

Effective Practice: Observation, Assessment and Planning

Key messages

Observation, assessment and planning all support a child's development and learning. Planning starts with observing children in order to understand and consider their current interests, development and learning.

Observation

Observation describes the process of watching the children in our care, listening to them and taking note of what we see and hear.

Assessment

We assess children's progress by analysing our observations and deciding what they tell us. We also need to find out about children's care and learning needs from their parents and from these we can identify the children's requirements, interests, current development and learning.

Planning

We plan for the next steps in children's development and learning. Much of this needs to be done on the basis of what we have found out from our own observations and assessments as well as information from parents.

Observation

Observation is the formal term for one of the most important aspects of day-to-day professional practice when working with children of all ages. It is how we find out the specific needs of individual children by carefully looking, listening and noting the activities of a child or group of children.

Observation allows us to see a child as an individual; this is important for every child in whatever setting but even more important in large group settings.

Observation should be both formal (planned) but much of it will be informal (spontaneous) carried out as you work with the children. Without observation, overall planning would simply be based on what we felt was important, fun or interesting (or all three) but it might not necessarily meet the needs of the children in our care. Carrying out regular observations is vital because it ensures that we put the child at the centre of our practice.

We can discover what new skills and abilities emerge over time through observation. For example, when a baby is able to sit up steadily, or a young child can pour their own drink, think about somebody else's feelings, assign meanings to the marks they have made on paper, or ride a bicycle without stabilisers.

Observation enables us to identify each child's likes and dislikes and their responses to different situations such as care routines or new people. We can find out which experiences, routines or activities a child seems to enjoy or to find difficult and any that seem to make them anxious. Observation helps us assess children's progress; we can find out about the specific care and learning needs of each child. We can then plan next steps in children's development and learning.

Observation skills

To find out about a child we need to observe them in a way that is valuable to the child and makes best use of our time. This involves a number of skills:

- **Looking** – we need to watch what the individual child is doing during the time of the observation, how and where they like to spend their time. Having a good understanding of child development is important. It also helps if you have some understanding of the child's current development and the particular way the child is learning, for example, gathered through information from parents.
- **Listening** – we must pay attention to the interactions of the individual child with different adults and between different children.
- **Recording** – we can note important features of the child's responses, behaviour, learning and development accurately and as soon as possible after observing them. Not all observations that you make will be written

down, but it is helpful to record significant experiences and milestones that children achieve.

- **Being objective** - looking, listening, recording and thinking all require the need for objectivity: not allowing preconceptions to influence what you have observed. For example, you may have concerns that a child does not communicate very often, but keeping an open mind about this will mean you are more likely to gather better evidence to either support or clear up your concerns. You may find that although the child is often very quiet, she is using body language that is being ignored, that she communicates well with peers but not with adults or that certain activities or interactions seem to make communication easier or harder for her. Your observations will also help you recognise the child's needs more accurately and to identify if there is any cause for concern. Each child's emotional well-being has a very strong influence on the way the child develops, including their ability to learn, to communicate, their behaviour, their curiosity and their ability to cope with new experiences.

After carrying out our observations, we then need to reflect on what they are telling us about the child by:

- **Thinking** – we then think about what we have seen and this leads into assessing and planning. You can also talk with the child's parents and other practitioners to help you clarify your thoughts.
- **Questioning** – we may sometimes need to ask questions in order to clarify, confirm or reject ideas about what we have observed. Where a child is able to respond, our questions may be directed to them. Sometimes our questions may be directed to their parents.

Types of observation

There are several types of observation and the method you choose will depend on what else you are doing while observing. Most of the observations carried out in early childhood settings are observations we call 'participant observations' - carried out while you are playing and working with the children.

Others will be 'incidental' and spontaneous – things you noticed happening which you felt were significant and should be noted down – and some of them will be planned, where you stand back to watch the child. These planned observations usually last for anything from between three and ten minutes. Very occasionally they may be longer if resources allow. Aim to write brief notes at the time. Sometimes it is necessary or helpful to follow your brief notes with a fuller description afterwards so that as much as possible is written down, and as little as possible is missed.

Recording observations

Many practitioners use sticky notes to jot down brief observations and this is a practical way of recording information. You will need to write enough information so that anyone else reading it can understand. Photographs, tape and video recording can also be helpful and are an accessible way of sharing observations with children and their parents.

You may be required to use a standard form in your setting, which identifies the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Principles and particular commitments such as Child Development or several of the seven Areas of Learning and Development. These forms can organise your thoughts and help you decide how best to identify areas in which the child's development is as expected, as well as those where further encouragement or more support may be required.

