Technical Assistance Paper No. 15

OBSERVATION:
The Heart of Individualizing Responsive Care

EARLY HEAD START
National Resource Center

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This document was developed by the staff of the Early Head Start National Resource Center in collaboration with the Office of Head Start. The contents of the paper are not intended to be an interpretation of policy.

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INTRODUCTION

For several days in a row, 23-month-old Jermiez spent much of his time outdoors moving back and forth between squatting and standing, all the while looking at the ground. His teacher, Rosa, became puzzled by Jermiez's behavior, especially because he did not participate in any other outdoor experiences.*

One day she decided to step back and observe him and see if she could figure out what he was trying to do. After a while, she moved closer to him and saw what had fascinated him so—ants! Sitting very close to him, she said, "I see ants. Lots and lots of ants." He looked down, smiled, and said, "Ants." "I wonder where the ants are going?" mused Rosa. "We'll have to watch." Jermiez looked at Rosa and smiled again.

With Rosa on the ground, several other toddlers wandered over. Jermiez pointed at the ants and said, "Ants. Ants go home."

When Jermiez's father came to pick him up, Rosa told him about Jermiez's interest in ants. His father said, "We're having a terrible problem with ants at home. But my wife can't stand killing any living thing, so we spend a lot of time following them around and trying to close off the place they enter."

As Rosa cleaned up that day, she thought about Jermiez's interest in ants. She decided that she would read The Ants Go Marching to him, and teach him the song. She considered adding large, plastic ants to the sand table, if his interest continued and maybe bringing a magnifying glass outside and inviting Jermiez to use it to see ants up close.

In this example, Rosa engages in an important process. She observes Jermiez. When she shares her observation with Jermiez's father, she receives further valuable input. She reflects on what she learned through observation and uses the information to plan meaningful experiences for Jermiez. In short, Rosa uses observation to provide individualized, responsive care.

Observation informs individualization. It is the first step in providing the kind of individualized, responsive care for infants and toddlers that builds relationships, supports attachment, and promotes healthy brain development. Because individualization cannot happen without observation, this technical assistance paper focuses on observation:

- What it is
- Why it is important
- What to observe
- How to observe and document
- How to set up observation systems
- Reviewing and reflecting on observation information

Individualization—the process of using observation information to tailor interactions, experiences, and environments to support each child's interests, skills, and needs—is explored in greater depth in a separate technical assistance paper.

*For the purposes of this paper, *staff* refers to teachers, home visitors, and family child care providers.

[1] *"Observation,"* Dictionary.com, *accessed November 10, 2010, http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/observation?&qsrc=.*

WHAT IS OBSERVATION?

One online dictionary[1] gives the following definitions for observation (noun):

- An act or instance of noticing or perceiving
- An act or instance of regarding attentively or watching
- The faculty or habit of observing or noticing
- The information or record secured by such an act

According to 1304.21(c)(2) in the Head Start Program Performance Standards, "Staff must use a variety of strategies to promote and support children's learning and developmental progress based on the observations and ongoing assessment of each child." Observing children is a necessary part of what teachers, home visitors, and family child care providers in Early Head Start (EHS) and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) programs do on a daily basis. However, there is more to observing than just watching what children do, as a toddler teacher describes here:

> *Johnny was a red-headed 2-year-old who could empty a shelf of toys faster than any child I've ever known. I would spend the days he came to child care racing around after him, trying to keep some semblance of order. Around this time, I had to take a course on observing as part of my studies at [school]. I was upset. I knew how to watch children. I could see what they were doing. After about 2 months, it dawned on me: Observing wasn't about just what children do. It was watching them from the outside with the purpose of trying to understand what they are feeling and experiencing on the inside. This revelation helped me get to know Johnny.*[2]

If observation is more than just watching children, how might it be defined? This teacher's story contains an important point; observing children also involves focus and purpose. Stetson, Jablon, and Dombro defined observation as "watching and listening to learn about individual children."[3] Teachers, home visitors, and family child care providers watch and listen to children and families to learn about each child's development and to figure out what each child is learning and how each child learns. Observation can also be defined this way: paying close attention to a child's behaviors, interactions, activities, and interests and noticing all aspects of the child's development.[4] The points to note here are that both definitions stress the importance of observing with intention and observing to learn about a child.

WHY OBSERVE YOUNG CHILDREN?

