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OBSERVING

What Is observing?

Observing is a way of gathering information. It is a natural human activity; the moment we are born, we start to look, listen, smell, taste and feel everything. This information gathering continues throughout our lives, because it helps us learn about our world and understand what is happening around us.

As a way of gathering information, observing plays a pivotal role for early childhood educators. Educators **look** and **listen** (and sometimes taste, smell and feel, but this is more rare) as they move through each day, in an effort to gather as much significant **observational data** as possible.

What constitutes **significant data**? This is actually quite a complex question and the answer depends on a variety of factors. In fact, it is the individual observers who decide what is significant by taking into consideration such things as the goal of their observations, the development of the child or children being observed, the physical setting, the time of day or period of the year, and many other factors.

For example, one educator might consider it significant that a specific child is using a certain skill for the first time, while another educator might want to record the fact that a child is still exhibiting a specific behaviour

after a period of many months. As well, an educator might consider it significant that a child has not yet mastered a specific skill, or even that a child is no longer exhibiting certain behaviour or behaviours. Each of the 200 short video clips featured on this site presents examples of the behaviours, interactions, incidents, etc., which early childhood educators would consider significant.

Why do early childhood educators observe?

The most important reason why educators observe is to **get to know the children** in their care. By having a deep understanding of each child as a unique individual, educators can identify and respond to each child's needs.

Educators also observe so they can get to know **parents, co-workers and even themselves**. As well, educators observe their **surroundings**. For example, educators might look and listen in order to gather information about their classrooms, and how they influence the behaviour of the children and adults that use them.

How do early childhood educators use their observations?

Primarily, educators use the information they gather through their observations to make decisions. Gathering information is actually just one step in a larger . Educators observe, then analyze their observations, then plan their responses. [Click here](#) to access a separate page dedicated to analyzing observations.

As they implement their plans, educators observe the outcomes of their decisions, then analyze their findings, then make new plans. In this way, the cycle is repeated over and over again. Although a full discussion of the types of decisions that educators make is beyond the scope of this website, it is important to at least note that these decisions can take many forms. To name just a few examples, an educator might use his/her observations and analysis to plan an individual intervention with a specific child, to make decisions about how best to share observational data with a parent, to adjust the furniture in the classroom, or to plan the curriculum for the coming week.

How do early childhood educators observe?

Educators take a professional approach to the task of observing by using specific methods and tools to record their observations. Educators do not simply rely on their memories because it is too easy to forget important details or to get confused. Furthermore, educators recognize the importance of objectivity. [Click here](#) for a more complete discussion of this concept.

The most popular methods for recording observations are [anecdotal records](#), [running records](#), [ABC records](#), [tally sampling](#) and [checklists/rating scales](#). Each of these methods is discussed in detail along with examples.

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POSITIVE LANGUAGE

What is positive language?

When educators use positive language to write their observations, it means they are recording the details of what happened, instead of recording that the details of something that didn't happen. Using positive language is especially important when writing qualitative observations like anecdotes, running records and ABC records.

How do I stay positive when I record my observations?

As much as possible in your observations, try to avoid words like "didn't," "can't," "won't," "not," etc. Often, recording in this type of detail will take longer and may require one or two extra sentences.

While it may seem easier and quicker to use phrases that contain these negative words; when you do, you are "robbing" your observations of important details about what did happen, how something happened or even how nothing happened!

Why is positive language important?

By using positive words and phrases in your observations, you are making your writing more descriptive, and this will be helpful for analyzing your observations and coming up with strategies to support development and learning.

For example, if you record: “Piper didn’t kick the ball properly,” it will be quite challenging to come up with specific strategies to help Piper learn to kick more successfully.

But if you write: “Piper pulled back her right leg, swung it towards the ball and her foot swished through the air above the ball,” you have a much better starting point for your analysis.

Example of positive language

Here are two anecdotal records that describe the same event ([see clip](#)).

The anecdote on the left is written using negative language.

The anecdote on the right is more detailed and is written using positive language.

Suzanne asked Errald if he was playing with the trains and he didn't answer.

As she lowered him to the floor, Suzanne asked Errald "Are you playing with trains? Are you playing trains?" Errald silently snuggled in to Suzanne's arms, laying his left cheek against her shoulder.

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