

“Our most important role is to sit back and observe...”

The most important occupation of any teacher of young children is to observe the children in their care at play. You can really get to know your children by making careful observations and using these to tune into the child's interests.

There are a number of observational techniques that you can use to do this effectively. Before starting any observation, however, it is sensible to consider your reasons for the observation, so you can capture the most pertinent information. For example, investigating a child's social circle will need a different technique than if you are investigating their proficiency with number.

The following examples of observational techniques will help you to tune into your children's interests and developmental needs. A word of warning – you must always ensure that you have permission to make observations of the children from someone who has legal parental responsibility and anyone recording observations must be respectful of the children's wishes.

1 Magic moments

These are the briefest observations that you can make. They are usually captured on 'post-it' notes or sticky labels, which can be easily put into a learning journey or child's developmental folder. This is the quickest way to record an observation and usually the most convenient for practitioners, who can often be seen carrying notepads around the nursery. Practitioners should note anything that is a 'first', for example, the first time climbing steps unaided, and also anything particular to that child, for example, a fascination with linking the trains together. Practitioners who know their children well will be able to note anything unusual or exceptional about the child's play at that moment. The aim of this type of observation is to build a picture about the children's interests and development from many pieces of information.

2 Narrative

The narrative observation, sometimes called a 'long' observation, is an extended written account of an activity. It may include a verbatim record of the language used by the child, level of involvement and other children that they play with, and may also include a photo. Ideally the child's key person should record a narrative observation, as he or she is most likely to understand the context of the play. The practitioner usually observes the child for 20 minutes to half an hour, so as much

There are a host of ways to conduct and record observations of young children, and each one can tell us something different, says **Kathy Brodie...**



information as possible can be recorded. As this method takes much longer, and is much more detailed than the magic moment, it is used less frequently. The narrative observation may be planned in advance to ensure that every child in the nursery is observed in this way once every half-term, for example.

3 Learning stories

Learning stories are longer observations, made over a much longer period of time. They are based on the child's interests, their level of involvement, persistence, communication and taking responsibility. They are written as a story in the first person, as if the practitioner were talking to the child and explaining what they had observed. Examples of these may be an extended record of how a child got out the paints, chose a particular paintbrush and carefully composed a self-portrait. The relevance of each step is explained and reflected on at the end of the 'story'. These are illustrated with photographs. Care must be taken not to simply annotate the

photographs but to produce a reflective, thoughtful story to accompany them. The parents or carers are encouraged to add their own comments at the end of the learning story.

This observational method takes a bit longer than the magic moments and narrative, but gives a really personal dialogue between child, practitioner and parents. It is particularly valuable for children who are just starting at nursery or for boosting self-esteem.

4 Time sample

In a time sample observation, an observation of a child is made every five minutes over a set period of time, usually an hour. The observations are only brief, but will include the activity the child is engaged in, which area of the nursery they are in and the level of involvement at that particular time. The practitioner will need to be able to make the observations regularly, which can be a challenge in a free flow environment, but each observation will take less than a minute to record.



Readeroffer

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This type of observation is very useful for recording a child's level of interest in types of activities, and their disposition. For example, it may become obvious from this sort of observation that the child spent an hour in different parts of the nursery, but always doing construction activities; or that a child never engaged in writing activities, even though he or she played in several areas that had writing opportunities.

5 Tracking

To record a tracking observation you must first have a floor plan of the setting, including outdoors. The practitioner observes and notes on the floor plan the area in the nursery that their child visits, and how long they were at each activity or area. The child may be tracked for a long or short time, depending on the type of information required. For example, if the observation is to

help understand why a child seems to flit from activity to activity, the practitioner could observe for the morning session. The observations may show from this that the child is, in fact, transporting items from one area of the nursery to another, because he or she has a transporting schema.

The tracking observations of all the children can be collated, to analyse the areas of the nursery that are being used by certain groups of children. For example, is it always the girls that access the book corner? Do the younger children tend to use the sand more than the older ones?

6 Sociogram

A less well-used observational technique is the sociogram. These are observations of the social groups that children play in. The practitioner observes the children that their focus child is playing with, what they are playing and for how long. When the child plays with different children, or changes activities with the same children, this is noted.

This observational technique can be used throughout the nursery, so the growing social development of the child can be observed and tracked.

Some children will play with a close social group all day, whereas others will move easily between groups. Occasionally some children seem not to play with anyone, but on closer observation you may find they actually have a large social circle, but only spend time briefly with each of their friends. This information can give a very powerful image of the child's social groups and social competence.

Kathy Brodie is an EYP and trainer based in East Cheshire. Visit kathybrodie.com

CHOOSING A TECHNIQUE

The choice of observational technique will depend on the time that practitioners have available and the reason for making the observation. Each method requires the practitioner to have an observational skill set. Ironically, the most skill is required to complete the shortest observation, the magic moment. This is because the practitioner must recognise the moment to begin with, and then record it quickly, succinctly and accurately. It may be worth considering starting less experienced practitioners on a tracking or sociogram method until they are confident in recording observations.

It is essential to use a range of methods, so practitioners can get a breadth and depth of knowledge about the children in their care. Similarly, different practitioners will observe through the lens of their own experiences, recording different aspects of children's development. For example, a practitioner who has training in children's physical development is more likely to record observations of motor skills whilst someone who is trained in musical development may record musical pitch.

By using close observation of children, practitioners can reveal a wealth of information, from interests to social group to dispositions.