> *Amy and Duane have begun to feel like referees in their young toddler classroom. It seems as if every time they turn around, they see toys thrown across the room. Lately, they have been spending a lot of time redirecting several children who are doing most of the throwing and trying to keep the other children safe.*
>
> *One day during planning time, Amy and Duane decide to take turns observing the "throwers." Over the next few days, their observations reveal that the children are not throwing toys to hurt anyone on purpose. Rather, the children have created a "game" of throwing toys at other toys. The teachers decide to dedicate an area of their classroom to this game. They provide soft balls, soft blocks, and a large paper "target." They model stacking the blocks, knocking them down, and throwing blocks and balls at the target paper.*
>
> *After several days, the number of toy-throwing incidents goes way down, as does the number of times Amy and Duane redirect children to safer activities. Through observation, the teachers gained a better understanding of what the children were doing and why. And they found a successful way to respect children's interests while keeping them safe.*

[2] *Judy R. Jablon, Amy Laura Dombro, and Margo L. Dichtelmiller,* The Power of Observation for Birth Through Eight, 2nd ed. *(Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies and National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2007), 3.*

[3] *Charlotte Stetson, Judy Jablon, and Amy Laura Dombro,* Observation: The Key to Responsive Teaching Workbook with DVD *(Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies, 2009), 1.*

[4] *National Infant & Toddler Child Care Initiative,* Infant/Toddler Curriculum & Individualization *(Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010), 19.*

There are important reasons why teachers, home visitors, and family child care providers observe infants and toddlers. For example, they observe to:

- Learn about children to individualize care and learning opportunities; and to
- Measure and track children's progress in acquiring skills and concepts over time.

Amy and Duane's story shows that, when staff are intentional about observing children, they are better able to understand how children think, feel, and learn about the world around them. In turn, this helps them make good decisions about how to provide responsive, informed care.

Individualizing care and tracking children's progress make observation a powerful and informative learning tool. However, there are other reasons to observe that are also powerful and informative.

Observing to Understand Children's Goals and Intentions

> *Respect is the teacher's process of observing children's actions and assuming they act in pursuit of their interests and questions about the world. Respect assumes that even very young infants have goals and try different strategies to meet their goals or figure out how things around them work.*[5]

Respectful observation reflects a belief that young children's behaviors have purpose and meaning and are worth attention. Teachers, home visitors, and family child care providers who believe that young children have goals and intentions ask themselves very important questions:

- Why? Why does this child do what he does?
- What is he trying to communicate or accomplish?
- How should I respond to support this child?

Observation becomes a tool to seek answers to these questions. It provides opportunities to take a moment to determine a child's goal or intention before responding. Observing from a respectful point of view helps staff make important discoveries about children, such as what they are like as individuals, how they respond to other children and adults, what tasks are easy or hard for them, and how they convey wants and needs.[6] These discoveries allow staff to be responsive to each child's interests and needs.

Respectful observation and curiosity about what motivates children become particularly important when children's behaviors are challenging to understand and manage. Infants' and toddlers' language skills are just developing, so their primary mode of communication is behavior. Even when they begin using words or sign language,

[5] *Sandra H. Petersen and Donna S. Wittmer,* Endless Opportunities for Infant and Toddler Curriculum: A Relationship-Based Approach *(Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, 2009), 92.*

[6] *Margo L. Dichtelmiller and Laura Ensler, "Infant/Toddler Assessment: One Program's Experience," In* Spotlight on Young Children and Assessment, *ed. Derry Koralek (Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2004), 18; Petersen and Wittmer,* Endless Opportunities, *94–95.*

[7] *Early Head Start National Resource Center,* Digging Deeper: Looking Beyond Behavior to Discover Meaning *(online lesson series) (Washington, DC: Department of Health & Human Services/Administration for Children and Families/Office of Head Start, 2006), Lesson 1: Slides 3–5.*

[8] *Ibid., Lesson 1: Slide 1; Lesson 3: Slide 1.*

their vocabulary for expressing themselves is still limited. Although some children's behaviors, such as physical aggression, biting, and tantrums, are troubling for both children and adults, these behaviors have meaning. For example, there are many reasons why a young child bites. She may be teething. She may want a toy that another child has. She may be hungry, tired, or even excited and happy. She may just want to know what an arm tastes or feels like in her mouth and then become fascinated by the "cause-and-effect" reaction that follows. Structured observation of the behavior, including what happens before and after it occurs, what time of day it occurs, and who else is involved, provides clues about the child's possible intentions and needs. Conversations with the child's family provide additional information. A pattern of behavior emerges. Staff then match their responses to the child's message (e.g., provide teething toys, make sure there are duplicates of toys, stay physically close to the child in situations that lead to biting, change the schedule for eating and napping).[7]

The observation approach described earlier is called the *responsive process*.[8] This approach has three steps and may be used by program staff as well as family members:

- Watch
  - Observe the child. Note what is happening, what causes the behavior, and what happens after the behavior occurs.
- Ask
  - What does the behavior mean to the child? Family? Teacher or home visitor? Others?
- Adapt
  - Decide what causes the child's behavior and identify possible responses.
  - Try out one of the responses.
  - Watch the child's reactions to see if a different response is needed.

