

QUESTION time



NDNA's quality manager, **Laura Robshaw**, explains the importance of peer observations, and offers tips on how to implement them...

Q Why are peer observations important?

A Research from the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project was the first major European longitudinal study of a national sample of young children's development between the ages of three and seven years. The main findings of the EPPE research in relation to adult-child interactions included:

- the quality of the interactions between children and staff were particularly important - where staff showed warmth and were responsive to the individual needs of children, children made more progress;
- more sustained shared thinking (SST) was observed in settings where children made the most progress. This occurs when two or more individuals work together in an intellectual way to solve a problem, evaluate an activity, extend a narrative, etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop the understanding. SST is most likely to occur during one-to-one interactions and focused group work;
- where open-ended questioning and adult modelling skills were observed children made better cognitive achievements;
- The most effective settings had an equal balance between adult-initiated and child-initiated activities.

Peer observations help assess and develop the quality of adult-child interactions in a setting. In order to improve quality, peer observations should feed into the supervision and appraisal system and inform action plans and training needs. They can also be used as part of the wider organisation's quality improvement processes including the Self Evaluation Form (SEF). All practitioners should be involved, including the management team.

Q How do I get started with peer observations?

A Peer observations require a willingness from both practitioners involved in the process; key questions for the observer to focus on; and a



findoutmore

Your essential guide to peer observations

Guide to implementing peer observations in your setting. Includes an access code for electronic peer observation question templates, which you can amend to suit your setting. Priced at £15 for members/£20 for non-members; order at ndna.org.uk/publications

Face-to-face training - peer observations

A full-day workshop that demonstrates the importance of peer observations in supporting high-quality interactions between practitioners and children. Prices start from £40 per delegate. Visit ndna.org.uk/face-to-face

Q How should observations be conducted?

A There are a number of different forms and tools that can be used for peer observations. NDNA's essential guide focuses on one in particular using set questions, which are available electronically so can be adapted to suit your setting. The process involves dedicated time to watch what happens when practitioners and children are together. After watching an activity for five minutes, the person observing answers questions which rate the quality of the adult-child interaction.

There are two simple rules to observing:

- Be discreet - position yourself close enough to the group to hear them talking, but not so near that you distract the children.
- Be objective - answer the questions only on the basis of what you actually see. It may feel uncomfortable if the score is low, but the purpose of doing this is to identify where the setting can develop and improve. It's important to score correctly to give accurate results.

Once the observation has been completed, constructive feedback must be given. I would advise you to start and end the discussion with positive aspects of the observation and in the middle discuss areas for development.

commitment from the practitioner observed to listen to constructive feedback once the observations are complete. This should be planned in with time away from the children.

An initial staff meeting should be held to discuss the aims of carrying out peer observations and the process. During the staff meeting, practitioners should be asked how they feel about the process and any worries or

concerns should be discussed.

Either during the staff meeting or in one-to-ones/room meetings, the staff team should decide who will observe whom and agree if they prefer to know they're being observed or not. Before observations begin, all practitioners should be confident in giving and receiving feedback (training may be required for this).