Participant observations or planned observations

Participant observations are observations you note down while you are fully involved with the children, noting down significant things you see. Although this might be most of what you observe, it is important that some observations are planned, so that time is set aside for you to watch the children at play. You will need to focus on what one child is doing, including in this the interactions she (he) has with others around. This type of observation often allows you to gather a different type of information about how the child is responding to your setting than when you are carrying out a participant observation, as you will see what the child chooses to do independently.

The key issue is that you should observe children on a regular basis, at different times of the day, and all staff should be involved. Decisions about a child's needs should not be based on just one observation. This means ensuring that each child is observed systematically, over time, by staff and that regular discussions take place to consider what has been learned to help you plan for the child's development and learning. Any concerns should always be discussed with parents and colleagues to identify whether intervention may be required.

With babies it might be difficult sometimes for the Key Person to be the observer in a planned observation, when close and individual attention is required, when children require a high degree of involvement or if you are a childminder, and so practitioners usually observe the child they are with as a participant in the activity. Of course this means you can't easily assess the quality of your own interactions with the child and therefore observations carried out by another person do remain important from time to time.

Occasionally a professional who is collating particular information, such as a speech therapist, may be invited in to observe a child. In this case they may systematically observe which sounds a child makes.

Other types of evidence of children's learning and development

We may also take photographs or video a child when they are involved in splashing in puddles, or when they are making marks on paper which they tell us is their writing. Sometimes we will retain evidence of a child's learning by making a recording of their music, their story or their songs. On other occasions, we may retain physical evidence such as photographs of a model or a weaving they have made, or pieces of their work, such as a picture.

Consider the different types of evidence you will use to help you make assessments and learn about the children. As well as your observations, you may be using photographs or tape recordings, for example, of children telling a story. When you have identified your evidence you may wish to add it to a record of the child's achievements, which will help you ensure you keep up to date information about each child which will provide a wonderful resource for parents.

Involving children

From the earliest age, the children should be involved and this is part of the assessment for learning process (see below). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 12 states the right of the child to express an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account, in any matter or procedure affecting the child. Sharing the child's record together provides an ideal opportunity for celebrating achievements and discussing future plans. Even with babies it is a valuable chance to delight together in their achievements.

Involving parents

Parents know their children intimately. For practitioners, therefore, building a close, trusting and reciprocal relationship with parents needs to begin before a child starts in a setting. Parents need to be involved as part of the ongoing assessment process, sharing their views and observations about the child's development with practitioners and being involved in planning what opportunities and experiences to offer the child next.

For parents where English is not their first language and those who find reading and writing difficult, it is important for practitioners to find ways to meaningfully engage them in the observations, assessment and planning process. Practitioners should do all that they can to ensure effective two-way communication between parents and the setting to support children's learning.

Assessment

Assessment is the process of analysing and reviewing what we know about children's development and learning – for example, what we observed.

We need to ask ourselves: what does our observation and any other evidence of learning we have collected (such as examples of the child's mark-making,

information from parents, a photograph we took or video recordings we have made) tell us about the child's learning and development? What was new – something we had not observed before?

When we do this regularly we have evidence of children's progress over time and we gain insights into children's learning, development and their needs.

Effective assessment involves evaluation or decisions about the child's progress and their learning and development needs and gives us the information we need to plan for the next steps. This is called assessment for learning: it is the formative assessment, based on observations, which informs or guides everyday planning.

Another forms of assessment is summative assessment. This is a summary of all the formative assessment carried out over a long period and makes statements about the child's progress. The EYFS Profile is the summative assessment completed by practitioners at the end of the EYFS. It summarises children's progress towards the early learning goals. It can also be formative in that it informs or guides the long- and medium-term planning carried out by Year 1 teachers to support and extend children's learning as they move into Key Stage One.

Effective settings, as well as using assessments to plan for the needs of individuals and groups of children, will also draw together data from across the setting to reflect on the progress different groups of children are making and how the practice and provision can be developed to improve the outcomes for children.

