

Thinking about observations, assessment and planning

As part of the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage we are told: “Practitioners must consider the individual needs, interest, and stage of development of each child in their care, and must use this information to plan a challenging and enjoyable experience for each child in all areas of learning and development.” EYFS 2017, page 9 1.6.

“Ongoing assessment is an integral part of the learning and development process. It involves practitioners observing children to understand their level of achievement, interest and learning styles and to then shape learning experiences for each child reflecting those observations.” EYFS 2017 page 13 2.1

Why do we carry out written observations about young children?

As practitioners, our observation, assessment and planning will support children’s development and learning. The process or cycle of observation, assessment and planning starts with observing children, in order to understand and consider their current interests, development and learning.

Observation describes the process of watching the children in our care, listening to them and taking note of what we see and hear. Observation is the formal term for one of the most important aspects of day-to-day professional practice when working with children of all ages. It is how we find out the specific needs of individual children

by carefully looking, listening and noting the activities of a child or group of children.



Observation allows us to see a child as an individual, a principle which must underpin our work. Without observation, overall planning would simply be based on what we felt was important, fun or interesting (or all three) but it might not necessarily meet the needs of the children in our care. Carrying out regular observations is vital because it ensures that we put the child at the centre of our practice. We can discover what new skills and abilities emerge over time through observation. When, for example; a baby is able

to sit up steadily, or a young child can pour their own drink, think about somebody else’s feelings, assign meanings to the marks they have made on paper, or ride a bicycle without stabilisers, we can make a brief record of this progress. It is important to try and jot this down (where possible) as it is happening, in order to get a true recording of language etc. before it goes out of your head!

Observation enables us to identify each child’s likes and dislikes and their responses to different situations such as care routines or new people. We can find out which experiences, routines or activities a child seems to enjoy or to find difficult, and any that seem to make them anxious. Observation helps us assess children’s progress or the specific care and learning needs of each child. From our observations we can then plan ‘next steps’ in children’s development and learning.

Looking, listening, recording and thinking all require the need for objectivity: not allowing preconceptions to influence what you have observed. For example, you may have concerns that a child does not communicate very often, but keeping an open mind about this will mean you are more likely to gather better evidence to either support or clear up your concerns. You may find that although the child is often very

quiet, she is using body language that is being ignored, that she communicates well with peers but not with adults, or that certain activities or interactions seem to make communication easier or harder for her. Your observations will also help you recognise the child's needs more accurately and to identify if there is any cause for concern. Each child's emotional well-being has a very strong influence on the way the child develops; including their ability to learn, to communicate, their behaviour, their curiosity and their ability to cope with new experiences.

Frequency of observations

Observations, both written and photographic, help us to assess and track the children's progress. The EYFS does not specify the frequency or the type of observation. We have given you some templates for presenting observations, but you could create your own. Childminders ask how often they should do an observation. This is a matter of judgement dependant on how much time the child is in your care, the age of the child, and the rate of change. It is important that a childminder understands what exactly makes a good observation opportunity, the 'wow' factor, particularly within the first two years of life when learning is profound and rapid. Although it may be impractical to record all of the observations that we see, we are still using this information to be able to provide a meaningful environment in which the children are enabled to meet their full potential. Remember parents are a vital link in helping us to understand the child; it is important that we facilitate the two way flow of information!

Quality more than quantity!

Consider that written observations need to be objective and informative rather than subjective (a matter of opinion). To give an example of a subjective statement which really needs to be expanded..."Joe was happy playing in the sand". We need to deepen our observation here: can we be more specific about how we know Joe was happy? What actually was Joe doing? Was Joe interacting, watching or copying the other children in the sand?

We also need to be careful when recording the observation, making sure this is a 'telling' observation; where there is enough description to make it clear about what actually transpired, without any misinterpretation or assumption about what is actually taking place, in terms of the child's learning. "Jack counted to ten".... but did Jack count in the right sequence and including all the numbers. This does not mean however that you have to write reams of information - just enough detail to make an accurate description of the learning.



Photographs to support observations

Taking photographs can be a powerful way of illustrating your observations of children and a help in planning. Parents appreciate being able to see what their child is doing when in your care, photographs celebrate children's achievements and furthermore they provide solid evidence of your work at inspection time (although use of photographs is not an Ofsted requirement).

Despite all the benefits of taking photographs please be careful how you use photographs when it comes to observations: they should enhance a written

observation, not replace it. Sometimes in order to get the perfect shot, you may miss the opportunity to record a child's speech, body language and action, which cannot be captured in the photograph. The lack of description will make the photograph less valuable in terms of helping you plan for that child.

Assessment

Using observations to track development on the Assessment Sheet

Using your observation you can track a child's progress on the *Assessment Sheet/tracking proforma*. With the overview of a child's progress captured on the *Assessment Sheet*, this will help you to plan a child's next developmental steps. The *Assessment Sheet* will also help you to notice if there are any gaps in your provision for a child – you may notice that you lack observations for a particular area of learning and development. It is important that the assessment sheet is not used as a tick list: you will need to be able to back up the statements that you have highlighted as having been achieved with specific observations.

