OUT OF THE BOX

Training™

Early Childhood Training Kit
from Exchange

Observation: The Primary Tool in Assessment/ To See Each Child with Wisdom, Humor, and Heart

What's In This Kit?

This training kit is designed to introduce teachers to using observation as the primary tool in gathering evidence of developmental growth and to develop skills in doing so. It contains:

- Expected educational outcomes
- Preparation instructions
- Training strategies and tips
- Implementation steps
- Follow-up activities for teachers
- Follow-up activities for administrators/directors
- Learning assessment
- Training evaluation/further needs assessment
- A resource list
- The articles "Observation: The Primary Tool in Assessment" by Kay Stritzel Rencken and "To See Each Child with Wisdom, Humor, and Heart" by Sally Cartwright
- A training certificate to award to teachers for attendance and participation
- A certificate for the trainer and other presenters

Who's the Target Audience?

The target audiences for this kit are beginning and intermediate teachers of children from birth to age 8. Teachers will learn how to use observation as a source of information about developmental growth.

Teacher Skill Level

beginning	intermediate	advanced
●	●	

Children's Age Level

infants	toddlers	preschoolers	school-agers	birth to 8
				●

Kit Timeline:

Preparation time for this kit is estimated at 1.0 hour. Implementation time is estimated at 1.5 hours.

Training Outcomes:

1. Teachers will explain the importance of observing, recording, and sharing information.
2. Teachers will plan curriculum based on group as well as individual needs based on the information gathered through observation.
3. Teachers will plan activities that allow opportunities for the teacher to be an "outside observer" and a "participant observer."
4. Teachers will distinguish between testing and observation.
5. Teachers will practice using different strategies for observing and taking observation notes.

These training outcomes address the following American standards:

- 2.A.01-03, 2.A.05, 3.B.02, 4.B.02-08, and 3.E.04 of the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Performance Criteria (2005), www.naeyc.org.
- 1, 3, 4a, 4b, and 4d of NAEYC Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation, Initial Licensure Level (2003), www.naeyc.org.
- 1304. 21(c)(1)(I-iv) and 1304.21(c)(2) of Head Start Performance Standards (Federal Register, Nov. 5, 1996, Volume 61, Number 215), www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ohs/.
- E1, E2, and E4 of the National Accreditation Commission for Early Care and Education Programs, National Association of Child Care Professionals (2005), www.naccp.org.

You may want to take the time now to locate additional state and local standards that relate to this topic or requirements of other regulatory bodies specific to your program. Add those to this plan to personalize it.

Preparation:

1. Read the articles "Observation: The Primary Tool in Assessment" by Kay Stritzel Rencken and "To See Each Child with Wisdom, Humor, and Heart" by Sally Cartwright. Locate and read any of the following resources to support an understanding of the topic:

Benjamin, A. C. (1994). "Observation in Early Childhood Classrooms: Advice from the Field." *Young Children, 49*(6): 14-20.

Cooney, M. (November/December, 1997). Observing Children's Play. *Exchange, 118,* 57-60.

Curtis, D., & Carter, M. (2000). *The Art of Awareness: How Observation Can Transform Your Teaching.* St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

Dodge, D. T., Heroman, C., Charles, J., & Maiorca, J. (2004). Beyond Outcomes: How Ongoing Assessment Supports Children's Learning and Leads to Meaningful Curriculum. *Young Children, 59*(1), 20-28.

Dombro, A., Jablon, J., & Dichtelmiler, M. (September/October, 2000). The Power of Observation. *Exchange, 135,* 22-25.

Epstein, A. (September/October, 2000). Measuring the Quality of Early Childhood Programs. *Exchange, 147,* 66-69.

Feld, J. K., & Bergan, K. S. (July/August, 2002). Assessment Tools for the 21st Century. *Exchange, 146,* 62-65

Jones, J. (2004). Framing the Assessment Discussion. *Young Children, 59*(1): 14-18.

Losardo, A., & Notari-Syverson, A. (2001). *Alternative Approaches to Assessing Young Children.* Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

National Association for the Education of Young Children and National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE). (2003). Joint Position Statement. *Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation: Building an Effective, Accountable System in Programs for Children Birth through Age 8.* Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Santos, R. M. (2004). Ensuring Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Assessment of Young Children. *Young Children, 59*(1): 48-50.