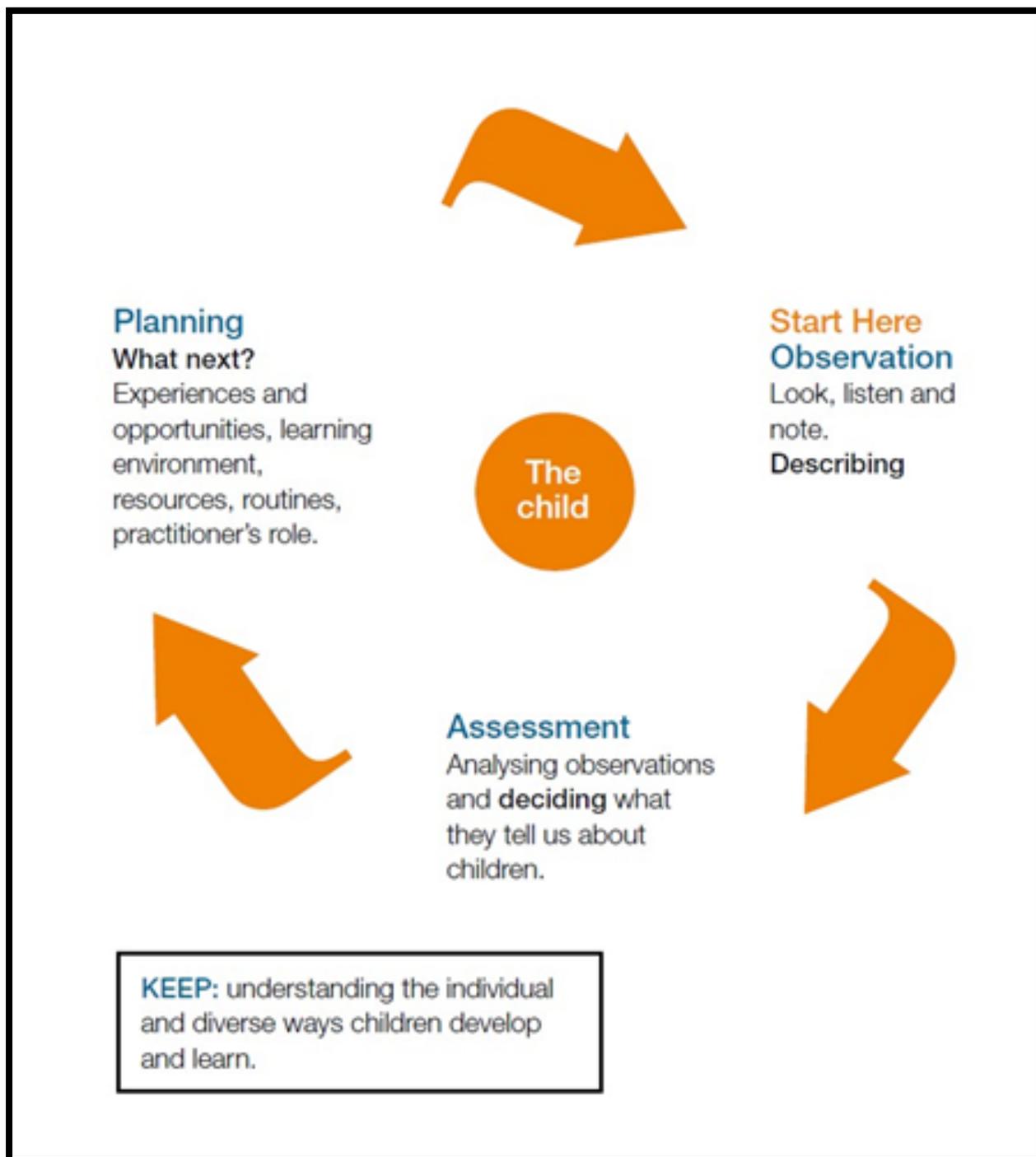
Observation, Assessment and Planning cycle: assessment for learning in action

Effective practitioners pull together the information they gather in their observations to identify aspects of the child's learning and development. This pulling together of information and thinking about what it tells us forms the basis of what is termed assessment.

When we assess we are making a judgement or decision about the child's progress and needs in one or several areas of Learning and Development.

We use this judgement to plan what we will provide for the child in the future. It is important to make thorough observations, taking time to think about what you have seen and heard, because the decisions that you then make affect the planning to meet individual and/or group needs and have a very real impact on the well-being of the child. Observations are perhaps the most powerful of all the methods we have available when working with children.

The diagram below shows how observation, assessment and planning all feed into one another and contribute to our knowledge about the child.



In this way, the observations you make, along with information from parents and other evidence you may collect through photographs and recordings, feed into the day-to-day provision, experiences and interactions you plan for the children. There are also other important aspects to planning, described below.

