

Basics of Observing

This reading is an excerpt from “Observing Infants and Toddlers” by Mary Johnson of Vanier College. It is part of the educational materials available from Collegial Centre for Educational Materials Development (CCDMD), and it can be accessed online at: <http://toddlers.ccdmd.qc.ca/observing>

Contents

BASICS of OBSERVING	2
What Is observing?.....	2
Why do early childhood educators observe?	2
How do early childhood educators use their observations?	2
How do early childhood educators observe?	2
OBJECTIVE WRITING.....	3
What is objective writing?	3
How do I stay objective when I record my observations?	3
Why is objectivity important?	3
Example of objective writing.....	3
USING POSITIVE AND DESCRIPTIVE LANGUAGE IN OBJECTIVE WRITING	4
What is positive language?	4
How do I stay positive when I record my observations?	4
Why is positive language important?	4
What is descriptive writing?.....	4
How do I use descriptive writing when I record my observations?	4
Why is using descriptive language important?	4
METHODS FOR RECORDING OBSERVATIONS.....	5
ANECDOTAL RECORDS	5
What is an anecdotal record?	5
Why use anecdotal records?.....	5
How do I write an anecdotal record?	5
Sample anecdotal records.....	5
RUNNING RECORDS	6
What is a running record?.....	6
Why use running records?	6
How do I write a running record?	6
Sample running record.....	6
CHECKLISTS AND RATING SCALES	7
What is a checklist?	7
Why use checklists?	7
How do I use a checklist?	7
Sample checklist for language development: Two-year-olds	7
Using a rating scale	8

BASICS OF 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** 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 behavior 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 behavior or behaviors.

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 behavior 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 process of assessment and planning. Educators observe, then analyze their observations, then plan their responses.

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 reading, 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. The next section explains the basics of objective writing.

OBJECTIVE WRITING

What is objective writing?

When educators record their observations in an objective way, it means that they are making an effort to write down only what they have observed directly. The educator takes on the role of a recording “machine,” relying on their eyes (or “camera”) and ears (or “microphone”) to gather information.

How do I stay objective when I record my observations?

To maintain objectivity, it is important to **record only what you have seen and/or heard**. As you cannot directly observe internal processes (like thoughts, feelings, ideas or decisions), information about such processes should not be included in your observations. As well, avoid including any assumptions, interpretations, opinions or “educated guesses”; this all falls under the category of subjective writing and should be left until you analyze your observations.

Why is objectivity important?

It is important for educators to be as objective as possible when recording their observations in order to avoid **bias**. A bias could be defined as *a pre-determined way of perceiving*, and can be positive or negative. Usually, bias arises out of past experiences; if you get bitten by a dog, in future, you may perceive all dogs as dangerous and scary even when they don’t bite you. Such pre-determined perceptions could influence how an educator records an observation as well as what an educator includes in an observation.

For example, if an educator feels that a particular child is “spoiled,” then this negative bias will affect what the educator records in observations about that child. The educator may be more likely to only record information about the child’s misbehavior.

By the same token, if an educator considers a particular child to be “really smart,” then this positive bias will also affect the educator’s observations. The educator may assume that the child is thinking in a certain way and include that assumption in an observation.

Example of objective writing

Here are two anecdotal records that record the same event. The anecdote on the left is written in a subjective way, and clearly shows the educator’s bias. The anecdote on the right is written in an objective way.

Matteo was riding around on his toy, and wanted to go into the main classroom. Matteo rudely shouted “Pass” at Karen and Rory. They quickly moved out of his way and he rode past them without saying thank you.

Sitting astride a ride-on toy, Matteo rode up to a small group of people. “Pass,” he demanded. Looking up, Karen suggested to Rory that they both move over. Once they had moved, Matteo rode past them into the main classroom.

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.

What is descriptive writing?

Descriptive writing requires an effort on the part of the observer to use specific, vivid vocabulary to record an observation. The observer endeavors to **paint a picture** of what has happened through deliberate words.

How do I use descriptive writing when I record my observations?

