

Child Care Tips:

Observation

Have you ever asked yourself the following questions? What activities should I do with my children? Why are my children behaving a certain way? How can I effectively share meaningful information with families? Is this child developing as expected? The first step to answering these and similar questions is observation. By observing children in your program, you can learn valuable information about an individual child, their family, and your child care program. This information can be used to address an individual child's needs, provide a better learning experience for all children in your care, and foster total program improvement.

What is observation and documentation?

Observation:

- Objectively looking at what an individual child does and says
- Watching a child with attention or purpose in order to see or learn something

Documentation:

- Writing down or recording what you see and hear while you are observing

Why should we observe children?

- To learn about each child – even children you think you know well
- To gather information about a child's strengths and weaknesses
- To learn how a child thinks, learns, and feels

Objective Observations

Include only facts about what you see and hear:

- Descriptions of an action, gesture, facial expression, or personal creation (painted picture, playdough sculpture) (*Lee picked up a book, smiled, and flipped through the pages.*)
- Quotations of language (*Kenna said, "More juice please."*)

Avoid documenting interpretations, opinions, or assumptions, such as:

- Labels (shy girl, creative boy)
- Intentions (wants to)
- Evaluations (good job)
- Judgments (beautiful, sloppy)

Why document your observations?

- to help you remember and to provide a record of your observations
- to confirm and support your evaluations
- to see the behavior and learning patterns of a specific child over a period of time
- to plan activities based on the collective interests, strengths, and needs of the children in your care

Tips for Observing and Documenting

- Keep paper and pencils in various places so you can always jot down a quick note.
- Wear an apron or pants with pockets and keep a post it pad in the pocket. Wear a necklace pen.
- Date and save your observations and children's work.
- Each day take a few minutes during naptime or after the children leave to complete or add to your notes.
- Set up a folder system so that each child has a file where you can readily store your observations of her/him.

References:

- The Creative Curriculum for Preschool*, Dodge, Colker, and Heroman, 2002.
The Creative Curriculum for Infants and Toddlers, Dombro, Dodge, and Colker, 1999.
Child Observation Record for Infants and Toddlers, High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2002.
Basics of Assessment, McAfee, Leong, and Bodrova, 2004.

Child Care Tips:

Observation and Assessment

The child care professional can gain valuable information regarding a child's level of development, knowledge, skills, and attitudes through the use of observational assessment. This information can be used to determine what knowledge and skills a child has previously mastered and what she/he has yet to learn. When this information is used to guide daily program planning and individual interactions with children, best care practices are established and maintained and every child's development, learning, and progress is encouraged, cultivated, and supported.

What is observational assessment?

Observational assessment is a process in which the child care professional systematically observes and records information regarding a child's level of development, knowledge, skills, and attitudes. This information is compared to typical standards of child development in order to determine what the child has learned and has yet to learn and what program improvements need to be made in order to foster and support her/his progress. During observational assessment, the child is observed daily or weekly in a familiar environment, interacting with children and adults, while participating in everyday, real life activities. Notes are used to record what has been observed.

Why use observational assessment?

We can use observational assessment to evaluate a child's skill level in all areas of development (cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and language) and to understand how a child applies those skills in real life situations. Observational assessment is used to track and monitor a child's growth and progress, as well as indicate whether the child may benefit from receiving special services. Information gathered through assessment can be used to share meaningful information with families and to guide curriculum choices and program planning to meet individual needs.

How can observational assessment be used to learn more about children?

- Ask children questions that encourage them to describe what they are thinking. (i.e. "Tell me about your picture.")
- Listen to children as they describe how they make decisions and solve problems.
- Watch them as they work and play with materials and other children. Include infants and toddlers in observation as they interact with others and their environment prior to becoming mobile or verbal.
- Listen as children informally talk with others and as they communicate during structured group times. Pay attention to how infants and toddlers communicate.
- Study children's work (scribbles, drawings, writings, art, sculptures, etc.)

How should I share assessment information with families?

- Schedule a conference in order to share assessment information. Be flexible when arranging the date and time. Plan conferences, informal meetings, and phone calls when it is convenient for the family.
- Remember that discussing their child's assessment information can be stressful for the family. Be sensitive to their concerns and fears and make them feel physically and emotionally comfortable. Reassure the family that their child's assessment information and any additional information shared will remain confidential.
- Be prepared to explain observational assessment and to discuss why it is important.
- Give specific examples of the child's strengths and weaknesses.
- View the family as a partner – they are their child's first teacher. Ask them questions and give them an opportunity to share information about their child. Maintain an attitude of openness.
- Be aware of and sensitive to cultural differences.

What are some observational assessment tools used in early childhood programs?

- Maryland Model for School Readiness – Work Sampling System
- The Ounce Scale
- Preschool Child Observation Record
- Infant/Toddler Child Observation Record

References

Child Observation Record for Infants and Toddlers, High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2002
Basics of Assessment, McAfee, Leong, and Bodrova, 2004
Work Sampling in the Classroom, Meisels et. al. 2001
The Ounce Scale Staff Development Manual, Margo Dichtelmiller,