

## **Child observations and learning journeys**

This practice guide explores the importance of child observations and provides a step by step guide to the observation process

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**Supporting members to provide the highest standards of care and learning for children**

This practice guidance has been developed for all professionals including childminders, nursery workers and nannies

This guide covers:

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2. Why do we observe children?
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## 1. Introduction

Observation is an essential part of your practice that supports you to understand the individual needs of each child in your care. As you know every child is unique. Observing children enables you to learn about and enjoy the unique qualities of each individual child. Personalities can differ enormously even when the child is from the same family or has had the same background experiences. To enable adults to learn more about children, their likes and dislikes; their wants and needs and where they are in their learning and development, we must observe them and then analyse and use these observations to support children to progress.

The information that we observe and gather about children in order to plan and assess where they are in their learning and development, should not just be a paper exercise for local authorities and regulatory organisations such as Ofsted, CIW or your childminding agency. They are there for everyone, including the children, to map their journey through their time in the setting. How these are presented is personal to the setting, children and parents and carers, but they should clearly show how the child is progressing. They can be a clear indicator of the learning styles of children.

Whilst observing children you will watch their actions, behaviours, interactions and expressions. Sometimes you will just listen and others times you will join in and talk to them. Observation forms a vital part of the assessment and planning cycle. This guide will support you to understand why we observe, how to observe and what the next steps might look like.

## 2. Why do we Observe children?

Observations carried out in a sensitive way are a great tool for us to;

- Discover what interests a child and where they enjoy playing and exploring
- See how children interact with other children and adults
- See how children manage their feelings
- Start to understand the learning styles of individual children – i.e. schemas
- Start to see the stage of development
- Enable us to follow the sequence of development
- See if children are developing the characteristics of effective learning
- To understand and monitor specific issues i.e. behaviour, learning delay

### 3. Child Observations – what does it feel like?

#### Activity

Think about a time when you are doing an activity in your home. You might be baking, washing the car or gardening. A neighbour calls by, takes out a pen and some paper, observes what you are doing and starts to write notes. How would you feel?

It is unlikely that you would be very happy with this scenario.

- How do we know what children are thinking when the same is done to them?
- Do you make sure observations are carried out sensitively?
- Do you engage with children's questions if they ask what you are doing?
- Do you respect children's wishes if they indicate they are uncomfortable?



## Some things to think about when starting to observe children

- Have you considered where the information will be stored to ensure confidentiality?
- Do you observe in a way that interrupts or intrudes in the child's learning or activity?
- Have you told the child what you are doing, and are they comfortable with it?
- Do the observations take into account the child's background experiences, cultures, language and understanding?
- Have you asked for permission from the child's parents and/or carers?
- Are your observations positive, unbiased, objective, non- judgemental?

## 4. What is a good observation?

The aim of observing is to build up a picture of the child and use this information to support their learning and development. There are a number of observation methods that can be used:

- Written snap shots – great for building a picture of the child
- Movement/time records – for seeing how much time children spend in specific areas of a setting or engaged in specific activities
- Sociograms – for observing and recording who the child interacts with and how those interactions go
- Event observations – where you may observe at a particular time to build a picture of how the child is during this time i.e. meal times, story times etc.
- Longer written observations – say observing a child for 20 minutes solidly
- Photographs or sound or visual recording

The most commonly used observations tend to be the written snap shots and photographs, with the other methods brought in when there are specific concerns about a child's learning or development.

A good written snap shot observation can help us to build up a picture of a child in a way that is manageable in a busy childcare environment. It is important to remember a good observation doesn't need to take long to complete or fill pages of paper. The EYFS statutory guidance clearly states that

*“Assessment should not entail prolonged breaks from interaction with children, nor require excessive paperwork.”* (EYFS 2.2, P13, EYFS 2017)

## Elements of a good observation

- Carried out when the child is engaged in a freely chosen activity  
You will learn much more about a child's interests, their characteristics of learning, and their abilities when they are engaged in something they have chosen to do, rather than during a set or planed activity.
- Factual and written in the present tense  
The aim of an observation is to collect evidence, not to assess that evidence (we do that later). “Jane is showing a real interest in Spot the Dog” would not be an observation but an assessment because how do we know that she likes spot the dog? Where is the evidence? “Jane is looking at the Spot book, says ‘dog’ and smiles” is an observation as it records factual evidence for us to use later.
- Meaningful  
If you already have six observations on the same thing you don't need to do another as we won't be learning anything new about the child. Use your time wisely.

