

Look at Me! Using Focused Child Observation With Infants and Toddlers

Whether we realize it or not, when we work with families, infants and very young children we are observing constantly. Observation becomes second nature; part of what we do. We are constantly taking in information; and consciously or not, these observations inform our work and interactions.

So much so, that it can sometimes be hard to recognize that we are observing . . . or when we are observing . . . or how to really identify or express what we observed or how we are using our observations

We can use the information gained from observation to individualize our time and work with families and children. Or it can help to guide our interactions with each other in ways that contribute to building and supporting strong relationships. And information gained from observation helps us to be part of building learning experiences that are best suited or tailored for individual children, families or groups

We can use focused observations; done over time, to measure or track a child's or family's progress and development . . . or to gain a deeper understanding of children and adults, their individual ways and goals and intentions.

When we are observing children we might ask ourselves questions like

Why? Why does this child do what they do?

What are they trying to communicate or accomplish?

or

What could I do to support them?"

Respectful child observation reflects a belief that infants and young children's behaviors have purpose and meaning and are worth attention. Focused observation of infants and young children gives us the opportunity to gain important information that informs our work with them and enhances our communication with their families

Watching this video clip you'll meet a toddler named Meadow. She's using a tricycle in a large indoor gross motor space. While you watch, think about what she is doing and how you might support her

What did you see? Everyone who watches Meadow will see this differently.

What did you notice about her motor abilities? How did she hold her body? How did she move her feet? How did she use her hands? Did you learn anything about her capacity to persist at a challenging task . . . or to problem-solve? If we were to watch 10 different children on a tricycle, each would look very different.

How could you support her? Did you learn anything else about Meadow from this short look at her?

Focused observation becomes a tool you can use to seek answers to these kinds of questions. It can provide you with an opportunity to take a moment to think about a child's goals or intentions; even before responding to them.

Observing from a respectful point of view can help us to make important discoveries about children, to learn more about them as individuals, to see how they respond to other children and adults . . .

or to see what tasks are easy for or challenge them, and to learn more about how they share their wants and needs.

These kinds of discoveries help teachers, caregivers, family childcare providers and home visitors to be responsive to each individual child's interests and needs.

All in all, observation can lead you to a deeper understanding of a child as a human being . . . which in turn leads you to a greater capacity to engage in a responsive relationship with the child. Relationships between caring, trusted adults and the infants and young children they care for provide the secure base that is the foundation for lifelong learning.

Sharing these observations with children's families also helps to strengthen the connection between program and home.

The next video clip gives us a glimpse of an infant and her mother. Watch what the child does . . . and what the mom does too.

What did you see this child do? . . . and how did her mom respond?

Did you learn anything about this child's development? If you were working with this family, what would stand out for you about this interaction?

Can you think of any questions you might ask mom about her daughter?

In a real life situation we would watch this child over and over again. But even in this short time period it's amazing how much information we can gain about her, and them.

As teachers, caregivers and home visitors, we also need to be sure to make regular opportunities to share information from focused child observations with families.

Regularly sharing observations. . . and actively pursuing a family's input and perspectives on their children, will not only give you a fuller view of the child as an individual, but will give parents the opportunity to work in partnership with you or to take the lead in their child's care and education.

Making opportunities to observe a child together; or to share and reflect on child observations with each other, can help to create the kind of mutually respectful environment that promotes the child's and family's needs.

Ultimately, thoughtful use of focused child observation can be one of the most powerful tools we have to ensure that we are learning all we can about children and families

. . . and that we are able to be responsive and effective in our roles in their care and education.

You can look us up on the ECLKC at www.eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov Click the yellow EHS NRC button in the middle of the page to find more resources from the Early Head Start National Resource Center designed to assist you in your work; or contact us at ehsnrcinfo@zerotothree.org. Wishing you all the best in your work, this is Laura Annunziata from the Early Head Start National Resource Center.