2. Read through the entire training kit to familiarize yourself with the kit's design, implementation, handouts, etc.
3. Duplicate and distribute the articles for teachers to read before the training session. Duplicate Handout 1: *Pre-Training Assignment,* Handout 2: *Emily's Observation*, and Handout 3: *Using Observations.*
4. Collect the supplies and materials needed for this session including flip chart paper, markers, and photographs of children participating in regular classroom activities in the indoor and outdoor environment.
5. Collect samples of a variety of different ways for teachers to take observation notes. Some examples might be Post-It® note pads, blank notebook paper, small spiral bound notebooks, flip chart size paper to attach the back of a door, notebooks on a necklace or lanyard, etc.
6. Create Flip Chart 1: *Top 10 Ways to Make Time for Observation.* You will need as many copies of the flip chart as small groups of 4-5 teachers.
7. Duplicate the learning assessment and the certificate of attendance and participation.

Training Strategy:

- Small group activities

Training Tip: For some topics, it is helpful to have teachers prepare in advance of the training session to provide a common starting place. In order to consider observation as the primary tool in assessment and support seeing each child as unique, teachers will benefit from observing before the training session and then using their own observations to consider the topic further. You will want to give teachers adequate time and a reminder or two so that they come prepared to this training session with the requested observation notes.

Another Training Tip: Round robin reporting is a technique to quickly share the work completed in small group activities. This training strategy begins with one small group's spokesperson listing one idea generated by the group. Then, the second group's spokesperson reports one additional but different idea. Continue in round robin format with each reporter offering only those ideas that have not been mentioned previously. The result is a fairly quick summary of the work completed in the small groups.

Implementation:

1. Both Rencken and Cartwright talk about observation as a way to see children and understand their development. Distribute Handout 2: *Emily's Observation.* Divide teachers into small groups by teaching teams. Ask them to read the vignette and then to glean a list of the things Emily knows and can do based on the information in the vignette.
2. Reconvene the large group and facilitate a summary discussion about the rich information available from the written observation note. Make sure to point out that the observation allows teachers to see children's developmental skills and behavior in all domains of development.
3. Next, summarize that, according to these articles, observation is a primary tool in child assessment. Further, gathering observation information can be embedded into the teacher's daily activities, although finding the time may be a challenge for teachers. Then divide teachers into small groups to discuss making time for observation. Ask each group to make a Top 10 List of ways to make time for observation using Flip Chart 1: *Top 10 Ways to Make Time for Observation.*
4. Reconvene the large group and report the Top 10 List using round robin reporting (see Training Tip).

5. The next step is deciding on a technique or strategy for recording observations. Show teachers the display of ideas you collected, pointing out the advantages and disadvantages of each strategy. Encourage teachers to experiment with different techniques to see which ones work in what situations.
6. Then, explore ways to use the observation notes. Divide teachers into small groups by teaching teams. Ask teachers to start by re-reading the 2 observation notes written as a pre-training assignment. Then, ask teachers to share their notes with each other. After reading each other's notes, ask teachers to use Handout 3: *Using Observations* to consider how the observation information might be used. Ask teachers to begin by considering the observations they completed for the training session, then move on to talk about each other's observations and how they might be used.
7. Reconvene the large group and facilitate a summary discussion of using observation notes in different ways. During this discussion, ask teachers to suggest a minimum number of observations that they think are needed to inform their work. Conclude the discussion by supporting teachers in taking and using observation notes to inform the assessment process.
8. Distribute the certificates of attendance and participation.

Follow-up Activities for Teachers:

1. Experiment with the different strategies for recording observation notes.
2. Make a footnote on observation notes that indicates how you used the note (shared with parents, used to modify curriculum, etc.). Use the information to evaluate how well your observation notes are supporting your teaching.

Follow-up Activities for Administrators/Directors:

Help teachers remember to make and use observation notes by creating opportunities for teachers to share notes, talk about their significance and usefulness, and reflect upon ways to use the notes to improve teaching practice.

Learning Assessment:

Ask teachers to complete the learning assessment to validate their understanding of the topic.

Training Evaluation/Further Needs Assessment:

Ask teachers to complete the evaluation. Use the results to evaluate the effectiveness of the training and to identify further training needs.

What's Next?

If the training evaluation and further needs assessment indicates that your staff needs further training in observation, take a look at the remainder of the kits in the Observation, Assessment, and Documentation category of Out of the Box Early Childhood Training Kits. For a complete list, go to www.ChildCareExchange.com.

Resources:

Benjamin, A. C. (1994). Observation in Early Childhood Classrooms: Advice from the Field. *Young Children, 49*(6): 14-20.