Observing to Build Relationships With Children

Observation leads teachers, home visitors, and family child care providers to a deeper understanding of the child as a human being. In turn, this leads to a greater capacity to engage in a responsive relationship with the child. Relationships between caring, trusted adults and the infants and toddlers they care for provide the secure base that is the foundation for learning. When infants and toddlers feel safe with, connected to, and supported by the adults around them, they are more likely to explore and experiment. Observation also helps staff build relationships with children with whom they may not initially feel a strong attachment or emotional connection.[9] It provides an opportunity to slow down, pay attention in a deliberate way, and look for things about a child that may not have been noticed before. Even in the most challenging situations, finding one new insight may be the means for opening the door to a deeper understanding of the child and the true beginning of relationship.

Observing to Build Relationships With Families

In addition to strengthening relationships with children, sharing observations with children's families strengthens the home–program connection. Head Start Program Performance Standard 1304.21(2)(a)(ii) states that families must be "provided opportunities to increase their child observation skills and to share assessments with staff that will help plan the learning experiences." Teachers, home visitors, and family child care providers help families feel valued and see themselves as leaders in their children's education when they:

- Regularly share their observations of children with families;
- Actively solicit families' input and perspectives; and
- Share observation techniques.

[9]*Petersen and Wittmer,* Endless Opportunities, *94.*

Supporting families to become engaged, experienced observers of their own children also deepens the child / family bond and relationship.

USING GOALS TO FOCUS OBSERVATIONS

Goals for children's development and learning provide a structure for framing observations. Teachers, home visitors, and family child care providers, in partnership with families, typically establish individual child goals that guide their daily work with infants and toddlers. In addition to family input, these goals may also come from sources such as knowledge of child development and Individualized Family Service Plans for children with disabilities. Child-related goals are also established at the program level. Head Start Program Performance Standard 1307.3(1)(i)–(iii) requires all Head Start programs, including programs serving infants and toddlers, to develop program goals for improving the school readiness of children participating in its program. These goals must:

- Appropriately reflect the ages of all children who participate in the program;
- Align with the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework (HSDELF), state early learning guidelines, and local school district requirements and expectations, to the extent they apply to children birth to five;
- Address, at a minimum, the five essential domains at the center of the HSDELF: social and emotional development; approaches toward learning; language and literacy development; cognition and general knowledge; and physical well-being and motor development; and
- Be established in consultation with children's families.[10]

In addition to establishing goals in the five essential domains, EHS and MSHS programs may also specify goals related to other areas such as self-care; explorations of the physical, natural, and social worlds; and the arts. In most cases, goals are the starting points for more formal, observation-based assessment. Teachers, home visitors, and family child care providers take steps to link their observations to the goals to track children's progress over time.

Observation and Its Relationship to Assessment

One of the primary reasons for observing children is to measure and track children's progress in acquiring skills and concepts in all areas of development. Ongoing assessment is also a Head Start Program Performance Standard requirement: See 1304.21(c)(2) and 1307.3(2)(ii). To do this, EHS and MSHS programs select valid and reliable observation-based assessment tools. These tools help teachers, home visitors, and family child care

[10] *Office of Head Start*, Part 1307: Policies and Procedures for the Designation Renewal of Head Start and Early Head Start Grantees *(Washington, DC: Office of Head Start, Administration for Children and Families, Department of Health and Human Services), 2011. http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/Head%20Start%20Requirements/1307.*

[11] *Jablon, Dombro, and Dichtelmiller,* The Power of Observation, *31.*

providers identify each child's current level of development in relation to the typical sequences of development. Assessment tools should align with the program's school readiness goals, be sensitive to the rapid development of infants and toddlers, and enable staff to:

- Observe and document each child's learning and development over time;
- Individualize interactions and learning opportunities;
- Identify children who are not progressing and who may need further evaluation; and
- Communicate with families about their child's growth in all areas of development.

IDENTIFYING THE "LENSES" THROUGH WHICH STAFF AND FAMILIES OBSERVE CHILDREN

An observation is like a photograph—it captures a moment in time. As an observer, you are like the photographer, focusing on some things, ignoring others. Like the photographer, you bring your own ideas, preferences, and perceptions to the act of observing.[11]

It takes practice to become a good observer. For staff and families, an important aspect of being a good observer involves becoming aware that what they notice and how they interpret their observations about infants and toddlers may be influenced by many things. Culture, temperament, personal experiences, professional knowledge, and even community values and messages in the media affect how staff and families see and experience children. These "lenses" through which staff and families observe and interpret are at work even though they may not always be conscious of them.

