

The Role of Observation

Observations are conducted every day in early childhood classroom environments. Teachers are constantly surveying the environment and completing safety checks to make sure the equipment and materials are safe for the children to use. Teachers also perform daily health screenings to ensure their children are healthy enough to participate in program activities. Beyond the standard safety check and health screening, teachers have many other important tasks and duties that they must do in order to maintain the classroom environment. Intentional teachers use their observations to plan and implement curriculum, set up engaging learning environments, monitor the children's social interactions, track behaviors, communicate with families, and assess each child's progress and development. Essentially, observations help teachers be more accountable. By conducting regular observations intentional teachers can:

1. Evaluate program effectiveness
2. Evaluate teacher effectiveness
3. Make improvements to ensure quality practices
4. Plan and implement developmentally appropriate curriculum
5. Measure and assess a child's development
6. Develop respectful family partnerships
7. Understand the cultural practices and family structure
8. Select effective learning strategies to support and accommodate the diverse needs of children
9. Ensure ethical conduct and professional standards of practice
10. Teach with confidence

If we want to understand children, we must first watch them and listen to them. Then, we must try to make sense of what we observed and give it meaning. The role of observation is to provide teachers with information and evidence that they will need to make informed decisions on how to best support the children in their care. With each observation, you will get a glimpse into a child's developing mind. Not only will you see a child's personality emerge, you will be able to see what a child can do. As you watch your children, you will see how they problem solve when conflicts arise and how they cope with the stress from being in a group setting. You will learn about their individual needs and their cultural practices. When you watch children closely, their interests and abilities are revealed. With each observation, you will gain useful insight that will help you become an intentional teacher.

Why Observe? Improving Teaching Practices

As we watch and listen to children throughout the day, we begin to see them for who they are. With each interaction and experience, we can see how children process information and how they socialize with their peers. We can learn so much about a child if we take the time to watch, listen, and record on a daily basis. Teachers are sometimes influenced by their own ideas of how children should behave. Truth be told, everything passes through a filter that is based on the observer's beliefs, cultural practices, and personal experiences. As observers, we must be aware that our own biases can impact our objectivity. To gain perspective and to be most effective, we must train ourselves to slow down and step back, we must try to focus on what the child is actually doing, rather than judging how they are doing it or assuming why they are doing it. To practice becoming more objective, imagine you are a camera taking snapshots

of key moments. As you observe the children in your care - practice recording just the facts (Gordon and Browne, 2016).

Bias in Observation

Biases, we all have them. They come from our upbringing and family of origin, what we're taught in school, media influences, and more. Every interaction and every experience we have had has shaped who we are. To some degree, our biases influence our beliefs and behaviors, they sway our attitudes, and they affect our personalities. Because our biases are so ingrained into who we are, it would be unrealistic to simply say "ignore your bias." Therefore, a valuable exercise might be to do a self-check and examine your own biases. Look for those biases that are "triggers." More specifically, think about the behaviors, temperamental traits, and moods that make you feel uncomfortable, frustrated, or annoyed.

Many of us are unaware of the biases we carry. For example, when a child says, "give me some milk!" Our first response might be "Ummm, how do you ask?" We might not realize that what we view as "manners" (or lack of them) can make us react in a judgmental way. What's important to recognize is that how we feel about the child's behavior can taint how we see them. What's more, our biases can influence how we gather our observation evidence. As intentional teachers we have to recognize our biases so we can treat all children with the respect that they deserve. According to NAEYC's Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment (2011),

P-1.3—We shall not participate in practices that discriminate against children by denying benefits, giving special advantages, or excluding them from programs or activities on the basis of their sex, race, national origin, immigration status, preferred home language, religious beliefs, medical condition, disability, or the marital status/family structure, sexual orientation, or religious beliefs or other affiliations of their families (p. 3).

Reflect on Your Own Biases

We all need to be aware of our internalized ideas about children and families. Rather than letting a child's behavior trigger you, look beyond their behavior, look beyond your bias. Focus on collecting objective observation evidence and use that data to reflect on what might be causing that behavior. Work with families to assess skills that you may not see in the classroom. If a child is acting out, consider ways that you can support them through redirection, modeling, scaffolding or positive reinforcements. As intentional teachers, one of our primary roles is to empower children, and to build meaningful relationships by creating warm, caring environments (Epstein, 2007).

[Project Implicit](#)



Read

[Do English-Language Learners Get Stigmatized by Teachers? A Study Says Yes](#) | Web article

[Equity for English-Language Learners](#) | Web article

[Washington Models for the Evaluation of Bias](#) | Resource Document from OSPI

Optional: [Assessment Considerations for Young English Language Learners Across Different Levels of Accountability](#) | Research Paper, 55 pages

Ethics

Every day, teachers observe, record and capture essential moments in a child's development. The evidence and artifacts that are gathered are then used to plan curriculum and assess development. Although we have highlighted the importance of gathering work samples and observation evidence as a key element to be an intentional teacher, we must also consider the perspective of the child. In the article "Who is Watching? Thinking Ethically about Observing Children" the authors highlight some of the ethical tensions that can arise within early childhood settings when trying to balance the rights of children, the responsibilities of teachers and the role of a student who is training to be a future teacher.