Cartwright, S. (November/December, 1996). To See Each Child with Wisdom, Humor, and Heart. *Exchange, 112,* 53-56.

Cooney, M. (November/December, 1997). Observing Children's Play. *Exchange, 118,* 57-60.

Cartwright, S. (September/October, 1994). When We Really See the Child. *Exchange, 99,* 5-7.

Curtis, D., & Carter, M. (2000). *The Art of Awareness: How Observation Can Transform Your Teaching.* St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

Dodge, D. T., Heroman, C., Charles, J., & Maiorca, J. (2004). Beyond Outcomes: How Ongoing Assessment Supports Children's Learning and Leads to Meaningful Curriculum. *Young Children, 59*(1), 20-28.

Dombro, A., Jablon, J., & Dichtelmiler, M. (September/October, 2000). The Power of Observation. *Exchange, 135,* 22-25.

Epstein, A. (September/October, 2000). Measuring the Quality of Early Childhood Programs. *Exchange, 147,* 66-69.

Feld, J. K., & Bergan, K. S. (July/August, 2002). Assessment Tools for the 21st Century. *Exchange, 146,* 62-65.

Jones, J. (2004). Framing the Assessment Discussion. *Young Children, 59*(1): 14-18.

Losardo, A., & Notari-Syverson, A. (2001). *Alternative Approaches to Assessing Young Children.* Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

National Association for the Education of Young Children and National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE). (2003). Joint Position Statement. *Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation: Building an Effective, Accountable System in Programs for Children Birth through Age 8.* Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Santos, R. M. (2004). Ensuring Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Assessment of Young Children. *Young Children, 59*(1): 48-50.

*You can purchase *Exchange* articles at **www.ChildCareExchange.com**.

Handout 1
Pre-Training Assignment:
Observation: The Primary Tool in Assessment/
To See Each Child With Wisdom, Humor, and Heart

In preparation for the training session on observation and assessment, please complete 2 observation notes using the example from Sally Cartwright's article (second page of article) as a starting place. Bring the observation notes to the training session.

Date: _____ Time: _____

Location: _____ Observer: _____

Notes:

Handout 1
Pre-Training Assignment: (cont.)
Observation: The Primary Tool in Assessment/ To See Each Child With Wisdom, Humor, and Heart

In preparation for the training session on observation and assessment, please complete 2 observation notes using the example from Sally Cartwright's article (second page of article) as a starting place. Bring the observation notes to the training session.

Date: _____ Time: _____

Location: _____ Observer: _____

Notes:

Handout 2
Emily's Observation:
Observation: The Primary Tool in Assessment/
To See Each Child With Wisdom, Humor, and Heart

10/10/95, 9:15, large block dramatic play area (names changed). *Emily, aged four years and seven months (4.7), vigorously rolls an imaginary pie crust with an invisible roller. Ann, 4.1, having finally gotten her baby to sleep, comes over to chat. Suddenly Emily looks up, listening. She puts down her unseen roller, signs "wait" to Ann, and leaves her hastily-built kitchen. She slips by three painters at the wall easel, around the large unit block area, past Don driving nails into the nailing stump, past the 'cut, paste, and puzzles,' and onward to the reading corner, where she steps over two pairs of legs, whose small owners are busily "reading" a picture book together. Emily picks up a pretend phone, listens, nods, and lays the "receiver" down. She steps back over the legs and out of the reading corner, edges by the table work and Don's raised hammer, skirts the block area and the easels, returns to her kitchen, and says, "It's for you."*

What Emily Knows	*Developmental Domain*	*What Emily Can Do*	*Developmental Domain*

Handout 3
Using Observations: Observation: The Primary Tool in Assessment

Observation Notes	Share with parents and family members	Use for curriculum planning	Use for schedule planning/modification	Use for making informed decisions about Children's development and underlying child development and or educational theories	Learn about myself and teaching skills and abilities	Raises questions to explore	Include as example in parent/family conferences	Consider modeling and coaching as an observer/participant	Use for curriculum planning				
Pre-assignment note 1													
Pre-assignment note 2													

Flip Charts
Observation: The Primary Tool in Assessment/ To See Each Child With Wisdom, Humor, and Heart

Flip Chart #1

Top 10 Ways to Make Time for Observation

Learning Assessment
Observation: The Primary Tool

Name_____

Date_____

1. Observing and recording behaviors of young children provide a way to
    a. Identify what children know and can do
    b. Chart developmental growth
    c. Make decisions about planning curriculum and future learning
    d. B & C
    e. All of the above

