

Observations

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Observations are crucial for all early childhood settings. They ‘paint a picture’.

Observations allow us as educators to build an understanding of a child’s skills, interests, abilities and focuses and what they can do and in doing so can highlight to us what areas/skills they may need further attention on.

Observations can take place during the course of the day....during every day routines, as the child interacts with peers, during experiences or during a spontaneous events.

Why observe?

Generally there is a specific reason we observe. Now this may seem an obvious statement, however, there are a number of reasons one may observe a child.

These can include:

- In order to be able to effectively plan the curriculum observing the child as they participate, engage and interact within the environment
- To record of the child’s developmental progress. For example it is a perfect tool to be able to track their ability at tasks and experiences and evaluate the next step through identifying their skill or area of need. This is the best way to describe a child’s skills and abilities
- Observing is the most effective way to record a child as they progress and in particular in their achievement of a goal and/or milestone
- To act as an informative tool in able to provide parents with informed data on their child’s learning and development.
- If there is a concern with a child on their behaviour, development or additional reasons such as the concern of a child at risk a series of targeted observations are vital.

Observations should be always written objectively. They should be intentional, with a purpose in mind. It is when we intentionally observe it enables us to then plan how, when and where we will observe.

Who should observe?

Educators in the room should observe each child. In an ideal world children are not broken up into groups whereby one educator has a selection of children. This is primarily because just as each is different so are educators and each educator. Generally you will find that no two educators will see and/or interpret an observation the same.

There are 4 steps to the observation.

Step 1: The observation:

What an observation should have?

An observation should include enough information for a reader of the observation to be able to paint a picture of the moment in time. It should have detail; it needs to be specific with particular attention to what the child is doing, their interactions, what is happening and their part/role including what if anything they are saying and their body language. It needs to be informative, objective and non-judgmental.

A good observation focuses on what you actually saw and heard. Nothing more and nothing less.

An observation in its principle dictates what additional information should be included:

Background information: This needs to be included in every observation. You may very well know this, however, someone reading it for the first time and not knowing the child needs to be aware of the basic information to be able to gain a true insight into the child and their developmental stage/level. Not including this information is like trying to start a car with no petrol. It all looks good from the surface but it is not able to be a complete picture for the reader or to be able to successfully interpret the observation. Such background information that is essential is child's age, date, setting, children involved, and observing educator.

Positive language: It is vital that as an observer you are not placing any prejudice on the observation. It needs to be factual and avoid using any judgment in your wording. The language needs to be positive in its wording for example silly, good are not the describing words to be used in an observation and do not describe what you are seeing rather your interpretation.

Focus on what the child is doing: A good observation clearly states what the child is (or is not) doing. By focusing on what the child is doing allows for a more descriptive observation. Only record what has happened. Be factual and objective. Do not include your opinion such as '*Thomas is crying and upset because he is missing his mum and is worried that she is not coming back*'. It is important to add that Thomas is upset if it is during the time of the observation as it helps to paint that picture of what is happening but leave out your opinion, rather include how this is impacting on his observation and what he is doing.

Focusing on what the child is doing provides a scope of information to be evaluated in the one observation. For example being specific in what the child is doing '*playing in the water trough, filling up the red cup right to the top and emptying it into the red bowl, repeating 4 times*' allows us to gain an insight and information on the child's development, interest and social skills, behaviour, etc.

Be applicable: include specific quotes of what the child said and interactions with others including in the context.

Step 2: Interpreting (evaluating) an observation:

Once you have completed an observation then the next step is an interpretation of the observation otherwise it was pointless in doing one in the first place. The objective of an observation is to capture the child at a moment in time to be able to piece together an overall developmental summary of the child. Interpreting an observation plays a large component of the overall puzzle as it allows us to then plan from that observation and make meaning what you saw in the pathway of the child's learning and understanding through what you have observed.

When interpreting the observation one of the first things you need to do is to analyze the learning you will need to first identify an outcome that the child has achieved during this particular observation. Now this is sometimes where some get a little confused as there may well be up to 6 or 7 outcomes that the child has achieved. Therefore in deciding which outcome to focus on it is easily brought back to the "purpose" of this particular observation and the best outcomes to focus on will become apparent. It is suggested to really only focus on one or two outcomes per observation. Once you have identified the outcome/s, then you closely look at the observation, what you have written. This forms the basis, the as evidence and that is how you then link it to the outcome which you have identified. When using the outcomes and linking them into the observation it is a good idea to be more specific and use the sub outcomes within the EYLF to help you add to the analysis based on what you observed. Be detailed in the linking using specifics from the observation. For example, if you are to use Outcome 1 and 3 as your outcomes then be precise in the linking and the sub outcome.

Millie has shown that she engages in and contributes to shared play experiences – Millie helped her friend feed the babies side by side (1.4.2).

Millie has also shown that she recognises the contributions she makes to shared experiences – “Let’s make a tower of blocks” “I like our block tower” (3.1.13)

Phrases that are commonly used when interpreting an observation are:

- One is able to ascertain that.....
- It is evident...
- Through the observation...
- (child’s name) has shown....

Step 3: Follow up:

This step is simply about providing a follow up experience. It enables us to potentially scaffold and engage the child taking the observation and the interpretation and providing additional experiences for the child to further extend upon their learning, or to practice a skill, or to develop an interest based on what has been already observed. The follow up needs to be relevant and meaningful for the child. It has to be related to the observation and the follow up really depends on what you want to focus on. The outcomes you chose as the focus can help to guide you to the follow up experiences, although you are not locked in to using the outcomes in the interpretation as the foundation for the follow up experiences as you have already demonstrated that they have achieved these outcomes and hence you may wish to extend on this or chose additional outcomes to strive to achieve and encourage. Outcomes do not need to be directly related from the interpretation to the follow up. Actually sometimes it can be enhanced as thinking of another outcome supports the child’s extension of learning and enables the child to achieve more than one outcome during the observation cycle. For example my aforementioned examples of outcomes were 1.4.2 and 3.1.13 however; I could then do a follow up based on these outcomes and the interpretation and use outcome 4.2.2.

For example: To follow up and extend upon Millie’s above experience we will support her interest by offering pattern blocks with pattern cards for her to follow. Learning Outcome 4.2.2 – create and use representation to organise, record and communicate mathematical ideas and concepts.

The follow up needs an evaluation that describes how the child went with this experience. It may or may not include a photo. Generally a summary (a concise paragraph observational evaluation of the experience) details how the child achieved the learning outcome through the follow up experience.

Step 4: Linking it to curriculum/program

In order to be able to keep track of the observation and see the cycle of observation and planning go full circle it is vital that the last step is done. This step is linking the observation experience to the program and allows for the easy identification of when the follow up experience is to take place.

Additionally it helps to validate that you’re planning for individual learning and development.

Please note: When linking the observation follow up experience to the program you only need to add the experience, the outcome and the code of the child (or) child’s name who the follow up experience is for.

For example:

Millie: Pattern Blocks with Picture Cards – 4.2.2