In most classrooms, a typical day includes teachers grabbing their cameras to take snapshots of the children in their care so that they will have ample documentation. Consider this - does the teacher's presence change the context of the child's experience? Does the thought of being monitored make the child behave any differently? How does the child feel about having their picture taken? Are teachers becoming overly concerned about capturing children in precious moments, rather than being engaged in teachable moments? As a "student" who is learning to observe and document a child's development it is important for you to consider the following guidelines when observing children:

- Take every precaution to maintain confidentiality and to ensure privacy
- Remember to ask if it is OK to take photographs of children and their work Understand that children have the right not to take part in activities
- Be respectful and keep a reasonable amount of space between you and the child so as not to interfere with their play and learning
- Be attuned to children's body language, temperament and styles of communication See each child as a unique individual who has their own perspective, set of feelings, interests, and way of socializing, along with their own cultural context, belief system, and values
- Be upfront and inform children about the purpose of your observation visit if you are approached
- Share information with the child about what you have observed when appropriate Write quotes down just as they were said without adding context, or trying to rationalize what the child may have meant

- Be aware that photos and observation data should be collected in a non-intrusive manner
- Ensure that observation evidence and photos are used only for the purposes intended Handle photos and data with care and sensitivity, and always store information securely Realize that a child's reactions, behaviors and conversations may not be what you expect and therefore you should refrain from being judgmental or tainted by your cultural biases

By following these guidelines, you are providing the children you observe with the respect they deserve while ensuring their dignity and safety. The centers and programs where you are observing are trusting you to act with integrity while you are at their site observing their children. Lastly, families will appreciate that you have their child's best interest at heart.

The Teaching Cycle

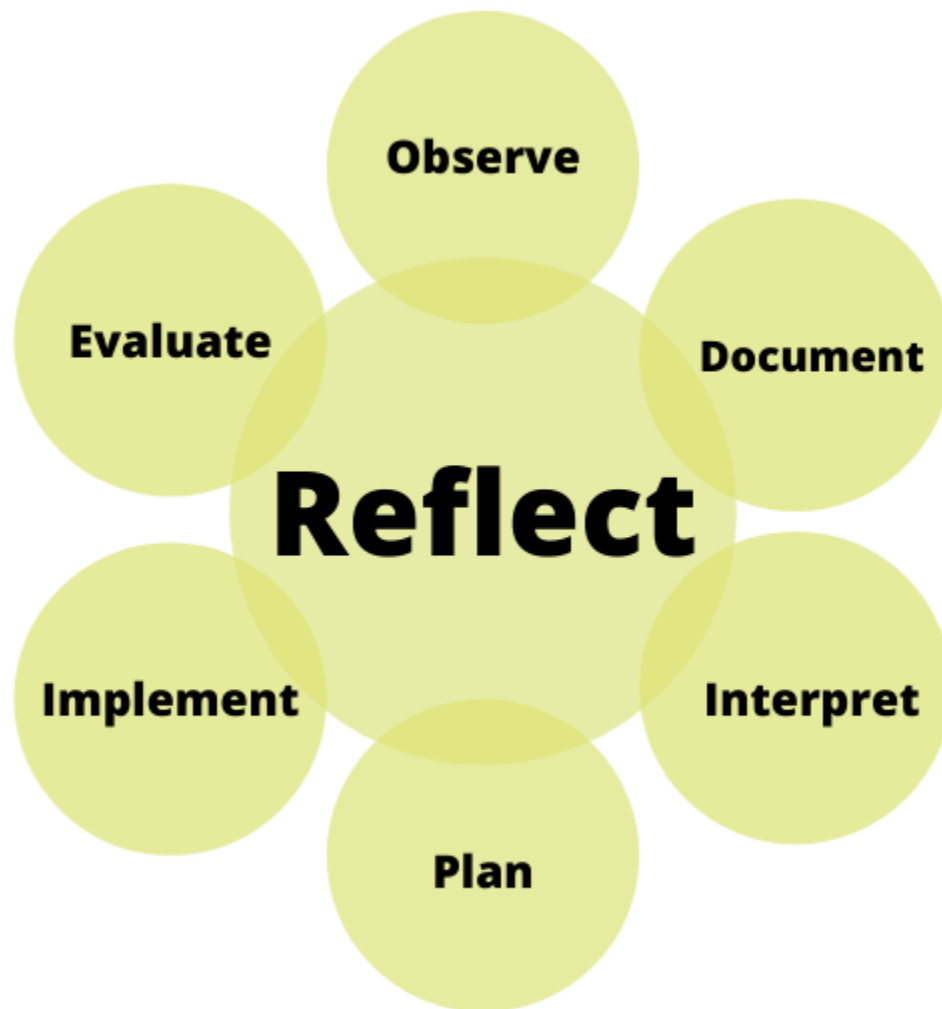


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Observation : Looking and Listening

- May be Spontaneous or Planned
- Watch and listen to children while they explore, investigate, play, problem solve, interact and socialize
- Keep an open mind as you gather evidence and artifacts, and look for what children CAN DO
- Observe children during daily routines, transition times, mealtimes, and while inside and outside