2. Illustrate 2 differences between observation and testing with examples from your teaching expereince.

3. According to the article, what is an outcome of being a participant observer?
    a. Being a friend to your children
    b. Putting theory into practice or finding theory to support practice
    c. Providing opportunities to test children's content knowledge
    d. None of the above

4. Which of these is an issue concerning testing of young children?
    a. Age appropriateness of the test
    b. Subjectivity of the test
    c. "Teaching to the test"
    d. Competency of the test administrators
    e. All of the above

5. True or False: Sharing records with families that clearly indicates how a teacher knows and understands their child helps to build strong relationships between parents and teachers.

6. List 3 ways to find/make opportunities to observe.

Learning Assessment Evaluation Rubric
Observation: The Primary Tool

1. Observing and recording behaviors of young children provide a way to:
    a. Identify what children know and can do
    b. Chart developmental growth
    c. Make decisions about planning curriculum and future learning
    d. B & C
    e. All of the above

2. Illustrate 2 differences between observation and testing with examples from your teaching experience.

    Accept any thoughtful answer that identifies differences mentioned in the articles.

3. According to the article, what is an outcome of being a participant observer?
    a. Being a friend to your children
    b. Putting theory into practice or finding theory to support practice
    c. Providing opportunities to test children's content knowledge
    d. None of the above

4. Which of these is an issue concerning testing of young children?
    a. Age appropriateness of the test
    b. Subjectivity of the test
    c. "Teaching to the test"
    d. Competency of the test administrators
    e. All of the above

5. ***True*** or False: Sharing observation records with families that clearly indicate how teachers came to know and understand their child helps to build strong relationships between parents and teachers.

6. List 3 ways to find/make opportunities to observe.

Photograph by Francis Wardle

Observation: The Primary Tool in Assessment

by Kay Stritzel Rencken

"Most teachers want to know more about their students . . . what engages and interests them . . . we want to be more effective" (Ayres, 1993, p. 33). Observing and recording the behaviors of young children on a consistent basis helps to do this. Teachers will never know the complexity of the student but will have pieces of the puzzle — hopefully enough pieces so that a picture of the student emerges. Knowing children provides a way to chart the growth and plan for the learning to come.

Assessment, "the process of observing, recording, and otherwise documenting the work children do and how they do it, as a basis for a variety of educational decisions that affect the child, including planning for groups and individual children and communicating with parents . . . requires teachers to observe and analyze regularly what the children are doing in light of the content goals and the learning processes" (NAEYC, 1992, p. 10). NAEYC also lists the principles that should guide assessment for young children. An early childhood educator needs to be versed in these principles.

Learning to See the Whole Child

Observing young children requires the gathering of evidence of growth in a natural setting. An early childhood classroom is a familiar place where the child feels at ease in experimenting and exploring with blocks, various art media, writing, computers, puppets. This experimentation and exploration provides a rich storehouse of

Kay Stritzel Rencken is a kindergarten teacher at Borton Primary in Tucson Unified School District in Arizona and adjuct faculty at Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena, California, and is active in the Arizona AEYC.

observable information for the teacher skilled in gleaning it from the play that surrounds the child. Observing in this setting looks at the whole child — not fragments or skills that are out of context. When a child is counting to see how many friends are at school today, there is authenticity; but when asked to count objects for a test, the reason is absent.

One of the important benefits of doing observations is that teachers are viewing many components at the same time. Unlike standardized tests, which focus only on cognition, observations allow the teacher to see the whole child. The emotional, physical, social, and cultural dimensions of the child are equally important, especially with the younger child.

Finding/Making Opportunities to Observe

Early childhood teaching is a task that is filled with movement. Often teachers are doing ten tasks at the same time, moving from place to place, talking to children in the block, house, and writing centers. This view of perpetual motion pervades the profession. It is hard for many teachers to understand when they will find the time and how they can remain stationary and unobtrusive enough to observe the children. It requires a different mindset of the role of teaching young children. Observing and recording is just as crucial to good teaching as providing the setting, structuring the day, and planning the curriculum. Anne Benjamin (1993) gives many practical hints on how the teacher can effectively observe and record by planning what and when you observe, providing activities that don't directly involve the teacher, and having spots in the room that let teachers see and hear what is happening.

