



# Careful observations

**Kevin Harcombe** considers how to balance between getting to know your children and stalking them with a clipboard...



Observation and assessment is not just required practice but good practice if children are to be guided in the all-important first years of formal education. It used to be that detailed and recorded observations were the preserve of researchers, but nowadays we're all engaged in research.

The late, great Professor Ted Wragg was never a fan of the box-ticking profiling of three- and four-year-olds. He believed passionately that practitioners who should have spent every second of the day teaching and getting to know their children had been required to follow them round with clipboards for too much of their time, "just so that the mad statisticians in the DfES can have their utterly meaningless data."

This is witty journalism, but it misses the point

that observations, done well, should be about getting to know children and that the box-ticking bit is a (cumbersome) by-product of the important work of observing and assessing. So, how do you strike a balance between getting to know your children and stalking them with a clipboard, stopwatch and camcorder?

People who work with children make hundreds of observations every day. They mentally 'record' information about children as they go about their learning. What they say, how they move, what they do, how they relate to their peers and adults. These mental records help shape how they plan for them, and how they adapt their planning. This is what good assessment is. Written assessments provide the evidence base for moderation and planning.

### How often and how?

Observations should be both planned and spontaneous, brief and extended. They

need to cover all children over a period of time, and a majority of observations need to come from child initiated learning, which in practice means most observations will be made during continuous provision. You need to ensure children do most of the work, freeing the adult to observe and assess.

Children shouldn't notice the observations, whether or not they're the focus of them. Keeping them low-profile is advantageous in that the child is less self-conscious. Some settings have some form of visual indicator that a member of staff is on observation duties and children should not interrupt them, e.g. by wearing a paper crown. This has the disadvantage of making a big deal of it, not to mention making you stick out like a sore thumb – or like someone wearing a paper crown.

At least four times a week one of the adults in the setting is assigned an observation role, e.g. watching children in the role-play area with a focus on language development. The



## How should the observations be recorded?

Some settings use digital voice recorders, some use PDAs (Personal Digital Assistants, no less) or hand-held computers which feed direct into the e-profile. PDAs can be used to make notes as well as to take photos and record voice.

I favour simple methods of recording – pen, paper and digital camera – and avoid time-consuming ‘copying out in neat’ at all costs.

In observations, hand-written notes are made on post-its and stuck on a planning board. Anyone involved with the children can add to these. The weekly planning meeting goes through these in detail and uses them in setting up continuous provision for the next week.

Lots of photographs are taken and annotated (what they said, what you said to further their understanding), shared with child and parents and incorporated in ‘learning journals’ which parents are encouraged to add to. A ‘learning journal’ forms a permanent and much-loved record and evidence base to support the e-profile, as well as enhancing the partnership with parents that is at the heart of good early years practice.

## How will I know which scale point to use?

In the FSP you’ll find statements that seem clear but are actually very vague. For example, “Reads books of own choice with some fluency and accuracy” might just as well be referring to *War and Peace* as to *Mrs Tigglywinkle’s Day at the Shops*. Some form of standard needs to be agreed on for your setting or for a wider network. At a recent moderation of my own EYFS, the external moderator thought that writing was writing whether it be in lower or upper case or just beyond mark making, whilst our own understanding involved cursive script only. The moderator had set the bar lower than we had, which is all well and good until we find out in Y6 a child is way off the accepted pace.

Different adults apply scale points in different ways – even the moderators leading a recent course showed quite a wide divergence of opinion. Moderation within your setting and through networking with other nearby settings will help ensure your assessments are accurate and fair.

The results of your observations should mean that you know the children not just as a cohort but as individuals too and can design better learning in response to their needs and interests.

important thing is to observe and not intervene at this point. The observations can be used to inform the continuous provision and lock into what motivates and interests the children and what questions they ask. For example, one child talked constantly about cartoon character Ben 10. Adults incorporated this into their planning, and he responded very positively to having his learning designed around his current favourite thing.

You need to ensure you have evidence for all areas and create or find opportunities to meet FSP requirements even though it’s child-led. For example, if a child is engaged in model building but you are still looking for evidence of written language work, it might be suggested that he make a sign or label for it, or instructions.

## What about evidence for things the child avoids?

Ah, you mean writing! The solution is about making writing an interesting ‘special’ activity that the children will want to choose. Provide lots of different writing implements in different colours, some of those pens with fancy feathers or flashing lights attached, or ones shaped like bananas (don’t fret about grip technique at this point), special writing material, maybe in different shapes and colours, and a special writing place that looks inviting. Some children will want to sit at a desk, others will prefer to be sprawled on cushions on the floor. Anything you do indoors needs to be mirrored outdoors. One school I visited, as well as the usual outdoor chalks and boards, had a playhouse in their outdoor area which was the special writing house. Boys, in particular, loved it.

## Look here

### REMEMBER THESE KEY POINTS WHEN CARRYING OUT OBSERVATIONS...

- 1** Keep an open mind during observations. Have a focus, but don’t discount something else if it arises in the course of the observation.
- 2** Avoid setting up specific assessment opportunities rather than those that arise naturally in the course of continuous provision. Inevitably, the child scores lower when this is done.
- 3** Remember also that observation and assessment is an opportunity to encourage. It’s about noticing that a child can accurately join pieces of Duplo and praising them, it’s about boosting the self-esteem of a child trying to speak new words and encouraging them to carry on doing so.
- 4** Environment affects achievement. When assessing pupils’ spoken language you have to have an environment in which they have the self-confidence to speak.