The EYFS recognises that children will not necessarily progress sequentially through the stages: each child's progress is individual to them and they all develop at different rates. It is therefore important that childminders are sensitive to that range or variation in the rate and sequence of child development. If you observe that a child appears to be developing at a slower pace in any area/areas you can consult with the SENCO for childminders. Please see EYFS page 9 1.6 and the government document on the Two Year Progress Check called *A Know How Guide – The EYFS progress check* which you can find on the Foundation Years website.

All about me

A suggested proforma which you can use to help you begin to assess children and build a working relationship with parents is *All about me* is for new starters. *All about me* can be filled in with or by the parents to help you prepare for their child's needs as they transition from home to your setting. *All about me* sheet will help you to start to collect information about a child's development. After a number of weeks in your setting (it can take a while), you will have gathered enough information, from your own observations and from talking to the parent, to establish 'starting points' in the child's development. You can use the *Assessment/tracking sheet* to record those 'starting points'

Establishing a starting point on entry to you setting, will enable you to demonstrate, both to parents and to Ofsted, how you have supported the child's progress, that is, the impact of you teaching (remember 'teaching' here does not mean formal teaching!)

You can use the *Summary/review of a child's development* as and when you think it would be useful to share with parents– perhaps once a year, and you may only wish to use one side of the proforma, to summarise the child's development in the prime areas of learning and development. It is not a requirement to assess children until they reach two years of age, however, it is good practice to review children's achievements every so often, as it gives you a chance to share achievements with parents and allow them to contribute information about the child's learning at home.

Liaising with parents in this way is known to be an effective support for a child's development. Occasional summaries or reviews of development also provide strong evidence at time of inspection, of how you work in partnership with parents.

Planning

Using observations, assessments, and any other evidence of learning, we can reflect on the gathered evidence of learning (remember that in addition to our observations we can collate other samples of the child's learning; mark making, information from parents, photographs). Through this reflection we can then decide how we can help the child further; this process is known as '**next steps**' or '**planning**'. Planning should be individual to each child, thinking about; how we could vary or extend the activity, how we could reinforce the newly acquired skill (children learn through repetition), how we can make use of resources, the local environment and of amenities to further the child's learning, and so on. Think about what it is that you would do instinctively - planning for increments in learning which are appropriate for that child. For example, the plan for a baby who has just started rolling over could be to put toys slightly out of reach in order to encourage the baby's coordination and intention.

Planning and the learning intention

You may plan to include vocabulary such as introducing more descriptive language or introducing mathematical concepts (size, weight, big, small). You may plan opportunities for the child: responding to instructions; developing fine motor skills; developing manipulative skills (maybe through filling, pouring, emptying); developing critical thinking (how problems may be solved). You may plan to offer more opportunity to share toys; to take turns, to make choices and decisions and to develop curiosity.

With each of these planned 'next steps' you should consider the 'learning intention' and that will help you to recognise which of the EYFS areas of learning and development will, potentially, be progressed.

Thinking about the 'learning intention' will help you plan more effectively!

It is important that we recognise the child's own interests and include the child's own ideas. For example, a child of fourteen months has chosen to play with the 'farm'. He is picking up a cow, mooing. The childminder observes this, and then plans 'next steps' taking account of the child's individual interests. This planning might include; a visit to a real farm, reading books, singing songs and rhymes about animals, or providing creative opportunities such as painting and gluing. Planning will ensure that resources reflect the age of that particular child while offering the other minded children animal related activities to reflect their stage of development.



Feedback from parents can help inform your planning at any time.

Long term planning

It is not advisable to come up with plans that cover a period of months where a range of activities, topics or themes have already been mapped out. The origin of any activity should stem from the child's observed interest - how do we know what a child

would be interested in a few months time? Themes **can** have a place in planning, but only once we have noted an interest from the child. To maximise learning outcomes we could, however, plan a range of activities around a theme to maintain a child's growing interest and awareness. For example we have noticed that a 14month old is interested in animals, and so it is appropriate to create an animal theme in our planning.

Long term planning could take account of festivals and celebrations throughout the year ahead, but again this should not be rigidly implemented. Closer to the event to the plan should take account of the child's interests and stage of development.

The adult's role

Adults play a vital role in keeping the momentum for learning ongoing. The EYFS recognises that there are three 'characteristics of effective learning', which help children to get the best from their earliest experiences and opportunities. The characteristics are Playing and Exploring, Active Learning, and Creating and Thinking Critically. The support or development of these characteristics should be factored in when planning for each child - this will help create an enjoyable and appropriately challenging environment.

You should also think about the balance between adult led and child initiated activities. 'Adult led' is when you set up activity, and 'child initiated' is when the child independently chooses with what to play. The best environments have a good mix of child and adult led play, and when the practitioner understands when it is right to hang back and let children lead.

Sitting back and watching the play unfold will help the childminder think about how learning could be promoted. Think about sensitively joining them in their play and what interactions, comments or open questions you might use to help children make connections and develop their understanding of the world. Sensitive 'sustained shared thinking' helps children to explore ideas and concepts - this essentially means helping the child to develop their own ideas and thought processes, helping them to think through an idea and think of their own solutions to problems. Try to build on what the child already knows and ask open ended questions such as "how do you think we can do this?", "what do you think we might need?", "what do you think might happen?"