Teachers can also become skilled participant observers. They observe the development of a particular child or activity within the setting. These narrative observations often read like a story. They relate what happened during the day and are the basis for reflection and planning activities that will occur the next day. Teachers are full of stories of what happened in their room. These stories can be the basis of putting theory into practice or practice into theory as they are shared with other early childhood educators. These stories give voice to a group that has been silenced for far too long.

Keeping Records of Observations

Observing children often comes very easily. Teachers watch and remember what children are doing and how they accomplish the task. But observing without recording is only half of the picture. Teachers must find ways to keep all the information that they traditionally store in their heads. Insights are gained about who is being observed on a consistent basis. Stand-outs at either end of the spectrum are always remembered. Record keeping often reveals that some children are being observed more than the shy child or the invisible child or the child that is just minding to the business of playing and getting along. Careful records reveal information about the observer, such as preferences for certain centers of the room or certain times of the day. These insights offer the teacher an opportunity to broaden the perspective of the observations and record keeping.

Sharing Observations with Parents

Detailed records kept over time reveal growth in many areas. This can be shared with parents during formal and informal conferencing. Parents want to know more about their child's progress and they want to know that the teacher knows and understands their child. A good conference means that the adults are sharing the information about the growth and development of the child. It is a personal story that each shares with the other and is often done with laughter, concern, caring, and love. Most report cards and tests don't convey that the teacher really knows the child as good observational records do.

Using Observations for Planning

Detailed observational records are necessary to show the value of a curriculum that is based on children's needs. Planning begins with a knowledge of the age group and goals. Observation provides insights so that planning can be done to meet individual needs and evaluates the learning that takes place. Along the way, there are modifications made to meet individual and group needs and the cycle begins again.

Considering Assessment

We are living in an era when early childhood educators are being asked to subject their children to all sorts of tests to determine a variety of information for a variety of purposes. Many of these are good tests, as tests go, but most of them subject a child to time spent away from learning so that someone can quickly determine what they have learned or not learned.

Often tests focus on what the child does not know. They are designed to show areas of weakness. Good observations focus on what the child knows and document areas of strengths. Areas of concern are often closely linked to these strengths and are noted.

Many of the tests given to young children are not for their benefit but to:

- help fund programs;
- help train staff;
- provide jobs for the testers and companies that make them; and
- provide accountability statistics.

This is not to say that providing funds and training and accountability are necessarily bad, but there are other means of achieving the same results. Test results do not yield new information to the experienced observer.

Standardized testing is often not age appropriate. By definition, it is standardized and therefore for only a small portion of our children. Non-standardized tests are often very subjective. These tests and the time it takes to administer them are very costly.

Testing is very time consuming and takes time away from what a young child should be doing in a developmentally appropriate program. It also requires that time be spent after the testing to rebuild the child's self-esteem.

The issue of who administers the test is a two-edge sword. There is an ethical concern if the teacher is also the administrator of the test because, in testing lingo, she lacks the objectivity necessary. If an "outsider" who is unfamiliar to the child administers the test, the child probably will not be comfortable and will not perform as well.

These tests count for a disproportionate amount and matter a lot more to the adult than to the child. If funding or accountability are the reasons for a test, it matters more to the adult. If inclusion in gifted programs or a special preschool are the reasons, it matters more to the adult. Rarely does the test have meaning for the child.

Whenever there is widespread testing, there is also a phenomenon called "teaching to the test." This is not a new concept, but the fact that it is appearing in early childhood settings is new and alarming. Even the very best teachers who work to provide a play-based and developmentally appropriate setting are subject to this concept. Soon the test becomes the curriculum. This downward push of academic skills is not good early childhood education.

Early childhood educators are striving for professional recognition. In the past, we have had the view that we were not seen as "professional" as others. It was easy to cede the role of "expert" to people in other professions like psychologists, social workers, and physicians. They are experts in their field, but we are experts in ours! We know the children in our care because we observe them for many hours a day and watch how they react in a variety of settings, using many different tools, and working/playing with many different children and adults.

In order for teachers to resist the testing phenomenon, we must provide useful information about the growth and development of the children in our care. We must use our voices to articulate our observations as an integral tool of assessment in our classrooms. We must become proficient observers and recorders of the behaviors of young children. Observation is the root of all we do as teachers.

References

Ayres, W. *To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1993.

Benjamin, A. C. "Observations in Early Childhood Classrooms: Advice from the Field." *Young Children*, September 1993, pp. 14-20.

Bentzen, W. R. *Seeing Young Children: A Guide to Observing and Recording Behavior*. Albany, NY: Delmar Publishers, 1985.