For example, two adults (e.g., home visitor–parent; teacher–teacher) may both "see" an infant fuss but interpret differently what the fussy behavior means—and respond differently. Because observing young children involves self-awareness and this awareness evolves over time, it is important to help staff and families identify various influences and begin to recognize when these influences may be interfering with seeing a child for who he or she really is.[12] Here are some things to consider:

- Every person comes from a culture, and every family's culture is unique. Culture—attitudes, beliefs, expectations about people and events—shapes us as humans and as early childhood professionals. For example, some cultures consider it respectful to look someone in the eye when speaking or being spoken to. Other cultures consider it respectful to look down when someone is speaking. A home visitor whose culture values looking someone in the eye when speaking may think that a child (or family member) whose culture values "eyes down" when someone speaks is ignoring her or being disrespectful.
- Traits such as temperament (e.g., being cautious, outgoing, or sensitive; having a need for order), personal interests and preferences, and feelings (e.g., what makes us feel excited, apprehensive, uncomfortable) also affect how adults see and relate to children. These traits may help them feel closer to children with similar traits: They may pay more attention to children with similar traits and observe them more frequently than other children. These traits may also drive adults away from children whose traits are different. Staff may pay them less attention or interpret their behaviors more negatively. For example, a teacher who has a high tolerance for bright lights, environmental noise, and a lot of "stuff" on shelves and walls may have a hard time figuring out that an infant who cries frequently may be overstimulated by those same things.

[12] *Ibid, 32–41; Dorothy H. Cohen, Virginia Stern, Nancy Balaban, and Nancy Gropper,* Observing and Recording the Behavior of Young Children, 5th ed. *(New York: Teachers College Press, 2008), 3.*

- Staff gain professional knowledge and grounding for understanding and responding to infants and toddlers from coursework, workshops, preservice and in-service training, coaching and mentoring, and daily practice in center-based classrooms, family child care homes, and home visits. They should feel confident about bringing this knowledge and experience to observing children and interpreting their actions. However, part of being an early childhood professional is maintaining an open mind. Professional knowledge and experience should not be a barrier to "seeing" and understanding a child. An early childhood professional knows that there is always more to learn about observing and responding to children!

To support staff and families:

- Share *Revisiting and Updating the Multicultural Principles for Head Start Programs Serving Children Ages Birth to Five* (also available in Spanish), published by the Office of Head Start, during preservice and in-service trainings and staff meetings. Use the reflection questions/activities that accompany each principle (see, for example, principles 1–5, 9) to offer opportunities for staff to identify and address their own cultural beliefs and practices as well as those of the children and families. Consider sharing the principles at parent meetings/trainings and adapting reflection questions/activities so that they are appropriate and relevant for families.
- Share temperament identification tools such as the *Infant Toddler Temperament Tool* (IT^{3}), available in English and Spanish, developed by the Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation. This tool can be used by staff and families to recognize and explore their own temperament traits (as well as those of the infants and toddlers they care for).
- Use reflective supervision to continue one-on-one conversations with staff about how their beliefs, preferences, and professional experience inform how they observe and "see" the infants, toddlers, and families with whom they work. Provide guidance, as needed, on how staff can balance competing perspectives as well as talk with families (and each other) to understand differing views and work together in the best interests of each infant and toddler.

In my family child care program, I keep a communication notebook with sections for each family by the sign-in sheet. I use it to jot down quick notes about things I see my children do and say so I can refer back to them later. I usually remember to tell parents what I had observed about their child during the day even before they check the notebook.

One day, Tomás's grandmother came to pick him instead of his father. She was just about to walk out the door with Tomás when she noticed the notebook. She looked in Tomás's section, read "Tomás-wooden rocking boat story-shared with Eli," and asked what that meant. I told her that I had watched Tomás (who is 12 months old) and Eli, one of my older toddlers successfully negotiate how to share the wooden rocking boat. They figured out who got in the boat first and who sat in which seat. There was no crying or pushing as there had been in past attempts—and they peacefully rocked for several minutes.

Tomás's grandmother seemed so pleased to hear this. Tomás is an only child. He hasn't had much experience being around other children and "sharing" space and toys. When I saw what this story meant to her, I realized two things: how important it is to jot down my observations and how important it is to share them with all family members!

There are a variety of methods that may be used to capture what children do and say (and for home visitors, what parents/family members and their child do and say together). The decision about what method to use depends on what teachers, home visitors, and family child care providers want to learn, what children are saying and doing at the time, and personal style. Additionally, each method makes different demands on time and energy. This section briefly reviews some of the more common documentation methods that staff are likely to use.

Audio and Visual Recordings

Cameras, audio recorders, and video recorders offer quick, efficient ways to document what children say and do. For EHS and MSHS programs that opt to use these devices, consider the following:

- Costs for buying the cameras and recorders, equipment, and software to download, store, play and/or print files, film development (if not using a digital camera), and upkeep (e.g., batteries, repair)
- Buy-in and signed, written permission from families to photograph/record their child for observation purposes

Encourage staff to keep audio and video clips short. The longer the clip, the larger the file; large files take up a lot of storage space. Long audio and video clips also take more time to review and analyze later. When saving the audio/visual recordings, include relevant information to identify the recording (e.g., date/time, setting, names of children/adults, routine or play experience during which the recording was made). This information will be important when staff reflect on what their observations tell them about each child and use that information to individualize care and learning opportunities. Photographs, video clips, and audio clips are also excellent, concrete tools for conveying what children know and can do to families.