Planning

There are three types of planning - long-term, medium-term, and short-term.

Long-term planning

This concerns the overall guidance for the children contained in the EYFS Framework Document. Long-term planning provides a structure which helps you:

- Ensure that you cover all the areas of Learning and Development and the Principles in the EYFS Framework.
- Identify the links between the different areas of Learning and Development and the Principles.
- Think about how you balance activities both indoors and outdoors with quiet times and quiet spaces throughout the day.
- Identify the key areas for supporting babies and young children.
- For older children, think about the balance of opportunities for supporting children to benefit from a wide range of freely-chosen play opportunities and well-planned interesting adult-led activities.

Long-term planning informs or helps you focus on your medium-term planning.

Medium-term planning

This usually outlines in some detail the overall programme for anything from two to six weeks at a time. Medium-term planning generally outlines:

- Types of experiences and activities appropriate to your group of children supporting the different EYFS Principles.
- Overall daily routines which will include: babies' feeding times, snack or mealtimes for children, time for unhurried arrival, settling in and leaving, provision for outdoor activities as well as indoor, quiet time or times for rest or sleep, time for stories and for individual or very small group interaction with staff.
- Main resources such as: planning for room areas to include comfort or quiet areas, home corners, messy play, clear access to equipment for older children to use independently (for example, books at child height). Consider if there is room for babies to move around safely if there is limited physical space, for example, if the setting is in a church hall. Recording the potential learning of the environment and the role of the adult in supporting children's play and learning.
- Planning for observation and assessment to further evaluate individual needs within group settings.

Medium-term planning informs or helps you focus on short-term planning. Above all you are meeting the needs of the children in your group at this point in time.

Short-term planning

This involves setting out what is to be included on a day-to-day basis (depending on the needs of the children) within the broad framework outlined above, based on your observations from the previous day. This enables much more focus on what specific needs the children have, and how these will be met. Such plans will include:

- Resources – for example, some of the children may want to set up a supermarket in the role-play area and you will need to indicate the materials and equipment that will be needed for the children and yourself. What space or room arrangement will be required, and what health and safety considerations will be appropriate? How will this fit in with the needs of younger children who may not be directly involved?
- Experiences being provided for children – how the adults will support the children and the anticipated learning outcomes. This can include singing to babies, supporting them in moving to music or shaking rattles alongside the other children. You would be focusing on the Principle of Learning and Development and assess how this would meet many of the sections within the Principle, but also how the fun and enjoyment arising would also support A Unique Child and engender positive interactions. Cooking activities arising out of someone's birthday, a festival or other celebration is another type of activity which could be included in the short-term planning, fitting in with a particular focus identified by both observations and knowledge and understanding of the social and cultural environment of the setting.

Notes for childminders

The personal and intimate way in which you work with a few children in your home provides a rich and varied experience for both you and the child or children. As someone working frequently on your own, and in your own home, it may feel as if much of the advice and guidance given for observations may be difficult for you.

For example, it may require a great deal of organisation for you to have another adult present while you carry out an observation. However, you may find that you can adapt your practice to suit your own circumstances by using methods such as time and event samples or checklists to carry out your observations.

As an example of how different Principles guide or inform practice, consider the principle of Learning and Development – learning through experience. You may notice when a baby has their hands in their baked beans during lunch or how they manage to move a breadstick in the direction of their mouths, or indeed something else they do with the breadstick to explore its properties!

This may be a particularly rich source of brief observations which you can quickly note down on a sticky note and then transfer to a daily diary. You could then review the diary on a fortnightly or monthly basis to think about what you have observed. Observations such as this can easily be carried out on your own.

It may also be possible for you to meet up with other childminders so that you could take turns in carrying out some observations in different settings. You may also have the opportunity to take your children to the local playgroup, where again, you may have an opportunity to take some time out to observe.

When you take a baby or a child out for a walk or to the local shops, you may also have the opportunity to notice how they react to experiences as diverse as a strange adult bending over the buggy to talk to the baby or how the young child reacts to a barking dog, windy weather, the sound of traffic or your conversation.

Ordinary, everyday activities will provide a range of opportunities for you simply to stop for a few moments and notice what the baby or young child is doing, what they are looking at, what their mood seems to be, how curious they are, and so on. Observations help you to get to know the child on a surprisingly deep level as you begin to be aware of those small movements, glances, approaches and withdrawals that indicate that the baby is making sense of the world and how they are trying to deal with their experiences.

References

United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child, United Nations, New York.

Adapted from

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