

# Early Years Observation and Planning in practice

Best practice for planning and observation in the EYFS.

**Includes guidance on cohort progress tracking and analysis**

By Jenny Barber and Sharon Paul-Smith

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# All about observations

## The reasons for observation

Observations have always been considered as an essential part of good childcare practice. It is through observations that you get to know the child and use that knowledge to guide you in the provision of experiences. The Department for Education and Skills publication *Starting With Quality* (1989) states that:

*'A good educational programme for under fives will offer ample opportunities to observe closely and to assess children's learning.'*

*'...collaborative planning which is based upon observation based assessment of children in all areas of development.'*

More recently in the DCSF (2009) publication *Learning, Playing and Interacting*, it states that:

*'[P]ractitioners observe children's activities carefully, trying to discover what the child is thinking about and learning and the goals of the play, so they can accurately support and extend the child's learning focus either at the time, or by later changes to the environment or in planned activities.'*

As an early years practitioner you need to reflect and identify how you observe effectively within the setting, to aspire to be the best and most effective in your systems and processes of observation, as this will bring about better outcomes for children.

In the documents *A Passion to be Outstanding* (Ofsted, September 2009) for childcare groups and childminders, Ofsted noted that outstanding practice in the area of observation, assessment and planning was seen in settings as:

- Responding to the needs and interests of all children.
- Talking with the parents, carers and children during the admission to find out about children's abilities, likes, dislikes, routine and cultural and family background.
- Establishing starting points from which they track children's development.
- Planning to ensure children have a wide range of opportunities to challenge and to enable them to meet their next steps.
- Involving children in planning.
- Keeping plans flexible and respond to children's changing interest and day to day events.
- Staff knowing children well because they regularly talk about the observations they make in all areas.
- Staff discussing and recording what the observations tell them about a child's interests and progress they are making.
- Staff using clear systems to monitor children's progress towards their identified next steps.

For childminders:

- Recognising that children learn best when they are having fun, interested and excited by what they are doing and building on what they already know.
- Being clear about each child's starting points.
- Frequently observing and assessing the children, so they know what they enjoy doing, their learning journey and their progress.
- Using their knowledge of each child to make good decisions about the next steps in their learning.
- Being flexible to changing circumstances and unexpected events.
- Providing a balance of adult and child-led activities to meet children's individual needs and interests covering all seven areas of learning.

Before we even consider how to observe, we need to think about the reasons why we need to observe and how to set the scene for effective observation. If you are clear about the reasons behind why you observe, you will be more effective in your approach. Knowing the purpose and motivation behind observations gives you a clearer insight and this understanding enables you to identify how to use observations, what to look for and how then to use the information collated effectively.

# Observation methods

Using a variety of different methods of observation will help you to build up a holistic picture of each child and what stage of development he or she is at. Some methods are more suited to different circumstances and situations and we will discuss this in this section.

Tips for getting started:

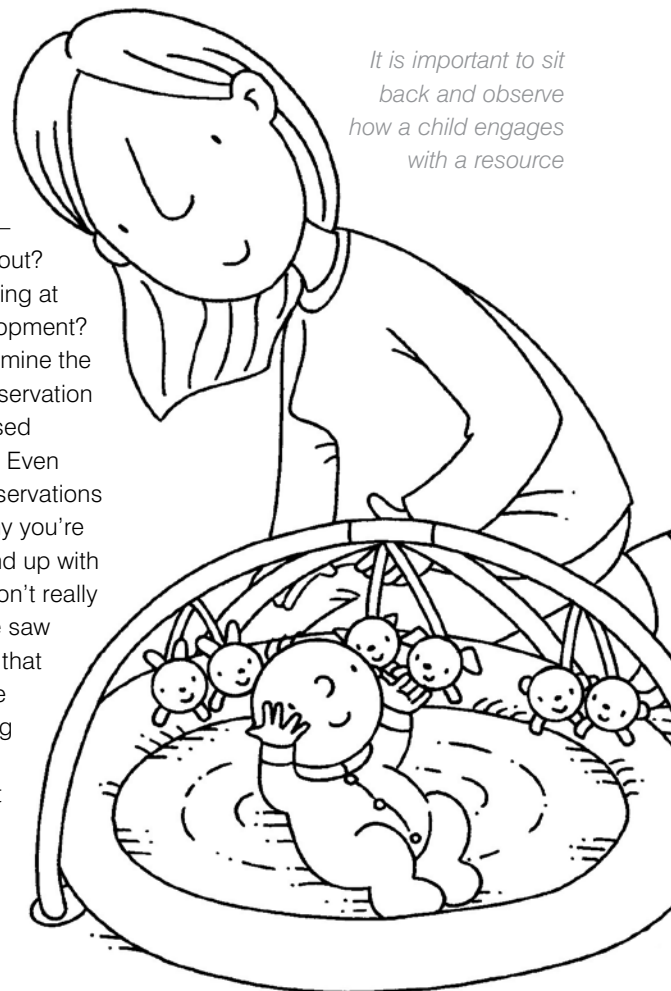
- Firstly, you must have the parent's or guardian's consent to make written observations of their children. Obviously it is in the child's best interests that observations are carried out and recorded, so if a parent is reluctant to give consent you would need to explain the benefits to the child, emphasising that observations are confidential.
- You need to be organised and prepared – these can be two completely separate things. You'll need to be prepared to make snapshot observations for which you'll need some sticky notes and a pen with you at all times. But you will also need to be ready to take out more lengthy planned observations, and for this you'll need to have printed off observation forms ready and have prepared for some time out to carry out the observation.
- To gain a truly holistic view of the child you will need to plan when to carry out some observations, some can be random to give a view of what the child accesses and enjoys but others may need to be of planned activities to observe certain skills. You need to use a range of observations and a range

of times and activities both indoors and outdoors.

- In some settings the person observing is recognisable by wearing a sash or a crown so that other staff and children know what they are doing and can avoid interrupting them.
- You will need to be flexible – you may have planned to observe a child playing in the sand and the child doesn't go near the sand, so you have to decide whether to observe on a different day or on a different activity.
- Before you start you need to know what the aim of the observation is – what do you want to find out? For example are you looking at a particular area of development? This will help you to determine the type and timing of the observation and allow you to be focused without being prejudiced. Even when doing snapshot observations it is important to know why you're doing them or you just end up with lots of sticky notes that don't really tell you very much. I once saw a sticky note observation that said "TC picked up a blue brick". That was it, nothing else. At the time it was written it may have meant something, but to me reading it later it didn't have much meaning at all. I didn't know if he'd been asked to pick up a

blue brick, I didn't know which hand he'd picked it up in as nothing was explained, so the observation lacked essential detail and as such failed to have any value.

- You need to decide if you wish the child to be aware that they are being observed. Children need to be involved in observations, but we all know that we behave differently when we are aware that we're being watched so sometimes it is best to be unobtrusive. This



*It is important to sit back and observe how a child engages with a resource*

they eat it may be too much too soon for that child and they will lose interest completely.

In your planning and provision you need to ensure you reflect a balance of child-initiated and adult-led experiences both indoors and out. This is not only a statutory requirement of the EYFS, but will also help you to ensure that you are providing broad and balanced experiences for the children.

The DCSF (2009) document *Playing, Learning and Interacting* provides clear definitions of both child-initiated and adult-led experiences to help you understand how to spot them in the setting.

*'Child-initiated activity ... is wholly decided upon by the child, based on the child's own motivation and remains under the child's control. It may involve play of many types...'*

**Remember if you had anything to do with it, it isn't child-initiated. This means you don't guide or influence the child; you let them choose from your continuous provision facilitating the free-flow play.**

For children to have optimum opportunities you need to have a varied and full continuous provision. For example, there needs to be a choice of construction toys, not just stickle bricks because it is Monday and this is the activity you normally play with on Monday. Restrictions that you put on resources mean that children will not be able to develop an idea or make the most of learning possibilities. Stimulation is the key, and this can be provided through variety that promotes challenge, which is achievable.