Most often, writing in a more descriptive way involves choosing the exact right verb to describe the action that is being recorded. A good place to start is by replacing verbs like "said," "went" and "moved" with verbs that are more descriptive. As well, being specific about quantities (e.g. "five children" instead of "some children") and duration (e.g. "three minutes later" instead of "later") can help to make your observations more descriptive.

Why is using descriptive language important?

When an educator records observations using vague or non-specific language, there is a greater chance that an element of bias might slip in. When it comes time to analyze the observations, educators usually re-read what they have written, to jog their memories. For example, if the educator has written: "a few children started to move around," this vague language will not help her remember exactly what happened. When we can't recall all of the details about a specific situation, behavior or interaction, our brains try to fill in the missing information by relying on our past experiences and assumptions. This is where bias comes from. If, on the other hand, the anecdote reads: "six of the children started to hop around the room," there is much less room for a biased re-interpretation or recall of the event.

METHODS FOR RECORDING OBSERVATIONS

The most popular methods for recording observations are [anecdotal records](#), [running records](#), [ABC records](#), [tally sampling](#) and [checklists/rating scales](#). For this course, we will focus on three formats: anecdotal notes, running records, and checklists.

ANECDOTAL RECORDS

What is an anecdotal record?

An anecdotal record (or anecdote) is like a short story that educators use to record a significant incident that they have observed. Please see the “Observing” section above for a short discussion of what educators might consider significant. Anecdotal records are usually relatively short and may contain descriptions of behaviors and direct quotes.

Why use anecdotal records?

Anecdotal records are easy to use and quick to write, so they are the most popular form of record that educators use. Anecdotal records allow educators to record qualitative information, like details about a child’s specific behavior or the conversation between two children. These details can help educators plan activities, experiences and interventions. Because they can be written after the fact, when an educator is on his break, for example, or at the end of the day, using anecdotal records allows the educator to continue to work (this is often referred to as the “participant-observer role”) without having to stop to write down his observations.

How do I write an anecdotal record?

Anecdotal records are written after the fact, so use the past tense when writing them. Being positive and objective, and using descriptive language are also important things to keep in mind when writing your anecdotal records.

Remember that anecdotal records are like short stories; so be sure to have a beginning, a middle and an end for each anecdote.

Sample anecdotal records

Phoenix and Rory each piled up a mound of snow in front of them on the picnic table. The girls began to sing, “Happy birthday to me, happy birthday to me.” When they finished singing, both girls puffed out their cheeks and pretended to blow out the candles on top of their snow cakes.

Sarrinah sat at the table, with a small paintbrush in her right hand. She used the bristles of the paintbrush to apply some watercolor paint to the palm of her left hand. She then turns the paintbrush over, and dabs at the paint in her palm with the wooden end of the brush. She examined the end of the brush, then scribbled on the table with it, making several scratchy lines.

What is a running record?

Writing a running record requires the educator to act like a video camera, recording all significant behaviors and interactions as they happen. Whereas anecdotal records are written after the fact, running records are written as the action is unfolding. If you were to read one out loud, it might sound a bit like the running commentary of a sports event: “Cournoyer passes the puck to Savard. Savard carries the puck down the boards, over the blue line. He winds up, he shoots, he scores!”

Why use running records?

A running record involves writing down **everything** that is happening, in the order that it happens. Observers limit the amount of editing they do as they record. Instead, the idea is to record as much raw data as possible. Using this rather open-ended method means that educators can gather a lot of information in a relatively short period of time. As such, these are a popular choice for professionals in the field.

How do I write a running record?

Running records are written as the action is unfolding in front of you, so use the present tense when writing them. Being positive and objective, and using descriptive language are also important things to keep in mind when writing your running records.

Give yourself a tentative time frame for writing a running record. For example, decide ahead of time that you will observe the children at the sand box for the first 7 minutes of Free Play. The process of writing a running record can be quite tiring. It also requires the educator to step out of her active role in order to record her observations on the spot. This is referred to as the **spectator-observer role**. Getting organized ahead of time is key.