To develop an effective curriculum, quality observations must be conducted. Whether spontaneous or planned, formal or informal, in-depth observations provide teachers with an advantage point. With each observation, teachers gain valuable insight that helps them gauge a child's zone of proximal development, and with that information, teachers can decide on how to best scaffold that child's learning. Likewise, teachers who conduct ongoing observations discover each child's baseline knowledge, and with that data, they can develop curriculum that supports children's play and learning in a developmentally appropriate manner. Furthermore, a teacher who regularly observes can track children's interests which in turn helps her to select materials and resources that will fascinate, intrigue, challenge and engage the children. Thus, when teachers take detailed notes and record objective facts, they recognize each child's individual pace, temperament, capabilities, interests and needs. It is with this vital data that they can ultimately meet children where they are at developmentally and map out where they need to go by intentionally setting reasonable expectations and goals.

To truly discover a child's intent, teachers need to be fully attentive to what children are doing and saying while they are playing and interacting with others. To be fully attentive requires a particular state of mind. Rather than being actively engaged with children or guiding their behavior or directing their play, teachers need to find moments where they can *focus on looking and listening*. Teachers need to approach each observation with an open mind - free of bias and preconceived notions, and they need to have an open lens to see what children are actually doing. Sometimes we can only look and listen for a brief moment; sometimes we can look and listen for a longer timeframe. Either way, we need to take in all that we are seeing and hearing so that we can discover a window into the child's thinking and find clues as to what they are capable of.

To gather useful information about each child, we must first remember to use an objective lens. In other words, rather than assuming you know what a child is thinking or doing, it is important to learn the art of observing. To gather authentic evidence, we must learn how to look and listen with an open mind. We must learn to "see" each child for who they are rather than for who we want them to be or who we think they should be. Be assured, learning to be an objective observer is a skill that requires patience and practice. As you begin to incorporate observation into your daily routine, here are a few things to think about:

1. **Who** should I observe? Quite simply - every child needs to be observed. Some children may stand out more than others, and you may connect to certain children more than others. In either case, be aware and be mindful to set time aside to observe each child in your care.
2. **When** should I observe? It is highly suggested that you observe at various times throughout the day – during both morning and afternoon routines. Some key times may include during drop-off and pick-up times, during planned or teacher-directed activities, during open exploration or child-initiated activities. You may have **spontaneous observations** - which are special moments

or interactions that unexpectedly pop up, and you may have **planned observations** - which are scheduled observations that are more focused around collecting evidence about a particular skill set, interaction, or behavior.

3. **Where** should I observe? You should observe EVERYWHERE! Because children can behave differently when they are indoors as compared to when they are outdoors, it's important to capture them interacting in both settings.
4. **What** should I observe? To understand the **"whole child"** you need to observe their social interactions, their physical development, how they manage their emotions and feelings, how they problem-solve when tasked with new developmental skills, how they communicate with their peers and adults, and how they use materials and follow directions. In other words – EVERYTHING a child does and says! In addition to observing each child as an individual, it's important to look at small group interactions, along with large group interactions.
5. **How** should I observe? To capture all the various moments, you need to know when to step in and when to step back. Sometimes we quietly watch as moments occur, and sometimes we are there to ask questions and prompt (or scaffold) children's learning. Sometimes we can record our observations at that moment as they occur, and sometimes we have to wait to jot down what we heard or saw at a later time.

Building Your Skills as an Observer

To truly observe a child, you must be present, knowledgeable, inquisitive and intentional. With every observation, you will sharpen your skills as you learn how to effectively gather objective evidence and detailed data.

Be present

To capture all the individual mannerisms, subtle social nuances, non-verbal body language and dynamic conversations that occur throughout the day you must be attentive, focused and ready to go at any given moment. Children move fast. When we blink, we are bound to miss some little detail or precious moment, that's a given. Being present takes considerable effort and careful planning.

Be knowledgeable

Understanding the core concepts of early childhood education is extremely important if you are to set reasonable expectations and plan developmentally appropriate learning experiences. Familiarizing yourself with child development theories will help you understand and appreciate why children do what they do. Learning about the key principles in early care and education will provide you with a solid foundation and a wide range of instructional strategies to support a child's development.

Be inquisitive

Think of yourself as a researcher. Your primary mission is to investigate the children in your care by routinely gathering evidence, using a variety of observation methods and tools. As a good researcher you will need to ask some thoughtful questions. These questions will guide you as you plan purposeful observations and as you select your method of observation. Here are some sample questions you may

ask yourself: What activities interest Max? How many times did Stevie hit today? What skills did Hazel master today with this activity, and what skills need further support? How long did Zoey stay engaged while playing in the sandbox? What milestones will this activity support? By asking thoughtful questions, you will learn more about the children in your care and you will do a better job at supporting each child's individual needs. Rather than fixating on a child's behavior, in time you will begin using focused observations to try and figure out the reasons why a child acts the way they do.

Be intentional

As you organize learning experiences, set up the classroom and outside environment, assess children's developmental progress, engage in activities, and interact with your children and families – you must have a thoughtful plan of action in place. "Intentional teaching means that everything you do as a teacher has a specific goal and purpose" (Gordon & Browne, 2016 p. 103). Even as spontaneous situations arise, intentional teachers must make the most of teachable moments. Intentional teachers conduct regular observations and gather objective documentation data to be accountable for the actions they take, the plans they generate and the assessments they make.