**You need to ensure that you are providing plenty of open-ended resources. An open-ended resource is one that has no specific purpose or function, but can be created into anything from the child's**

## Case study: How do you structure your planning?

*Corinne Finlay, Early Years Professional, Townhill Early Years Centre, Southampton*

### Long-term plans

The long-term provision outlines the planned celebrations and visits diarised for the nursery throughout the academic year. In addition, our continuous provision is based on the EYFS' Themes and Characteristics of effective learning. Every area of the provision i.e. routines, outdoors, ICT, the nature area plus many more are all cross-referenced to the EYFS Themes and Characteristics of effective learning to ensure we are providing opportunities for children to develop through the Early Years Foundation Stage.

### Short-term plans

EYFS Aspects Sheets: these sheets contain the Aspects for each of the broad areas of development. Each Key Person has a sheet located in their 'Big Floor Books' as a point of reference to identify what aspects have been covered, and which still need to be included.

**imagination.** If everything you provide for children has a clear purpose and function, a classic example being a shape sorter, there is risk that children will lack stimulation and the opportunity to interpret the creative and endless possibilities that more open-ended resources can have. Of course, resources with a specific purpose do have a place, but they shouldn't be the only resources on offer.

A good example of an open-ended resource is a treasure basket. Do take care to refresh and replace the items in the basket regularly, as even open-

In addition, we keep a record of individual children's next steps and targets in the Key Person's Big Floor Books, to enable the Key Person to incorporate the children's interests and next steps.

A big floor book is a reference book for key carers to track their key children's progress through the development matters of the seven areas of learning and development of the EYFS.

Observations of the children during their time at nursery are recorded on stickers, then transferred into the child's individual 'Learning Stories' book. These observations inform the children's next steps and ensure their individual needs are incorporated through everyday child-initiated activities.

We also have Individual Needs Sheets located at key areas around the play room, to ensure that all adults working in those areas are able to provide the right support for individual children's learning.

ended resources can become stale after time.

Commitment card 4.1 of the EYFS Play and Exploration states that practitioners should:

*'Provide flexible resources that can be used in many different ways to facilitate children's play and exploration. These might include lengths of plastic guttering, tubing and watering cans near the sand and water play areas; lengths of fabric and clothes pegs in a box; large paintbrushes and buckets near the*

# All about assessment

The Early Years Foundation Stage and the Ofsted inspection framework put a clear emphasis on the importance of assessment and using that to show children's progress, taking into account starting points and using observation to support these assessments, this includes the progress check at two.

People often shy away from assessment, usually because of a lack of understanding of what it involves. Assessment however is an essential part of the observation process, and without assessment you cannot fully utilise the information you have gleaned from observations. It is certainly not about testing.

In the Statutory Framework it states that:

*'Assessment okays an important part in helping parents, carers and practitioners to recognise children's progress, understand their needs and to plan activities and support.'*

**Assessment is about tracking children's progress so you know that they are moving forward. This tracking needs to reflect all seven areas of learning and development.**

There are two key processes in assessment: formative and summative assessment. The formative assessment provides the evidence for the summative assessment. In the DCSF document *Progress Matters: Reviewing and Enhancing Young Children's Development* (2009) the process of assessment is described as:

- **Gathering** – information on children's learning and development.
- **Using** – information to support children's learning and development.
- **Summarising** – information to track children's progress.
- **Using summary information** – to support children's progress.

The first two items describe formative assessment and the last two summative assessments.