Boehm, A. E. and R. A. Weinberg. *The Classroom Observer: Developing Observation Skills in Early Childhood Settings*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1987.

Bredekamp, S. and T. Rosegrant (editors). *Reaching Potentials: Appropriate Curriculum and Assessment for Young Children, Volume 1*. Washington, DC: NAEYC, 1992.

Bredekamp, S. and T. Rosegrant (editors). *Reaching Potentials: Transforming Early Childhood Curriculum and Assessment, Volume 2*. Washington, DC: NAEYC, 1995.

Cohen, D. and V. Stern. *Observing and Recording the Behavior of Young Children*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1978.

Genishi, C. *Ways of Assessing Children and Curriculum*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1992.

Kamii, C. *Achievement Testing in the Early Grades: The Games Grown-Ups Play*. Washington, DC: NAEYC, 1989.

Photograph by Subjects & Predicates

To See Each Child with Wisdom, Humor, and Heart

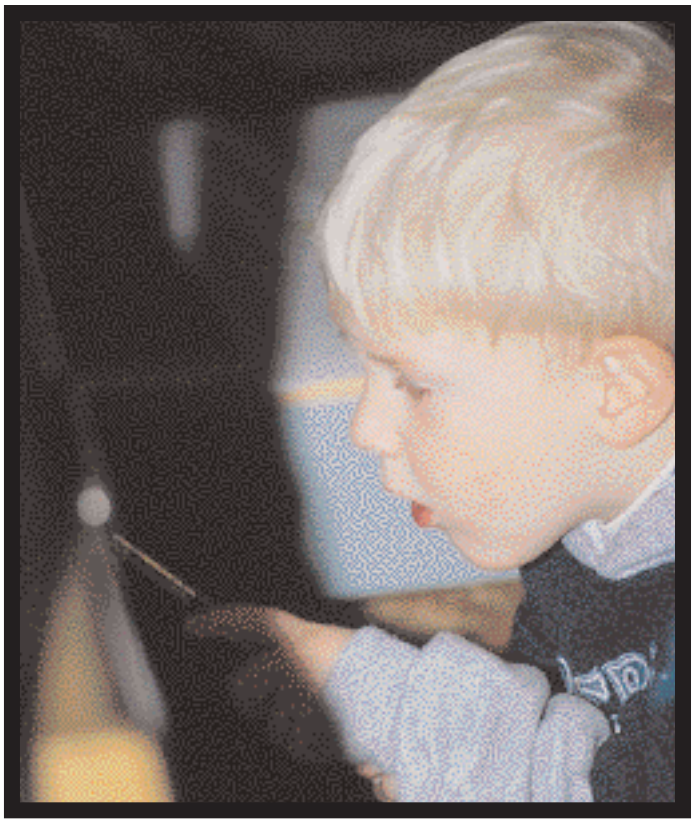
by Sally Cartwright

"Learning is *experience*. The rest is information." (Einstein) This is true not only for children, but for each of us at work with them. Although we are guided by the findings of those who have gone before, our knowledge of each child will depend largely upon our own keen observation and recording, our own diligent and ever-lively experience with the children themselves.

10/10/95, 9:15, large block dramatic play area (names changed). *Emily, aged four years and seven months (4.7), vigorously rolls an imaginary pie crust with an invisible roller. Ann, 4.1, having finally gotten her baby to sleep, comes over to chat. Suddenly Emily looks up, listening. She puts down her unseen roller, signs "wait" to Ann, and leaves her hastily-built kitchen. She slips by three painters at the wall easel, around the large unit block area, past Don driving nails into the nailing stump, past the 'cut, paste, and puzzles,' and onward to the reading corner, where she steps over two pairs of legs, whose small owners are busily "reading" a picture book together. Emily picks up a pretend phone, listens, nods, and lays the "receiver" down. She steps back over the legs and out of the reading corner, edges by the table work and Don's raised hammer, skirts the block area and the easels, returns to her kitchen, and says, "It's for you."*

In a setting designed for child initiative guided by quiet, caring, adult authority, children actively learn at their own pace and style. This allows teachers and caregivers

Sally Cartwright, with an MS from Bank Street College of Education, has taught children and teachers across five decades. She has written eight books for children and much material on early childhood learning, especially as experienced in her own experimental school. She's still writing at 73.



Photographs by Bonnie Neugebauer

to watch and take notes on individual children, especially during creative, free-choice activities. It is in these child-centered ventures — and to youngsters they *are* adventures — that children most often reveal their own personalities and development.