Documentation: Recording What You See and Hear

- Record what you see and hear. Include date, time, and location
- Include child's first name
- Include who else is engaged in the activity
- Document the purpose of the activity – highlighting what the child is supposed to do All recorded evidence should be concise, factual and have descriptive details
- Use a variety of observation and documentation methods and tools to collect evidence
- Record actual evidence as you see it (avoid summarizing or assuming)
- Consult with families about things that they might know about their child that's not readily observable in the classroom

As we observe, we must record what we see and hear exactly as it happens. Documentation provides the vital evidence and visual artifacts that teachers need to accurately track each child's learning, growth and development in order to plan a developmentally appropriate curriculum. Documentation helps teachers hold into memory the significant moments of play, exploration and learning. To gather data, teachers can opt to use several tools and techniques. Whether a teacher uses an anecdotal note, frequency count, or checklist to gather documentation, the goal is to have an extensive collection of factual evidence, along with work samples, that highlight each child's actions and behaviors, verbal and nonverbal communication skills, social interaction and intellectual abilities.

Objective versus Subjective Observation Evidence

Intentional teachers must learn how to write objective observations. Teachers need to write down exactly what the children do and say. As you observe, it is best to write down all that you see and hear, and report just the facts. It takes practice to learn how to separate facts from opinions. Here are some helpful tips for you to review:

Objective Observations	Subjective Observations
Objective observations are based on what we observed using our senses, we record exactly what we see, hear, taste, touch, and smell	Subjective observations are often influenced by our past events, personal experiences and opinions, and can be biased based on our cultural backgrounds
Objective information is based on the facts we gather. If we don't see it, we don't report it. We report only details and provide vivid descriptions	Subjective information is based on our opinions, assumptions, personal beliefs, prejudice feelings or can be based on suspicions, rumors and guesses
Results are more likely to be valid and reliable from child to child	Results are often inconsistent and vary from child to child

Record as many descriptive details as you can, while remaining as objective as possible. Include the whole child's development. More specifically,

- Look for what children “can do” and note the milestones that have been mastered
- Track language development by recording pertinent conversations. Learn about patterns of language development for bi- and multilingual children to avoid bias in language assessment.
- Track play patterns to see who engages in cooperative play and who prefers to play alone
- Watch the interactions and social dynamics between peers
- Interview families about abilities that you do not observe directly

Next, in order to track a child's development over time, remember to include the following information: date; time; location and setting; activity; and note the children that are engaged in the activity. Lastly, to plan a meaningful curriculum, you will need to regularly review all the documentation you have collected so that you can ponder and interpret what was observed.

Documentation Sample

Date: 2/10/19

Time: 9:30 -9:45

Location and Setting: Inside during Active Investigation Time. The following centers were open: Science – magnifying glass and leaves, Art – painting

with pom poms, blocks with transportation vehicles, computer station –

Clifford the Big Red Dog.

Activity: Science Area

Children Present: Hannah and Zoey

Hannah and Zoey were in the science area. They scooted their chairs up to the counter where the class pet gecko was perched. “Hello, Gex. How are you today? What are you eating?” Asked Hannah. “I love Gexy Gex don’t you?” Zoey asked Hannah. “Yeaah,” said Hannah. “I wish I had Gex,” said Zoey. “Me too!” Said Hannah. The 2 girls sat next to Gex the Gecko until it was clean up time (about 10 minutes). Hannah sat with her back to Zoey. Zoey played with Hannah’s hair (brushing it with her fingers maybe braiding it or putting it in a ponytail). They continued to chat back and forth to each other.



Reflect

What are you able to interpret from this interaction?

There are several tools and techniques that can be used to document our observations. As you continue along the Early Childhood Education / Child Development pathway, you may take a class on “Observation and Assessment” which will provide you with detailed information on how to effectively document a child’s development.

An observation is often prompted by a question. Here are a few questions that might guide your next observation:

- *“In what ways are the children using the new materials in the block area?” “Which children can cut a zig-zag line with scissors?”*
- *“Who will recognize their name tag that is posted on the outside table?” “Will Sofia play with a peer today or keep to herself?” “I wonder how Jackson will do at drop-off today?”*
- *“I’m curious to see how the children will react to painting with fall leaves and who will try?”*
- *“What activity area are the children using the most while outside?”*

As teachers observe to find answers to questions like these, they will need to record what children are doing and saying. No matter which tool, technique or method is used, teachers need to document what they are observing. Let’s take a brief look at some of the tools and techniques you may want to use as part of your daily routine.



Documenting what you observe is an important part of the process.
[The Integrated Nature of Learning](#) by the [CDE](#) is used with permission.

Running Record

To gather authentic evidence of everything you see and hear a child doing during a specific timeframe, you can use a running record. The primary goal of using a running record is to “obtain a detailed, objective account of behavior without inference, interpretations, or evaluations”. According to Bentzen, you will know you have gathered good evidence when you can close your eyes and you can “see” the images in your mind as they are described in your running record (Bentzen, 2009).