Checklists and Other Print Recording Tools

Tools such as checklists, frequency counts, and participation charts are used to quickly record information about the occurrence of specific behaviors or skills. A defining feature of these tools is that the behaviors or skills are already identified. Staff record the observed behavior or skill by using check or tally marks or noting the date on which the skill or behavior was seen.[13]

[13] Oralie McAfee, Deborah J. Leong, and Elena Bodrova, Basics of Assessment: A Primer for Early Childhood Educators (Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2004), 40–41

Written Observations: Jottings, Anecdotal Notes, Running Records

Staff use *jottings* as quick reminders of things they have observed. These jottings tend to have short phrases or sentences that describe a single event or interaction; for example, "Matthias stacks 3 large foam-covered blocks, looks at Dad, says 'Bwocks!'"

Anecdotal notes are used to document a particular occurrence and typically focus on specific skills, behaviors, and/or interactions. Staff determine how much detail to include in an anecdotal note; however, these notes tend to be more extensive than jottings. Anecdotal notes may start out as jottings, with additional details added later.

Staff use *running records* to collect detailed narrative information during a specific time frame. They write everything they see and hear, as events and behaviors occur and in the order in which they occur, during the observation period. These narratives are extensive and provide a rich, comprehensive view of children. However, they require more dedicated time for stepping back, observing, and writing than staff may have in the midst of caring for children, or during a home visit or group socialization. Running records may be useful for a program supervisor to do as part of ongoing staff support or if there is a specific issue with a child. When a teacher uses this method, consider how to provide coverage to maintain the 1:4 staff:child ratio while the teacher is engaged.

Regardless of the type of written observation note used, the recorded information needs to be accurate, objective, and provide an unbiased view of the child or children being described.

Writing Objective and Accurate Observation Notes

Written observations about infants and toddlers should be factual and objective to be useful and meaningful.[14] This means that staff should write only what they see and hear (the facts) and avoid using words that communicate judgment about a child's feelings, intentions, and motivations; are ambiguous and open to interpretation; or describe an opinion. One way staff may think about their own objectivity is to ask themselves: Am I describing this child's behaviors and interactions in the same or a similar way that someone else observing this child would describe them?[15] Consider the following observation notes about 8-month-old Umar:

Note 1: 11/29, 8:00 a.m., arrival
Umar has a hard time when his mom brings him into the room. He doesn't like being put down on the floor. Ignores her when she tries to read a book to him. Crawls over to Lettie, takes ball from her hands; gets upset when mom kisses him, says goodbye, and leaves the room.

Note 2: 11/29, 8:00 a.m., arrival
Umar's mom carries him into the room, sets him down on floor next to book bin. Umar makes whimpering sounds (no tears). Mom sits down next to him, picks a book from the bin, shows cover to Umar, begins to read. Umar turns his head away, sees Lettie (child) holding and shaking a ball with a bell inside, holds his arms out to her, crawls over and sits next to her, takes ball from her hands, shakes it. Mom goes to Umar, kisses him, says goodbye, walks out. Umar starts to cry (tears).

[14] National Infant & Toddler Child Care Initiative, Infant/Toddler Development, Screening, and Assessment *(Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010), 22.*

[15] *Laura J. Colker,* A Trainer's Guide to Observing Young Children: Learning to Look, Looking to Learn *(Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies, 1995), 7.*

Both observation notes describe how Umar separates from his mother, but the first note contains the teacher's assumptions about and interpretations of Umar's behavior. Someone reading this note may have different ideas about what happened because words such as "hard time," "doesn't like," "ignores," and "gets upset" are open to interpretation. The second note describes rather than interprets Umar's behaviors. It provides a much clearer picture about what Umar actually does and says during the arrival routine.

Objective, factual written observations include the following:

- Descriptions of actions
- Descriptions of children's vocalizations
- Direct quotes of children's language
- Descriptions of facial expressions and gestures
- Descriptions of creations (e.g., stacked blocks, scribble drawings, finger-painted pictures)

The following words are often found in written observation notes.[16] However, these and other similar words can be interpreted in many ways and express judgment. They should be avoided.