Sample running record

12:32 pm Annette kneels down next to Maya and begins wiping her face with a wet cloth. As Annette starts to wipe Maya’s right hand, Maya grabs the cloth with her left hand and yanks it away from Annette. Annette asks, “You wanna do it?” Maya starts wiping her mouth and tongue, clutching the cloth tightly in both hands. Annette smiles, claps her hands together and exclaims, “OK! Good job!” Maya continues to wipe her face and mouth.

12:34 pm Annette reaches out and begins to lift Maya’s bib over her head. Maya transfers the wet cloth to her right hand, then, as the bib is lifted up and over her head, grabs it with both hands again. She wipes the cloth across her cheek and mouth, then vigorously swipes at her tongue four times.

What is a checklist?

A checklist is just what it sounds like: a list that educators check off. Using this method is a little bit like going bird watching. Start with a list of items you want to observe and then check off each item when appropriate.

One popular choice for educators is to use developmental checklists to record what they have observed about individual children; these developmental checklists consist of lists of skills from the different developmental domains for a specific age range.

Why use checklists?

Checklists are quick and easy to use, so they are popular with educators. They can be used to record observations in virtually any situation, and do not require the educator to spend much time recording data; in general, a few moments is all it takes. One other advantage is that there are many different pre-made checklists available for use from a variety of sources. For example, certain websites connected with ECE offer developmental checklists that educators can download and print out. Educators can also create a checklist that exactly meets their needs, depending on what they want to observe and record.

How do I use a checklist?

As it is such a popular choice for educators, the example we will present here shows how to use a developmental checklist. These developmental checklists are generally used to record observations of one child at a time. The list of skills is targeted for a specific age group (e.g. 12 to 24 months). They may be divided into the different developmental domains or focus only on one aspect of a child's development.

Once you have chosen or created a checklist, you then observe the child in a variety of natural contexts and check off all the relevant skills or behaviors. Usually, there is a space to indicate the relevant date(s) on the checklist, as this might be an important piece of data.

As the checklist method does not allow for the recording of a lot of qualitative data, you might choose to have a column for comments.

Sample checklist for language development: Two-year-olds

Child's Name: Alan

	Behaviour/Skill	Date	Comments
	Communicates with gestures and pointing		
	Shakes head for no		
	Uses one- word sentences		
	Uses two- word sentences		
	Names familiar objects		
	Follows simple instructions		
	Enjoys songs and rhymes		
	Refers to self as "me" or "I"		

Once you begin filling in the checklist, it will start to look something like this:

Child's Name: Alan

	Behaviour/Skill	Date	Comments
✓	Communicates with gestures and pointing	March 9, 2012	
✓	Shakes head for no	March 9, 2012	
✓	Uses one- word sentences	March 10, 2012	
✓	Uses two- word sentences	March 29, 2012	"My book"
	Names familiar objects		
	Follows simple instructions	April 15, 2012	
✓	Enjoys songs and rhymes	March 5, 2012	Loves Hokey Pokey
	Refers to self as "me" or "I"	March 20, 2012	Taps self on chest, says "Ayan"

Note that, in general, behaviors and/or skills that you have not yet observed, or that the child has not yet mastered, are left blank, so that you can update the checklist as needed. In some cases, you may want to add a comment like the one in the last box in the sample above. In this example, Alan's strategies for referring to himself are significant, even if he is not yet demonstrating the specific behavior from the checklist.

Using a rating scale

Sometimes educators feel limited by a checklist because this method only allows the observer to record **if** a child uses a specific skill or not. In this case, they might choose to add a rating scale to their observations. By adding a rating scale, an educator can rate the quality, frequency or ease with which a child uses a certain skill.

If you were to add a rating scale to your checklist, it might look like this:

Child's Name: Alan

Date: March/April 2012

Behaviour/Skill	Usually	Frequently	Rarely	Never	Comments
Communicates with gestures and pointing	✓				
Shakes head for no	✓				
Uses one- word sentences		✓			
Uses two- word sentences			✓		"My book"
Names familiar objects				✓	
Follows simple instructions	✓				
Enjoys songs and rhymes	✓				
Refers to self as "me" or "I"					Taps self on chest, says "Ayan"