Anecdotal Record

Whereas a running record can be used to gather general information more spontaneously, anecdotal records are brief, focused accounts of a specific event or activity. An anecdotal record is “an informal observation method often used by teachers as an aid to understanding the child’s personality or behavior” (Bentzen, 2009). Anecdotal records, also referred to as “anecdotal notes,” are direct observations of a child that offer a window of opportunity to see into a child’s actions, interactions, and reactions to people and events. They are an excellent tool that provides you with a collection of narratives that can be used to showcase a child’s progress over time.

Developmental Checklists

To track a child’s growth development and development in all of the developmental domains including physical, cognitive, language, social, and emotional you will want to use a developmental checklist. With a checklist, you can easily see what a child can do, as well as note the areas of development that need further support. Teachers can create their own checklists based on certain skill sets, or to look at a child’s full range of development they can download a formal developmental milestone checklist from a reputable source (e.g., the [CDC Developmental Milestones](#)). Checklists can be used to track a large group of children or an individual child.

Frequency Counts

To gather information about a child’s interests, social interactions, play patterns, and temperamental traits you can use a frequency count chart. As you observe the children at play, a tally mark is made

every time the noted behavior or action occurs within a set timeframe. Frequency counts are also used to track undesirable or challenging behaviors, as well as prosocial behaviors.

Work Samples

Creating a work sample requires more effort than hanging a child's picture on the wall. A work sample provides tangible evidence of a child's effort, progress, and achievement. Not only does a work sample highlight the final product, but it can also highlight the process. To collect authentic evidence, with every work sample you need to include the date and a brief caption that explains the child's learning experience.

Documentation Boards

In addition to using the above tools and techniques to record observations, teachers can use documentation boards or panels to highlight the learning activities that are happening throughout the week, month, and year. Not only do families enjoy seeing their child's work posted, but children can also be empowered by seeing all that they have accomplished. Documentation boards are another great way to validate progress over time. Documentation boards can be made with the children as a project or can be assembled by the teacher or parent volunteer. Typically, documentation boards are posted on the wall for all to see and they usually showcase the following information:

- Learning goal and objectives
- Children's language development
- The process and complete project
- The milestones of development
- Photos with detailed captions



Reflect

What might be pros and cons of each of the above tools for documenting your observations? Do you have any experience with any of them (as a teacher, family member, or child/student)?

Interpretation: Making Sense of Our Observations

After you have captured key evidence, it's time to interpret that data. In other words, you must try to figure out what it all means. As you begin to analyze and interpret your documentation, you will want to compare your current observations to previous observations. As you compare observations, you will want to look for play patterns and track social interactions. You will also want to look for changes in behavior and look for possible triggers (antecedents) when addressing challenging behaviors. Lastly, you will want to note any new milestones that have developed since the last observation. To help you analyze and interpret your observation data, you will want to ask yourself some reflective questions. Here are some suggested questions:

- What have I learned about this child?
- What are their current interests – who do they play with and what activity centers or areas do they migrate to the most?

- Has this child developed any new skills or mastered any milestones?
- How did this child approach new activities or problem-solve when faced with a challenge?
- How long does the child usually stay focused on a task?
- Is this behavior “typical” for this child?
- *What can I plan to support and encourage this child to progress along at a developmentally appropriate pace?

Another vital step in interpreting your observations is to reflect and connect your observation data to developmental theories. ECE theories provide foundational principles that we use to guide our practices and plan developmentally appropriate curriculum. For example, consider the three zones of proximal development.



Learning Zones. [College of the Canyons ZTC Team](#) is licensed under [CC BY 4.0](#)

Besides analyzing documentation on your own, you can share information with your co-teachers and with families at conferences. Sharing observations with children's families strengthens the home-program connection. Families must be "provided opportunities to increase their child observation skills and to share assessments with staff that will help plan the learning experiences." Collaboration will only enhance your effectiveness in planning.

Families are with their child in all kinds of places and doing all sorts of activities. Their view of their child is even bigger than the teacher's. How can families and teachers share their observations, their assessment information, with each other? They can share through brief informal conversations, maybe at drop-off or pickup time, or when parents volunteer or visit the classroom. Families and teachers also share their observations during longer and more formal times. Home visits and conferences are opportunities to chat a little longer and spend time talking about what the child is learning, what happens at home as well as what happens at school, how much progress the child is making, perhaps to problem solve if the child is struggling and figure out the best ways to support the child's continued learning (Head Start, 2020).

Here are some examples of how you might start the discussion.

- "What growth do you see?"
- "Are their peer interactions the same in the afternoon as they are in the morning?"
- "Do you see them doing X at home?"
- "What are your thoughts on this behavior?" "How did you handle this transition?"

The high-quality practice of collaborating with co-teachers provides both professional and ethical support. When co-teachers are able to meet and discuss their observations, not only are they able to share their successes, they can also share their struggles. A co-teacher who is working alongside you will be familiar with the children and may have valuable insight that will help with your curriculum planning. They may be able to offer suggestions from a different perspective, as well as provide encouragement and empathy as needed. Another benefit of collaborating with a co-teacher is having the opportunity to share resources and materials with each other. Shared resources can extend curriculum possibilities. (Davis, L. (2019). Teacher Collaboration: How to Approach it in 2019.

