

Observation

“Unless we regularly observe children, we will not know if our provision for them is right or what to do next to extend this. The richest source of information about their learning will come from observations of children at play and in their self-chosen activities.”

Reference: Assessing and Supporting Young Children’s Learning for the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, Vicky Hutchin (2012)

Why observe?

To provide the best experiences for children practitioners need to know their children well. Everybody involved in supporting a child’s development should learn as much about the child as possible. Contributions from parents are crucial and should be sought and valued.

Observation is not about writing everything down. Practitioners know so much more about the children than is ever recorded.

When to observe?

Observations should be happening all the time as part of everyday interactions. It is an intrinsic part of your role. Observations should happen:

- inside and outdoors
- at different times of the day or week
- during extended periods of play
- as part of routines such as snack times
- at times of transition
- in solitary play
- in group play.

Sometimes it may be useful to record an observation, although much knowledge is held in mind.

Remember that development and learning are holistic. An observation may reflect many areas of learning. A practitioner will observe a child who is new to the setting more often than other children. A child who is vulnerable will also need observing more than other children.

What type of observation?

Observations can be:

- anecdotal or retrospective
- from a variety of sources
- captured in a variety of ways:
including dated stickers, post-its,
electronic observations,
annotated photographs
- on specific observation formats used in your setting.

Unconscious bias

Consider whether you are reflecting any bias in your observations without realising it. Early years practitioners work hard to ensure fairness is a key feature of their practice. Yet, we can make a snap or automatic judgement before we realise. We may be drawing on stereotypes based on our own opinions or experiences, e.g. gender, race, religion, disability or behaviour. This is human nature and is often referred to as unconscious bias. Observations are subject to unconscious bias because we base them on our interpretation of what we can see.

Dr Stella Louis describes three main types of unconscious bias:

Affinity bias

We feel comfortable with people who act, behave and talk like us. This might affect how we view families and children from different backgrounds to us.

Confirmation bias

We only consider information that fits into our pre-existing beliefs. For example, if we think a child is underachieving, we may only look for the information that supports this when observing.

We might not identify what they are achieving.

Attribution bias

This refers to the errors made when people evaluate or try to find reasons for their own and others' behaviours. For example, when we attribute the cause of a child's behaviour to their character and not the situation. If a child accidentally trips another up, we might decide it was on purpose. Similarly, we might decide that a child simply can't play with others, rather than looking at the whole picture.

To avoid bias

Gather information from a range of people (including children and parents). Use a range of observational methods and consider alternative interpretations and explanations.

Observation Non-negotiables

- Observe every child from when they join the setting and then at regular intervals. Remember you do not always have to write observations down.
- Capture the child's voice. Children show their understanding of an experience when they talk about it. A child demonstrates their voice through their non-verbal communication. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Article 12 states the rights of the child to express their views and have their views taken seriously.
- Involve parents, carers and other practitioners in the observation process to give you the whole picture. This includes two way sharing of information from home to setting and vice versa.
- Share your observations of a child's interests with other practitioners. Include regular liaison with other settings that the child attends.
- Observations will inform responsive planning in the moment and future planning.
- Any recorded observations should be significant and dated.
- Your observation does not interrupt or intrude in the child's learning or activity.
- Written observations describe what the child can do, rather than what they cannot do.

Why Do We Observe?

- To know the unique child.
- To inform discussions with parent and carers about their child's learning and development.
- To find out about children's well-being and involvement.
- To identify children's interests, needs and development.
- To plan the next steps to consolidate support and extend children's knowledge, skills and understanding.
- To check children's progress.
- To identify children's learning styles and schemas.
- To identify barriers to learning.
- To identify what activities particular groups of children, choose.
- To know how different children or groups of children respond to routines and practice.
- To know how the children are using different areas of the environment.
- To review and improve continuous provision and practice

Optimum times to observe

Remember, we gather our best information when a child is:

- involved in their play
- attempting something for the first time
- achieving something that they could not do before
- applying new skills, knowledge and understanding in different situations
- explaining or expressing something for the first time
- explaining something or giving instructions to another child or adult
- co-operating or collaborating for the first time, or for an extended period of time
- persevering at an experience for longer than is usually seen.

If you have not observed a child demonstrating any of the examples above, you need to consider why this might be.

Please note: The observation templates are examples only. You may already have a system in place that works for you. If you wish to use these templates, you might need to adapt these to suit the needs of your setting. Add in extra information that is important to you, such as the Leuven Scales for wellbeing and involvement.