Emily is no exception. She shows self-direction, concentration, and perseverance. But why was her kitchen hastily built? That hardly seems her style. And what caused her protracted, single-minded intent on a phone call to a playmate? Since children of Emily's age are often more physical than verbal, to ask the child for answers not only intrudes but may invite frustration. Better to watch and interpret with wisdom, humor, and heart.

How can we best see and understand child behavior?

First of all, realizing the importance of observing and recording can motivate staff study and practice of the attitudes and skills needed for effective results. Why are recorded observations important? Anecdotal records not only raise questions for us to explore; they also point to answers. What do we know of Emily? We already have some answers: along with the three qualities mentioned above, we see that she can take the lead in dramatic play, and that she's certainly inventive and probably generous. As spot records accumulate, they are important for understanding the child.

Another reason for recorded observations is their use in staff meetings and parent conferences. Compared to generalizations, specific examples of child behavior speak with clarity, precision, and integrity. Staff members need to recognize this, and they need to know they have time for serious note-taking. Again, the school or child care environment which encourages child learning initiative and responsibility invites the adult to pause with respect for each child, to watch and listen, and, yes, to take notes. Nor will this observing and recording interfere with child learning.

On the contrary, keen adult interest shown by watching and recording is a boost to the child's self-esteem and purpose. When little Tom, curious about my note-taking, asked, "What you doing?" I said, "I really want to know how you kids learn, and I'm so interested I even write it down." He was satisfied.

Emily's anecdote demonstrates how immediate notation of an observation is far more accurate than memory. Regular staff members are *participant observers*, meaning that, while they are watching child behavior, they are very

much part of the mix. When not actually leading the children, they guide the quality of child behavior simply by their presence. And that presence must consistently model caring, humor, respect, and integrity. Although no observer can be entirely objective, experienced observation and recording approach scientific methodology suitable for disciplined research (see Cohen and Stern, 1978). Those who perform at this level, who enjoy research as part of their professional work with children, often derive deep satisfaction from this extended insight and service to childhood. We can always learn more about child behavior through current research, our own as well as others. When those of us who work with children exhibit an inquiring mind, we model an important attitude for the children. The child who copies a loved and respected model employs a powerful way of learning.

How we record our observations is significant.

There are various methods of recording, such as video filming, audio taping, and handwritten notes. Video filming is both intrusive and expensive. A participant observer can hardly wield a video camera without disturbing her child subjects. Some demonstration schools and centers have one-way screens to conceal the camera. I've worked with these in various settings, and find that concealing persons and procedure may stir child unease and mistrust. Using one-way screens to hide observers and cameras involves deceit. This feeling can permeate staff-child relationships and erode good learning. At all times, staff members need to be open and aboveboard with their children.

In my experience, audio taping tends to dull one's perceptions. When I tried a neat, almost invisible micro-taping device, I no longer tuned my ear to the children. Why should I, when it's all on tape anyhow? Furthermore, my occasional comments to the hidden recorder to explain the setting and name the children interrupted the children's play. Worst of all, both the children and I felt imposed upon by this mechanical contrivance which impaired our human rapport. Delicate adult-to-child relationships of affection, respect, guidance, and humor do not mesh with machines. Moreover, I had little time or patience for the necessary transcriptions. After many trials with mechanical equipment, I found that to understand and meet the needs of children the best method of all is on-the-spot note-taking by participant observers, teachers, and caregivers daily at work with these children.

There are numerous ways to take notes.

Some staff members use one or more 3x5 cards for each individual child, and later file them by date under the child's name. For many years, I've used a 6x9 spiral bound notebook, which I find easier to write on, to handle and not misplace, and easier for later reference. Pen and paper in whatever form should always be conveniently at hand.

I keep my notebook, precious as any personal journal, in a convenient, central location, out of sight and beyond reach. Notes about a named child are for professional use only. They are not to be shared with children, nor with parents or professionals who are not directly involved. Discretion must be used at all times. Confidentiality is essential for trust. Trust is essential for children.

When taking notes, as long as I do not disturb the children, I find it good to move discretely near my subjects so as to hear as much as possible. Depending on the children and the immediate situation, a casual or a

friendly, supportive glance allows me to see and note their behavior without adverse influence. I do not try to hide my note-taking, because open honesty promotes good learning, and my obvious interest in the children's activity supports them.

Informed selection is imperative.