<https://www.schoolology.com/blog/teacher-collaboration>

Reflection: Planning for the Next Step

Reflective practice helps us to consider our caregiving practices and to develop greater self-awareness so we can be more sensitive and responsive to the children we care for. As we look, listen, and record the conversations and interactions of each child, we are collecting valuable insight. With each observation, we are learning specific details about the children's interests and abilities, their play patterns, social behaviors, problem-solving skills, and much, much more. With the information we gather, we can reflect on our caregiving practices and look at what we are doing well in addition to where we can improve. To ensure best practices, we can think about how we can become more responsive and how we can meet each child where they are in order to best support their individual needs. Reflective practice can be done alone or with co-workers - if you are team teaching. To create an inclusive learning environment that engages each child in meaningful ways, here are some prompts to help you begin reflecting on your practices:

- look at the space, materials, and daily schedule;

- Consider the cultural diversity of families;
- Think about whether or caregiving routines are meaningful;
- Think about how you are fostering relationships with families
- Consider if you are using a “one size fits all” approach
- Think about if your expectations for children match up with the age and stage of their development

Interpreting the meaning of children’s behaviors and interactions is important. These interpretations give us insight into each child’s story. Each child’s story informs our responsive practice. With this valuable insight, we can:

- Adapt the environment
- Modify the daily schedule and/or routines
- Make decisions about how to guide the children’s learning based on what the child knows and can do as well as what the child is ready to try. ([Observation: The Heart of Individualizing Responsive Care](#) by the [Office of Head Start](#) is in the public domain)
- Curriculum planning requires a considerable amount of time. Teachers need time to observe and collect documentation, they need time to interpret their data, and they need time to reflect on how to use that data to plan effective strategies that will foster a child’s learning. High-quality preschool programs that support intentional teaching allocate time in teachers’ schedules for them to reflect and plan curriculum individually and collectively as a team. ([Preschool Curriculum Framework Volume 1](#) by the [California Department of Education](#) is used with permission)

As we reflect, we must ask ourselves a wide range of questions. The answers to these questions lead to individualized care and learning. Let’s look at a few questions you may ask yourself as you begin to plan developmentally appropriate curriculum:

- What skill or activity does the child appear to be working on?
- What learning strategies is the child using to play with different toys?
- Does the child engage with objects or people differently than a month ago? What has changed? What has not changed?
- Do my actions affect the outcomes of the child’s experience? How so?
- How does the information relate to goals for the child? The family’s goals? The program’s school readiness goals?

Planning Curriculum

Once you have interpreted your observation data (asked questions, looked for patterns, noted any changes in growth and development) and you have analyzed theory principles, it is time to plan the **curriculum**. Probably the more joyful part of our job is implementing curriculum and seeing the children engage in new activities. It is common to hear teachers say that the highlight of their day is “seeing the lightbulb go on” as children make valuable connections to what the teacher has planned and as the children master new skill sets.

The word “curriculum” can mean different things to different people. For some, curriculum can provide the framework for learning, for others it can be a variety of planned activities, still for others curriculum is a way to drive learning outcomes, goals and objectives. In early care and education, we value how children process information, we recognize how important their feelings are, and we place great significance on how children learn to socialize with others. As intentional teachers, our primary goal is to incorporate a curriculum that supports the “whole-child” in all domains of development including social, emotional, physical, and intellectual.

Let’s define “curriculum”. According to Epstein (2007), curriculum is “the knowledge and skills teachers are expected to teach and children are expected to learn, and the plans for experiences through which learning will take place”. I would like to define curriculum as “the activities, experiences, and interactions a child may have throughout their day.” Curriculum supports learning and play and it influences a whole child’s growth and development. As teachers set goals and make plans, they should consider that some curriculum will be planned, while some curriculum will emerge. As you plan your curriculum, you are encouraged to think about the following aspects of curriculum – the environment, materials, and interactions. For example,

- ***How is the environment set up*** – is it overstimulating, cluttered, or inviting and well organized?
- ***What is the mood and tone of the classroom*** – is it calm or chaotic? Do the children appear happy and engaged? Have you interacted with the children?
- ***Are there enough materials available*** – *are children having to wait long periods of time for items and are there conflicts because of limited materials?*
- ***Do the materials reflect the children’s interests*** - are they engaging and accessible?
- ***What are the social interactions*** - who is playing with whom, are there social cliques, is anyone playing alone?
- ***Are the activities appropriate***- do they support development in all areas of learning?
- ***Are there a variety of activities to encourage both individualized play and cooperative play?***¹

As teachers reflect on children’s play, they discover possibilities for designing curriculum to sustain, extend, and help children’s play to be more complex and, consequently, support the children’s continual learning. Teachers review ideas for possible next steps in the curriculum. Possible steps might include adding materials to interest areas, books to read with large or small groups, activities to do in small groups, or a topic to investigate over time with the children. With clear ideas or objectives in mind, teachers plan curriculum that includes strategies to enhance the learning of all children in a group, as well as strategies to support the learning of individual children. The most effective curriculum will:

- Motivate children to explore their environment
- Inspire children to investigate various centers and activities
- Encourage children to create with new materials
- Allow children to engage in conversations and prompt them to ask questions Prompt children to interact with peers
- Encourage children to problem solve
- Reinforce the cultural and linguistic identities of the children and families

¹ [Preschool Curriculum Framework, Volume 1](#) by the [CDE](#) is used with permission

- Embrace and support the unique abilities of children

Implementation: Let's Do It!