- Intelligence: smart, slow (Lyle completes the two-piece shape puzzle correctly. He is such a *smart* baby!)
- Feelings: angry, mad, sad, upset, happy (Jorge gets *angry* and splashes water from the water table on the floor.)
- Intentions and preferences: wants, likes, loves, because (Sonia hits Andre when he picks up the doll she dropped *because* she *wants* her doll back.)
- Labels: bored, distracted, cooperative, aggressive, hyperactive, helpful, withdrawn, shy, outgoing, fussy, bad, good, silly, cute, beautiful (Inette was *distracted* when I tried to feed her. She kept turning her head away.)
- Evaluations: good job, bad job (Oliver does a *good job* putting the toys away.)
- Time and amounts: always, never, a lot, long time, short time (It took a *long time* for Hannah to settle down and stop crying after her grandfather left the room.)

Interpreting the meaning of children's behaviors and interactions is important, and impressions, feelings, and insights about children are extremely valuable to the individualizing process. However, staff first need accurate, factual information in order to draw conclusions later on about children's skills, behavior, interests, and needs.

A Note About Accuracy

Observation notes need to be accurate as well as objective and factual. Accurate observation notes include facts that are written in the order in which they occur.[17] Consider the following story about Gabriel (33 months), which takes place during a socialization experience. A home visitor observes the entire exchange:

[16]*Ibid, 7; Derry G. Koralek, Amy Laura Dombro, and Diane Trister Dodge, Caring for Infants & Toddlers, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies, 2005), 372.*

[17]*Koralek, Dombro, and Dodge,* Caring for Infants & Toddlers, *373.*

Gabriel and his mom are next to each other. Each one is building a tower using large plastic blocks. Gabriel builds his tower as tall as he is. He bumps into the tower with his arm. The tower falls over and knocks down the block tower that his mother built. Gabriel laughs and jumps up and down while clapping his hands. His mom laughs, claps her hands, and hugs Gabriel.

Here is the home visitor's observation note:

Gabriel builds a tower as tall as he is using large plastic blocks. He starts to laugh, jump up and down, clap his hands, and bumps into his tower, knocking it down and his mom's tower down, too.

This observation note is not accurate. It contains facts that are out of order (laugh, jump up and down, clap his hands, and bump into his tower). It is also missing information (Gabriel and his mother are next to each other, each one is building a tower, Gabriel's mom laughs, claps her hands, and hugs Gabriel). Accuracy matters. Over time, inaccurate observation notes may lead to inaccurate interpretations or misunderstandings of what a child knows and can do, how the child interacts with others, and so on.

Here are additional tips for writing observation notes:

- Note child's name as well as the person making the observation.
- Note the date/time of the observation, setting (e.g., indoor/outdoor, routine, play experience), and other children/adults involved.
- Use abbreviations, short phrases, symbols, drawn pictures, and other shorthand inventions to quickly capture information.
- Use phonetic spellings to capture children's vocalizations (e.g., buh-buh-buh-mmmm) and word attempts (e.g., "peez" for "please").
- When possible, observe with a partner (e.g., co-teacher, professional colleague, education coordinator, family member). Compare notes to see if the same information was recorded and if it was recorded using similar language.

Writing accurate, objective, factual observation notes takes time and practice. But staff can plan for opportunities during the day to write notes intentionally and thoughtfully.

SETTING UP SYSTEMS FOR ONGOING OBSERVATIONS

Infants and toddlers typically do not demonstrate what they know and can do "on demand" (i.e., when the observer wants them to). However, teachers, home visitors, and family child care

providers can still be intentional about capturing and recording what children do and say by setting up a system for carrying out observations.

There is no one right way to do this. An observation system in a center-based classroom with two teachers may look differently from the system that a family child care provider who works alone uses. These systems will likely be different from those used by home visitors during home visits and socialization experiences. Additionally, observation systems are not static; they should be revisited as staff become more proficient in observing children and as children grow and develop. However, there are some general strategies that should be considered when developing a system.[18]

- **Plan times to observe a child.** To capture the depth and breadth of children's skills, abilities, and interests, observe at different times of the day and in different settings. For example, observe children:
  - Across settings (e.g., indoor and outdoor) and times of the day (morning, afternoon);
  - During routines (e.g., mealtimes, diapering and toileting, naptime, dressing, arrival / departure);
  - As they engage in play experiences and move from one play experience to another; and
  - As they interact with other children and adults.

  Develop a plan to make sure that each child is observed regularly (e.g., once a day / week) and that individual child goals and program school readiness goals are addressed. If using an observation method that requires stepping back for a period of time to observe, such as a running record, coordinate that observation time with another adult so that children are supervised and staff:child ratios are maintained.

  Repeat observations over time. For many skills and behaviors, particularly cognitive, social–emotional, language and literacy, and approaches toward learning, a single observation does not provide enough information to fully determine what a child knows and can do. Children's behaviors are not always consistent. Many factors (e.g., illness, lack of sleep, hunger, changes at home, changes in the daily schedule, changes in staff, the developmental process) may influence what children do and say from day to day, and even from hour to hour, so multiple observations are needed.