A very important requirement for professional observation is a thorough knowledge of child development. One can neither see everything, nor record all that one sees. Informed selection is imperative. Teaching and child care professionals need a theoretical foundation to guide their choice of what to record. It will help them watch for behavior which depicts each child's stage of development and which hints of the unique qualities and potentials in each child.

A general knowledge of child development — for example, as in Stone and Church (1958), augmented, for example, by reading Piaget (1974), NAEYC's developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp, 1990), and the "developmental-interaction" approach to the child by Bank Street College of Education (see Boegehold, Cuffaro, Hooks, and Klopf, 1997; Biber, Shapiro, and Wickens, 1971; Shapiro and Biber, 1972; and DeVries and Kolberg, 1990) — provides a sound conceptual framework for observing and recording. The word *developmental* suggests a continuing, complex process of growth and learning, while *interaction* occurs between the child's emotional, physical, and cognitive growth, and between the child and her expanding physical and social environment. The stress is on *integrative* action by the children themselves.

The self of the observer is important.

The last requirement for useful observation and recording is more subtle. I put it last because it refers not only to the process of observation and recording but to wise interpretation of the child's behavior and resulting adult action, if any. When a child care or teaching professional observes and selects child behavior for interpretation and acts on that interpretation, she must be not only informed, not only experienced, but well-balanced and mature.

As educational psychologist Barbara Biber (1948) said, she needs to be "so secure within herself that she can function with principles rather than prescriptions, that she can exert authority without requiring submission, that she can work experimentally but not at random, and that she can admit mistakes without feeling humiliated." These qualities are well chosen goals for each of us to emulate. They will help to ensure the wise, unbiased observation, recording, and resulting professional action that all children deserve. They will help to ensure our wisdom, humor, and heart.

References

Biber, Barbara. *Childhood Education*. New York: Bank Street College of Education, 1948.

Biber, Shapiro, and Wickens. *Promoting Cognitive Growth from a Developmental-Interaction Point of View*. Washington, DC: NAEYC, 1971.

Boegehold, Cuffaro, Hooks, and Klopf. *Education Before Five*. New York: Bank Street College, 1977, pp. 45-52.

Bredekamp, S. (editor). *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8* (Expanded Edition). Washington, DC: NAEYC, 1990.

Cohen, Dorothy H. and Virginia Stern. *Observing and Recording the Behavior of Young Children* (Second Edition). New York: Teachers College Press, 1978, pp. 2-3.

DeVries, Rheta and L. Kolberg. *Constructivist Early Education: Overview and Comparison With Other Programs*. Washington, DC: NAEYC, 1990.

Piaget, Jean. *The Language and Thought of the Child*. New York: American Library, 1974.

Shapiro and Biber. "The Education of Young Children: A Developmental-Interaction Approach." *Teachers College Record*, Volume 74, Number 1, September 1972.

Stone, L. J. and J. Church. *Childhood and Adolescence: A Psychology of the Growing Person*. New York: Random House, 1958.

OUT OF THE BOX

Training™ EVALUATION

Early Childhood Training Kit
from Exchange

Your Opinion Matters! Please share your perceptions about this session.

Training Topic: ***Observation: The Primary Tool in Assessment***

	Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Good	Excellent
Length and format of the session					
Presenter's instructional style					
Presenter's knowledge of the topic					
Overall usefullness of the information					
Training room comfort					

The most important thing I learned during this session was . . .

I would like to learn more about . . .

OUT OF THE BOX

Training™

Early Childhood Training Kit
from Exchange

Certificate of Attendance and Participation

1.5 hours training session entitled

Observation: The Primary Tool in Assessment

Awarded to _____

by Exchange

Certified by:

Date _____

_____
Trainer's Signature

Kay M. Albrecht

Kay Albrecht, Ph.D.
Out of the Box Training

Exchange™
800-221-2864
www.ChildCareExchange.com

Certified by:

Bonnie Neugebauer

Bonnie Neugebauer, President
Exchange

Roger Neugebauer

Roger Neugebauer, Vice President
Exchange

Early Childhood Training Kit
from Exchange

Certificate of Training

1.5 hours of training

Observation: The Primary Tool in Assessment

Awarded to _____

by Exchange

Date _____

Certified by:

Kay M. Albrecht

Kay Albrecht, Ph.D.
Out of the Box Training

Exchange™
800-221-2864
www.ChildCareExchange.com

Certified by:

Bonnie Neugebauer

Bonnie Neugebauer, President
Exchange

Roger Neugebauer

Roger Neugebauer, Vice President
Exchange