Once a plan has been formally written, teachers will implement it accordingly. While implementing the plan, teachers watch and listen to determine if the curriculum was effective. They will watch how children respond to the activities, materials and resources, and how they interact with peers and the environment, and how they process new information. In essence, teachers are looking for “the light bulb to go off.” It is during the implementation step that the curriculum planning cycle begins again.

Think About It...Consider this Case Study

For the past few weeks, children in Miss Emily's class (ages 3-5 years) have been watching vegetables grow in a garden across the street. During lunchtime, Miss Emily heard the children talking about what they had for lunch. Later in the day, the children watched the sprinklers water the yard and ask the teacher about how the water gets to the sprinklers to water the grass. While playing outside at the sensory table, four children are fascinated with pouring and dumping water into pipes and seeing how far it can travel.



[Image](#) by Nathan Lipscomb is in the public domain.

Observation: Lucas is somewhat cautious in joining others in play. He stands to the side and watches others as they play.

Interpretation: Lucas appears to want to join the play, but may need just a little bit of support. I plan to watch for moments when he is on the sidelines of play, and find ways to invite him into the social play, and stay with him to support him in his encounters with the other children.

Questions to Consider

- What can you infer about the children's interests?
- What can you infer about their knowledge base?

It would be safe to say that these children understand that for plants to grow, you need to water them. It would also be safe to infer that the children are most likely interested in how water travels, as you observed their actions at the water table and their questions of where and how water gets to sprinkler systems. As an intentional teacher, with your observations, you would maybe consider doing your next unit on water systems where you can incorporate all developmental domains, based on the children's interests.

An important part of implementation is understanding differentiated instruction. According to Gordon and Browne (2016) when teachers can implement activities and materials to match the interests and skill level of each child, they are utilizing developmentally appropriate practices. For light bulbs to go off, intentional teachers must remember to "tailor what is taught to what a child is ready and willing to learn."

When measuring development using assessments, it is important to consider the cultural relevance of the assessment. Does the assessment allow for children who speak multiple languages or those who do not have a familiarity with classroom materials? Imagine, for instance, that your assessment uses American football as examples. What happens when you have a child in your class who has just moved from India? Will her assessment be meaningful if she doesn't understand the rules of American football? Teachers can be mindful of such differences when assessing children. The best way to stay informed about cultural practices is to develop reciprocal communication and strong relationships with families.

Evaluate: How Did It Go?

Once you have planned your curriculum, gathered your materials, set up your environment, and implemented your activities, you will need to observe, document, and interpret the interactions so that you can evaluate and plan for the next step. Based on whether the children mastered the goals, expectations, and met the learning outcomes will determine your next step. For example, if the children can quickly and easily complete the task, you may have to consider adding more steps or extending the activity to challenge the children. If some children were unable to complete the task or appeared uninterested, you may consider how to better scaffold their learning either through peer interactions or by redefining the steps to complete the activity. As you evaluate your implemented activities here are some questions that you want to think about:

- How did the child approach the activity and how long did the child stay engaged?
- What problem-solving strategies did the child use?
- Did the child follow the intended directions or find alternative approaches?
- Who did the child interact with?

Based on your answers, you will decide on what is in the child's best interest and how to proceed moving forward.



[The Integrated Nature of Learning](#) by the [CDE](#) is used with permission.

Early childhood educators use assessments to showcase critical information about a child's growth and development. As suggested by Gordon and Brown (2016) "Children are evaluated because teachers and parents want to know what the children are learning." It is important to note that "assessment is not testing" (Gordon, 2016).

Assessment is, however, a critical part of a high-quality early childhood program and is used to:

- Provide a record of growth in all developmental areas: cognitive, physical/motor, language, social-emotional, and approaches to learning.
- Identify children who may need additional support and determine if there is a need for intervention or support services.
- Help educators plan individualized instruction for a child or for a group of children that are at the same stage of development.
- Identify the strengths and weaknesses within a program and information on how well the program meets the goals and needs of the children.
- Provide a common ground between educators and parents or families to use in collaborating on a strategy to support their child.



Reflect

What is assessment and why is it important? Imagine describing this to someone else in your own words.

The key to a good assessment is observation. Whether you obtain your observation evidence through spontaneous or planned observations, it is suggested that you document your observations by utilizing various tools and techniques (e.g. running records, anecdotal notes, checklists, frequency counts, work

samples, learning stories). As teachers watch children in natural settings, they can gather evidence that can then be used to track a child's learning, growth, and development throughout the school year. To start the assessment process, here is a road map for you to follow:

- **Step 1:** Gather Baseline Data
- **Step 2:** Monitor Each Child's Progress
- **Step 3:** Have a Systematic Plan in Place

Let's look at each step more closely.

