

Tip Sheets

Observing and Monitoring Children's Development

Observation

Observation means "watching to learn."* We learn about children by carefully watching them, listening to them, and studying their work. This helps us understand what children are feeling, learning, and thinking.

Observation provides the information you need to:

- Build relationships with individual children
- Enable children to be successful learners.

Observation Tips

Look at the concern under a microscope and ask yourself:

- Is it developmentally appropriate?
- Is the concern/behavior consistently occurring?
- Are there cultural components you need to be aware of that impact development?
- Is the area of concern getting in the way of:
 - Learning
 - Communication
 - Social Interactions

Look at the whole child, the whole family situation, and factors that may impact the child's development. These may include:

- Cultural differences
- Poverty
- Abuse / Neglect in the family
- Nutrition
- Sleep issues
- Allergies
- Multiple languages spoken in the home
- Birth risk factors (e.g. prematurity)

Look for patterns or clusters of a behavior and observe a child in a variety of situations.

- Compare the child's behavior to a "norm" of six months younger and six months older.
- Note how much the child has grown in the past three to six months—have they progressed or regressed?
- Know the normal patterns of growth and development.
- Keep in mind the factors that may be influencing the development.

Observe children authentically in natural settings.

- Observe children playing independently, in groups, with adults, and in various social situations. Is there a difference in the skills they are demonstrating?
- Observe how children follow directions, how they react to requests, how they initiate social situations, and communicate needs/requests.

Observation Strategies

Make observation a priority. Observation takes time but is essential to children's growth. When determining the strategies you will use to observe, keep the following in mind:

- Choose a format that works for you, such as:
 - Taking notes
 - Checklists
 - Reflect on photo documentation
 - Review work samples
- Observe the child during a variety of activities.
- Observe over extended periods of time.

- Record the time, day of the week, and activity the child is engaged in during observation.
- Get parental input. Ask parents about their routines and how children react to the routines and daily activities. Encourage parents to document their concerns.

The documentation that an early care and education professional provides can be very helpful to the screening process—be sure to share it!

Monitoring Children’s Development

Assessing children in the earliest years of life—from birth to age eight—is difficult because it is the period when young children’s rates of physical, motor, and linguistic development outpace growth rates at all other stages. Growth is rapid, episodic, and highly influenced by environmental supports: nurturing parents, quality care giving, and the learning setting.

Children’s achievements at any point are also the result of a complex mix of their ability to learn and past learning opportunities; it is a mistake to interpret measures of past learning as evidence of what could be learned.

What to watch for:

- The quality of children’s skills.
 - Children may be using high levels of speech, but is it just mimicking?
 - A child may be walking independently, meeting that milestone, however if they’re on their toes too often, walking with a wide gait or turned in feet, the quality of the gait should be monitored.
- Cultural differences in expectations for children’s development.
 - An example is the expectation of when children feed themselves.
- Children who are demonstrating at, or above, age-appropriate levels in an area of

development, but not demonstrating age-appropriate skills in other areas.

- An example is a child who demonstrates very high language skills in speech, but shows lower skills in motor or social areas.
- The child’s opportunity for some developmental skills.
 - If the child has not been exposed to scissors by age three, be cautious when evaluating their use of this tool.

Screening and Checklists

There are prescreening charts or checklists that are a quick way to help you monitor a child’s development and recognize possible areas of concern in a child’s development. The best charts and checklists should encourage a look at the whole child by observing areas such as social, emotional, motor, language, hearing, and vision.

These charts and checklists provide a general overview, and the user needs to look at the quality in these areas of development as well as achievement of the skill. Formal screening is provided within each community for children three to five years of age and is required in most states before the first day of kindergarten.

Additional Resources

Raising Children Network | Activity Guides
<https://raisingchildren.net.au/guides/activity-guides/children-with-diverse-abilities>

For more information, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

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