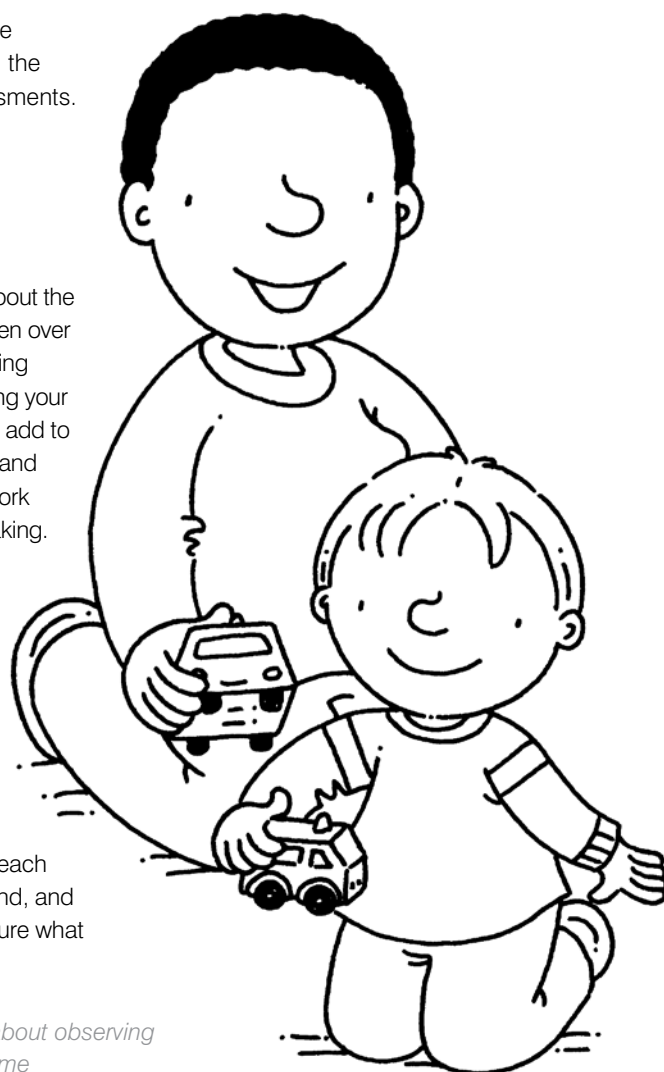
## Formative assessment

Formative assessment is about the process of observing children over a period of time and collecting evidence, the evidence being your observations. You may also add to this evidence photographs and samples of the children's work e.g. paintings and mark making.

Through the collection of observations and other evidence you have on a particular child you can build up the story of their individual journey of development and learning. It's a story that continually changes and evolves with each little twist and turn, never end, and you can never be exactly sure what is going to happen next.

*Formative assessment is about observing children over a period of time*

Summative assessment is about looking at your formative assessments gathered over a period of time, perhaps six weeks or a term and reflecting on those assessments and identifying what it tells you about the child in terms of where that child is developmentally and where they need to go next.



# THE PROGRESS CHECK AT TWO

## AIM OF THE CHECK

- It is a statutory requirement
- Part of the early intervention initiative
- To identify where the child is at in all of the three prime areas and if necessary identify any problems in the three prime areas, and working early on to support them
- Encouraging dialogue and communication between the setting and the child's parents
- Supporting good practice in relation to summative assessments to monitor children's progress.

## WHEN TO DO THE CHECK

- Between the ages of 24-36 months, but as near to 24 months as possible, so parents can share it with their health visitor at the 2-year-old health and development check if they wish
- The check needs to be carried out by the child's key carer and shared with the parents at a convenient time
- Remember to ensure the child is settled and hasn't experienced any recent emotional upheaval e.g. birth of a new sibling which may have affected their development
- If a child joins your setting between the ages of 24-36 months and has previously not attended an early years setting, once they have settled in you need to carry out the check
- If the child attends two settings, the setting where they spend the most time is responsible for carrying out the check, but it is good practice to exchange information.

## HOW TO DO

- The check is based on your ongoing observations and knowledge of the child in the three prime areas
- A summary needs to be written on where the child is at either in general on each area or individually on each aspect of each area
- You must note in each aspect of each area which development phase the child is at
- You may wish to include information about the child and the characteristics of effective learning and their key interests
- Include on the form how long the child has attended the setting and how many sessions they attend a week, as this is significant in terms of how well you may know the child
- Identify any significant next steps for the child
- If the child is not progressing in any of the three prime areas, you need to state how you are going to support them.

## INCLUDING PARENTS

- The purpose of the check and why it is being carried out and that it is based on what you have observed and your knowledge of the child
- That you will share it with them at a mutually convenient time and that they will be able to comment on the check about what they have noticed about their child's development
- The development phases, so they are aware of the individual nature of development and that the phases overlap because they are not fixed boundaries but suggest a typical range of development
- The prime areas and their aspects
- What will happen if their child is not progressing
- Explain that they can then share the check with their health visitor
- Tell them they keep the check and you will put a copy in their child's profile that you keep, to help you monitor their progress.