  It is important to note, however, that one observation can yield information about more than one area of development. For example, the following observation provides information related to motor, social–emotional, and language skills:

> ***5/5, outdoor play space, 2:30 p.m.:***
> *Jorge (13 months) on riding toy, holds steering handles, pushes it straight using his feet. Stops in front of Wendall (13 months), leans forward, pats Wendall's arm 3 times, says "Da, Da." Wendall moves. Jorge continues pushing riding toy with his feet and steers straight to far edge of pavement without bumping into anything/anybody.*

- **Plan for spontaneous observation opportunities.** Although this may sound like a contradiction, it is not. Often, infants and toddlers do and say things that are new and unexpected; these behaviors may occur during unplanned observation times. Staff can prepare for these moments by:
  - Putting note-taking materials (e.g., writing tools; index cards; sticky notes; mailing labels; note pads; clip boards and paper) in strategic places around the room, in the pocket of a smock or apron, or in a home visitor bag; and
  - Making sure that cameras and audio recording devices are in working order, have fully charged batteries, and are easily accessible.

- **Decide how observations will be organized and stored.** There are many ways this can be done. Staff should choose what works best for them.

[18] *Ibid., 374.*

[19] *Jablon, Dombro and Dichtelmiller,* The Power of Observation*, 88–90.*

For example:[19]

– File folder for each child kept in hanging files in file cabinet, large box, or crate

– Index cards in file box with a section for each child

– 3-ring binder notebook for each child

– Accordion folder for each child

– Hanging shoe bag, with pockets labeled for each child

Many EHS and MSHS programs ask staff to create portfolios to support observation-based assessment. Portfolios are collections of children's work, notes and photographs from families, checklists and other print recording tools, and other items that document what children know and can do. Written observation notes, photos, and audio and video files may be included as part of the portfolio. Portfolios may be physical, virtual (some online assessment tools allow users to input observation notes and upload photos, video, and audio files for each child), or a combination of both. To be useful, portfolio items should:[20]

– Be dated and filed in order;

– Represent various parts of the program (e.g., routines, play experiences, transitions); and

– Present a balanced view of the child's growth in all developmental domains.

Over time, the portfolio collection serves as a concrete record of the child's progress toward individual goals as well as the program's school readiness goals, so it should be reviewed regularly with families. Staff should explain what they include in the portfolio and why they include it. They should also actively encourage families to contribute information and items to their child's portfolio.

Note that observation information and children's portfolios must be kept confidential. EHS and MSHS programs should follow their confidentiality policy regarding storage and who has access/permission to view the information. Families should have permission to see only their child's observation information and portfolio.

- **Find time to file observations (e.g., naptime, planning time, beginning or end of day, end of each week).** Do not wait too long; observations can quickly pile up or get lost during the course of a busy day or week.

- **Decide how often to review observations (e.g., daily, weekly, bimonthly).** The more frequently staff review observations, the sooner they have the information they need to respond appropriately to each infant and toddler and plan accordingly. Very young children develop quickly, so staff may need to review observations more often.

  EHS and MSHS management staff can support staff with filing and reviewing observations by ensuring that there is dedicated time for these tasks.

- **Include families in the observation process.** Consider the following story from a home visitor.

[20] *Koralek, Dombro, and Dodge,* Caring for Infants & Toddlers, *376, 378.*

During a home visit, I watched Troy and Celeah try to get their daughter, Jasmine (18 months old) to play a game of matching similar objects (2 yellow balls and 1 wooden yellow cylinder). The first time Troy held up a round, yellow ball and asked her to find one like it, Jasmine picked up the other yellow ball. Both Troy and Celeah clapped and said, "Good job, you found the ball!" Troy then put the ball down and asked Jasmine to put her ball down, too. Jasmine rolled the ball to Celeah. Celeah then picked up the ball and asked Jasmine to find one like it.

Instead of picking up the other ball, Jasmine laid the cylinder on its side and rolled it toward her mom. Celeah quickly said, "No, no. Find the ball that looks like mine. See, it's round and yellow." Jasmine sat for a moment, and then crawled over to her mom, reached for the cylinder, and rolled it toward her dad. Troy looked at Jasmine. He shook his head, sighed, and said, "Oh. Okay. So you want to roll things. Okay. I'll roll the ball to you." For the next few minutes, Troy, Celeah, and Jasmine rolled the balls and cylinder back and forth to each other. I was delighted by this. It was the first time I had seen Troy and Celeah follow Jasmine's lead rather than fuss at her for not following their directions.

After the game was over, I shared my observation with them and asked what they had noticed about their interaction with Jasmine. Troy smiled and said, "Well, it was a lot easier than making her play the game and having her start crying and me feeling frustrated. I didn't know she could pay attention like that. I even had fun!" At the next home visit, Troy, Celeah, and Jasmine showed me other household objects that roll.

