

SURVIVING

YOUR



In the concluding part of her series, **Melanie Pilcher** offers guidance on a new, key aspect of the early years inspection process...

The joint observation is a new element to the Ofsted Inspection and Regulation Framework introduced last year, and is a key part of the inspection process.

Practitioners have generally welcomed its introduction, regarding it as an opportunity to 'have a voice' alongside the inspector as they observe practice together. However, some settings have not fully benefited because they do not understand the process, or because what is in effect 'peer observation' is not an established part of their own reflective and evaluative activity.

The joint observation involves the inspector observing practice alongside the manager or senior staff member as a parallel activity. By doing so, the inspector can see the quality of teaching and learning that is taking place, get a good idea of how the manager or senior practitioner evaluates, and reach a shared understanding of what is happening at the time.

The three main reasons given by Ofsted for the joint observation are as follows:

'Joint observations help the inspector to gain an insight into the effectiveness of the provision's professional development programme for practitioners'. This will be evident by the way you demonstrate your knowledge and understanding of how children learn and develop, and by the range of experiences and learning opportunities that are available. The inspector will be looking for a sense of the professionalism of the manager or senior staff member and the whole team.

'They help the inspector to assess the accuracy and quality of staff's monitoring and evaluation of practice'. This will be demonstrated by

how well you evaluate what you are seeing and feed back to the inspector and sometimes the staff being observed at the time. It will also be demonstrated by how well other methods of evaluation are established in your setting.

'They allow the provider to contribute evidence towards judgements about the quality of practice and learning'. This will allow you to explain more fully what is happening and why - for example, if a child is standing back and observing rather than being actively engaged with an activity, why that might be. It might also involve explaining why the practitioner being observed has chosen to do something in a certain way to meet the needs of a particular group of children. It prevents the inspector from misunderstanding a situation because they do not have background information, and demonstrates that practice is focused on the needs of the children. It also demonstrates your knowledge of the children, their families, the local community, the learning environment, the daily routine, and the strengths and weaknesses of your team.

ON THE DAY...

When the inspector arrives they will discuss with the manager or person in charge, a timetable for the inspection activities, one of

which will be the joint observation/s. You will decide together who is going to take part, but it will usually be the manager, an EYP, or other senior member of the team. You will also discuss what is going to be observed, for example, activities, age groups and care routines and/or scrutiny of the progress children make.

Nobody has to take part as a co-observer, but unless there is a really good reason, such as staff shortages, it would be a wasted opportunity not to do so. The inspector will not put anyone under pressure to take part if they can see that it will be an issue, so the advice here is to make the most of this opportunity to take part in your inspection.

There will probably be the opportunity to suggest an area, or a part of your routine, that you would like the inspector to see. This does not have to be an adult-led activity, but if it is, then it is important that it demonstrates your knowledge of children's needs and interests.

It would definitely not be good practice to plan a set activity just for inspection day. There is absolutely nothing to be gained from doing so, and it is against all the principles of the unique child and creating enabling environments. On the other hand, the inspector may have an idea of what he or she needs/wants to observe. This does not mean that you cannot steer them towards practice that you know really demonstrates the Characteristics of Effective Learning and the 'unique child'. For example, the children's interests may be taken by something completely random. You could use this opportunity to explain how you will build on the children's interests throughout the day and to see where their ideas take them next. This is so much more meaningful than suggesting to the inspector that they might like to observe the children icing and decorating biscuits as a planned activity.

Whatever you do suggest as an observation, it still needs careful consideration to make sure that the inspector

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JOINT OBSERVATION

gets what they need and that it allows for a good assessment of the elements already mentioned.

COMPARING NOTES

The inspector and the co-observer will both make their own observations and notes. If this is already embedded in practice then you will be used to recording observations in this way and should make notes just as you always do, being mindful of the inspection judgements and the criteria for 'good', making mention of the Characteristics of Effective Learning as appropriate.

After the observation, the inspector will look at any notes you have made. Any differences in the analysis of practice can be explored at this point, helping you both to reach a shared understanding of what has happened. Any comments about the quality of your evaluation will be included within the

inspector's evidence. The notes you make will not be taken away or included within the inspector's evidence base.

Where the quality of practice is weak, the inspector will talk to you and/or your manager about what has been observed. The inspector will also ask about the action that will be taken, if any, to bring about improvement. After observations, you and the inspector will agree how to manage feedback to the practitioner being observed and when this should take place. The inspector may ask you or your manager to give feedback to the practitioner(s) in order to evaluate the manager's assessment about the quality of practice observed.

FINAL THOUGHTS

If you have established the use of peer observations in your setting already, then you are well placed to take part in Ofsted's


joint inspection. Whether you use a standardised format or simply take notes, there is no doubt that it is one of the most effective means of assessing the quality of your interactions with children and how the characteristics of effective teaching and learning are supported in your setting - and not just as an inspection process.

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GIVING FEEDBACK

Once the observation is complete, the inspector will discuss what you have both observed in terms of the quality of practice in supporting children's care, learning and development. The inspector will not convey a view about what was observed initially, but will ask you for your view about the practitioner's strengths, what could have been done better and how effective practice is within the setting. You should be able to explain to the inspector what you are basing your feedback on. For example, "I could see that Jack was testing out new ideas as he tried different ways to stack the boxes so that he could roll the heavy car across them. I was pleased that Laura (his key person) did not intervene until Jack asked her to hold one of the boxes steady. Kelly is becoming increasingly confident in her role in giving the children time to think and work things out for themselves".

It is the strength of this feedback that will be integral to what the inspector is looking for. Even where practice can be further improved or the activity did not go very well, it will be your identification and proposed response that will matter.



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