we have questions about or want to improve, some are focused on group goals or outcomes that we have for all the children in our programs, and others are focused on specific children.

Programmatic observations may be focused on the usage of specific areas, traffic patterns, schedules, transitions or how areas are being used and by whom. These like all observations take multiple observations over time and if possible by all program staff. They are most often used when a problem has been identified. Two people observing the same event may have different perspectives.

### **Tracking Group Progress**

Based on our program mission and goals, there are outcomes that we have identified for the whole group. Once identified we need to track progress toward the achievement of these goals for the group and each child in the group. There are many formal tools to track the achievement of outcomes, many are complex and include multiple pre-determined elements. As an after school program breaking down the tracking to a single or two to three elements may be easier to complete. Simple tally or progress sheets are easy to create and complete. Simple examples are illustrated in the accompanying *Tracking for Group Outcomes*

### **Individual Progress**

In the beginning, our observations of individual children are more open and focused on getting to know the children and develop a profile of that child. Later as we begin to see patterns and have more specific questions, we become more focused on observing to help answer our questions. Our questions and concerns guide when and how we observe—for example are you trying to find out if a child is truly happy playing by him or herself after a day of school and just needs down time or do they need help engaging with other children? To answer this question, we may need different days, times of day, different activities, different locations before we can answer our question. In observations of specific children, we most often use anecdotal notes which can more easily be completed while we are engaged with the children.

While you may have a specific objective for our observations, do not close off other possibilities—the observation may take a totally different direction and give us powerful insights that we did not expect or wonderful surprises.

### **Sharing observations**

We are not doing observations in isolation; observation, documentation and assessment is being done by all staff. Through sharing our written or recorded observations with co-workers and supervisors we bring multiple perspectives to create a fuller picture of each child and strategies to support the child and ways to enrich the program and guide us in achieving our goals. It is important at staff meetings or debriefings at the end of the day for staff to talk about and share observations.

It is also important to share observations with families—Observations provide specific information to share with families. They enhance opportunities to build positive relationship and a strong partnership with families. As we are building relationships with families, it opens lines of conversation: *“John and Joe build a huge structure with Legos today, ask him about it on the way home—it was really cool!”* (Better yet, take a picture to share.) *“I observed that John seemed much quieter than usual today, he might not be feeling well.”* These start building trust and a relationship that allow parents to also begin sharing with you. When there are concerns and needs for conferences and follow-up, our observations that we have shared on-going with families make tough conversations a little easier.

### **Organizing the information you collect**

How do we keep and organize all our observations? How it looks is not important— a simple file folder is all you need. More important is that you are able to access and reflect on what you have collected to guide your efforts. What is important is being able to use the information you collect. For this reason, it is important that all observations are dated so they can be organized chronologically

In the beginning we are using observation to help us design specific outcomes for the child to form a plan of action, strategies and activities to support the child. Subsequent observation are designed to note progress, modify our actions, add additional supports, note success, change direction or add new outcomes—learning cycle

### **Interpreting and Using Observations**

One of the most difficult aspects in doing effective observation is recognizing the difference between descriptions and interpretations. We are “fix it” people and we tend to want to jump to analyzing and taking action on what we are observing, rather than just describing what we see without interpreting what we are seeing.

To help separate the two, it is often useful to have a side bar or column in our observation tool to jot down our thoughts, the “I wonder” column. Keeping these with our observation helps see them in perspective as we review several observation records. Are our interpretations validated?

How often we review and analyze our observations is situational. Are we using observations to work through a specific problem, behavior or guidance challenge with a child? If so, these will have a shorter and often pre-determined time frame. Certainly all child observations deserve a timely review. But it is better to do these on a rotational basis—not try to review all at the same time. For example within a month, you will want to review each child’s observations to note progress, successes, challenges and develop actions for next steps or program activities to do. By doing two or three children from your group each week your efforts are more focused and doable. This is where group ratios are helpful, you are only responsible for a small number of children (by regulation, a max of 18 children). Based on your program structure this may even be smaller and shared with more staff. Also a small team can review together and plan.

### **Final Thoughts**

There is no “perfect” time or way to do observation. It takes experimentation to find ways that work best for you. It takes time to develop and hone your skills until they become second nature. The benefits to the children and your program are worth the effort and will pay enormous dividends in improving the quality of your program and the ability to make a difference for each child.