Talk with families about why and how observations are made in the program. Teach them observation strategies such as "watch, ask, adapt." Provide relevant information (verbal and/or written) about child development so that families have a clearer understanding of what they observe. Invite them to share what they observe about their children verbally, through pictures and photographs, or in writing (e.g., notes in journals that go back and forth between home and the program, email exchanges if families have access to computers).

REVIEWING AND REFLECTING ON OBSERVATION INFORMATION

Once teachers, home visitors, and family child care providers have facts about each child, they have to do something with those facts. The first step is reviewing the facts and reflecting on what they mean. Staff ask themselves questions about what the information says about children's development, interests, and needs. The answers to these questions lead to individualizing care and learning.

There are many questions that staff may ask themselves. For example: [21]

- What developmental skill or activity does the child appear to be working on?
- What strategies does the child use 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/the actions of other adults who interact with the child 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?
- What other information do I need?
- What questions do I have for the child's family?

Staff who engage in reflection uncover children's likes and dislikes, what makes the child comfortable or uncomfortable, how the child approaches familiar and unfamiliar tasks and situations, and so on. They begin to see and track trends in children's growth and development.

[21] *National Infant & Toddler Child Care Initiative,* Infant/Toddler Curriculum, *21.*

> *Although* [staff] *cannot know for certain what a child is taking away from any given experience, the quality of the child's engagement can be observed and is an indicator of whether or not a particular experience is capturing the child's focus and attention . . . . Reflecting on the specifics of a child's experience contributes to a deeper understanding of* [the child's] *developmental process, leading to a more customized, individualized curriculum.*[22]

It is during the reflective process that interpreting the meaning of children's behaviors and interactions becomes important. These interpretations and insights give rise to each child's story. Each child's story informs responsive practice.

> *Jennifer, 4 months old and new to the program, seemed to use the same high-pitched intense cry for everything. We had difficulty figuring out what she wanted. Sleep? Food? Comfort? A pacifier wouldn't help; Jennifer didn't use one. Jennifer's parents mentioned they were having a hard time establishing a regular napping or feeding schedule. They were also finding it difficult to understand what their baby was trying to communicate.*
>
> *Frankly, we were at a loss. We started viewing Jennifer as a "difficult child," but we knew there had to be something more to it than that. So we made a plan with Jennifer's parents. We started to watch her closely and keep detailed observation notes. We even videotaped her. Jennifer's parents watched her closely, too, and shared their observations during drop-off and pick-up times.*
>
> *After about 2 weeks of observing, trying various strategies, and sharing information back and forth, we began to notice subtle differences in her crying and body movements. With Jennifer's parents, we started to figure out what Jennifer's cries and movements meant and respond accordingly. Jennifer's crying jags began to lessen as we learned what she needed and when she needed it. This experience really made us believers in observation!*

Families remain an important source of information during the reflection process. They can answer questions and help staff interpret what children's behaviors and interactions might mean as well. They can continue to share what they have observed at home and will often be able to share the strategies that work for them.

RESPONDING TO INFANTS AND TODDLERS BASED ON OBSERVATION

Observing, documenting, and reflecting guide teachers, home visitors, and family child care providers to intentional and purposeful responses. These responses happen in the moment (as with "watch, ask, adapt") or may be planned and carried out later. Through the process of observation and reflection, staff get to know each infant or toddler on a deep level so that they can individualize opportunities that support relationship building (child–teacher, child–family, child–child) and each child's developmental profile, preferences, interests, and needs. Staff use what they know about each child to:

- Adapt the environment (e.g., rotate toys and materials; rearrange space to enhance opportunities for movement, sensory exploration, social interactions, or privacy; introduce a new piece of equipment);

[22] *Ibid.*

[23] *J. Ronald Lally, "Infants Have Their Own Curriculum: A Responsive Approach to Curriculum Planning for Infants and Toddlers," in* Curriculum in Head Start, Head Start Bulletin #67 *(Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/Administration on Children and Families/Administration for Children, Youth and Families/Head Start Bureau, 2000).*

- Modify the daily schedule and/or routines in consultation with families; and
- Make decisions about how to best to guide the child's learning based on what the child knows and can do as well as what the child is ready to try.

In essence, individualization is driven by the interests of the child and the belief that even the very youngest children play a significant role in selecting their learning experiences, materials, and content.[23] This individualization process starts with observation.

A FINAL THOUGHT ABOUT OBSERVATION

Observation is one of the most powerful tools teachers, home visitors, and family child care providers have for building relationships with infants, toddlers, and their families. It is the entryway to seeing each child as a unique individual and as a capable learner. Learning the art of observation and how observation informs responsive caring and individualization takes time, effort, and practice. However, the payoff in terms of positive outcomes for children and their families, as well as growth in staff professionalism, is well worth the energy.

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