Step 1. Establish a Baseline

Before you can assess a child's development, you must get to know your child. The first step is to gather "baseline" information. Through ongoing observation, you learn about each child's strengths, interests, and skills. While observing you may also uncover a child's unique learning styles, needs, or possible barriers that may limit them from optimal learning opportunities. For example, you may notice that when a child arrives in the morning, they tend to sit quietly at the table, and they don't engage with other children or join in play activities. As you track the behavior, you begin to see a pattern that when a teacher sits with the child and they read a story together, the child warms up much faster than when left alone. Baseline information provides you with a starting point that can help you build a respectful relationship with each child in your class.

Step 2. Monitor Progress

"The goal of observing children is to understand them better" (Gordon & Browne, 2016, p.119). Observations help guide our decisions, inform our practices, and help us to develop a plan of action that best fits each child's individual needs. With every observation, we can begin to see how all the pieces fit together to make the **whole child**. To successfully monitor a child's progress, we must look at the following:

- The child's social interactions
- The child's play preferences
- How the child handles their feelings and emotions
- The timeframe in which the child masters developmental milestones
- How the child processes information and is able to move onto to the next activity or level

With each observation, you gather more information and more evidence that can be used to assess the child's development.

Step 3. A Systematic Plan

Once you have gathered an array of evidence, it is time to organize it. There are two different types of assessment systems:

1. Program-developed child assessment tools are developed to align with a specific program's philosophy and curriculum.
2. Published child assessment tools have been researched and tested and are accepted as a credible source in assessing children's development.

Forms of Assessment

Whichever system is in place at your program, you will need to be trained accordingly. In this section, we will highlight the use of portfolios and learning stories as well as discuss the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP, 2015) as featured assessment systems that can be used to track a child's development.

Portfolios help teachers organize all the work samples, anecdotal notes, checklists, and learning stories that they have been collected for each child throughout the school year. A portfolio is similar to a traditional photograph album, but it is much more than an album. A portfolio is "an intentional compilation of materials and resources collected over time" (Gordon and Browne, 2016, p. 112). A portfolio is not an assessment tool in and of itself, it is a collection written observation notes for each photo and work sample. The evidence clearly documents a child's progression over time. Portfolios are important tools in helping to facilitate a partnership between teachers and parents. During conferences, teachers can showcase the portfolio as they share anecdotes of the child's progress. Parents (and children) enjoy seeing all the achievements and chronological growth that has occurred during the school year.

Digital portfolios or e-Portfolios are trending now as technology has become more accessible. Not only do e-Portfolios enable teachers to document children's activities faster, but teachers can also now post information and communicate with families on a regular basis, rather than waiting until the end of the school year for a traditional family conference.

What are the strengths of portfolios?

- Information in a portfolio is organized in a chronological order
- Portfolios promote a shared approach to decision making that can include the parent and child and teacher.
- Portfolios do not have the same constraints and narrow focus as standardized tests.
- Portfolios help teachers to keep track of a child's development over time
- Portfolios can help teachers develop richer relationships with the children in their classroom

What are the limitations of portfolios?

- To create and maintain a portfolio requires a large investment of time and energy
- Currently, there are no valid grading criteria to evaluate portfolios since outcomes can vary from one child to another
- Maintaining objectivity can be challenging

Learning Stories are written records that document what a teacher has observed a child doing. It becomes an actual learning story when the teacher adds his or her interpretation of the child's dispositions toward learning - such as grit, courage, curiosity, and perseverance. The story may be as short as one paragraph or as long as one page. Much like an anecdotal record, teachers observe and document brief moments as a child engages with peers or completes a task. With the learning story, however, the teacher connects learning goals and highlights developmental milestones that the child is mastering. With learning stories, teachers tend to focus on what the child can do rather than what they can't do. With almost all learning stories, teachers will take photographs (or video) to include with the written story.

What are the strengths of learning stories?

- By listening to, observing, and recording children's explorations, you send them a clear message that you value their ideas and thinking.
- As the teacher shares the Learning Story with the child, the child has the opportunity to reflect on his or her own development, thinking, and learning.
- The whole class can listen and participates in each other's stories and ideas.
- Learning stories provide parents with insight into how teachers plan for their children's learning.
- Parents uncover that teachers are thoughtful and continuous learners.
- Learning Stories encourage families and children to talk about school experiences.
- Learning Stories showcase how powerful and capable children really are

What are the limitations of learning stories?

- The quality of the learning story depends on the teacher's own subjectivity (ie: viewpoints, values, and feelings towards the child)
- Learning stories provide only a small snapshot of a child's learning.
- It takes time to write a learning story (teachers may only be able to write 1 or 2 stories per month) and critics argue that this may limit the amount of information a teacher will need to truly track a child's development
- Because learning stories are relatively new, there aren't official guidelines on how often to write learning stories and what exactly they should be included
- Learning stories are written up after the event or interaction has actually happened - so teachers need to have a good and accurate memory!

Ages and Stages Questionnaires is a developmental screening tool used widely in Washington State. This system provides reliable, developmental and social-emotional screening for children between birth and age 6. The system includes training for staff administering the assessment and it's conducted with input from the family. [Learn more about it here.](#)



Reflect

What are your thoughts about using portfolios, learning stories, and the Ages and Stages? Which are you most drawn to? Why?

Attributions

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