- Have the date and ideally the time noted  
Remember your observation is evidence so it is crucial you can pin point when the observation was carried out.
- Photographs must be annotated to explain what they are showing  
Again remember this needs to be done factually, photos are just another way of collecting that evidence.
- Children are not observed to a checklist  
I.e. you don't set out to see them doing XYZ so you can mark it off against developmental outcomes, such as Early Years Outcomes or Development Matters (England), or the Foundation Phase Profile (Wales). Not only will this bias you observing but you will most likely miss all the great stuff that will help you to support children's learning and development.
- Are you capturing the child's "voice"?  
This can mean writing word for word what the child says, or for younger children describing clearly how they make their wishes known, or what they were doing. Photos and examples of children's work are another great tool.



- Observing doesn't need to be time consuming  
A great way to collect snap shot observations is on post it notes. Have a pack in your back pocket and a pen to hand and when you see something you want to observe simply note it down. The post it notes can then be stuck in to the child's learning folder at a later date. There is no need to re-write the observation. In this way you can easily take observations as part of your daily routine for both your key children and your colleagues without the need to remove yourself from the care of the children.

Other methods of observing will take longer and will need a bit more planning. You will need to ensure that you can remain focused on the observation and not be interrupted. Don't let this be a barrier to carrying one out if you feel you need more focused evidence to understand and support a child.

## 5. Assessment

Once you have collected your observations you then need to use your professional judgment to assess the evidence they provide to understand what they are telling us about skills, knowledge, understanding or behaviour of a child.

In England the non statutory guidance Early Years Outcomes (2013) and The Early Education, Development Matters Guidance (2012) are there to support you in understanding the information your observations provide.

In Wales the Foundation Phase Profile Handbook (revised September 2017) and the Foundation Phase Framework (revised 2015) provide further guidance on observations and the principles within these documents will support improvements to your practice.

The activity below will help you to start to do this. Please remember though that in your childcare setting you wouldn't ever sit down with each individual observation and age and stage it. Instead you should carry out periodic formal assessment, using the evidence collected through your observations over 6-8 week period to assess where the child is at.

Remember "The Unique Child" is where you are "observing what a child is learning".

### Activity

Complete the table observation	Area of learning	Age band
Alesha draws a circle and attaches some lines. She says, "that's mummy".		
Scott waves his arms around when daddy puts his bib on him and he sees his bowl of food.		
Molly looks at her coat and says to Eve, "It's nearly like yours. The flowers are the same".		
Tom talks to his childminder about how mummy was cross and upset because he wouldn't get dressed that morning.		
Sandip puts the pieces of paper in the bin when asked to.		
Joseph takes the shiny objects and drops them into the tube. It makes a sound. He empties the tube and repeats the action.		
Oliver holds the big chinks in his whole hand and draws on the paving slabs outside.		

## 6. Emerging, Expecting and Exceeding

When observing and assessing children we are looking to see whether children are at the expected stage of development. If they are not at the expected level, they are emerging/developing/evolving. It does not matter what words you use as long as everyone understands. There may be slight or deeper concerns but it is important to recognise these early. All development progression must be discussed with parents and carers but where there are concerns, it is important to discuss these early and a plan of action agreed to give children the support they need to get to the expected level. Sometimes, outside agencies may be consulted and support given in other ways, for example speech therapist and physiotherapists.

Some children exceed in their development beyond the expected level. This may be in one or more areas of learning and development. Observations will help to identify where these children need extra support to keep them interested and motivated to learn further. These children need as much extra support as those who are emerging or at the expected level. Remember, you must meet the needs of all children in your care. In England, Ofsted are looking at how

“...all children progress well from their different starting points”

(Early Years Inspection Handbook 2015)

When aging and staging children’s development it can sometimes be difficult to decide which age bracket they fit into; it is ok to use your professional judgment. A great way of thinking about it is “best fit”. Children are all individual and will never neatly fit into written guidance, rather you are looking for which descriptors “best fit” where the child is at. Remember children will often be at different levels in different areas of learning.

When observing children and making assessments, consideration must always be taken into account of internal and external factors that may affect the child at particular times. Factors that may influence a child’s behaviour and development may include;

- A new baby in the family
- Separation and/or divorce
- Illness

Children sometimes regress for short periods and need to go back and refresh learning a skill. Always discuss the situation with the parents and carers and support them also in helping their child through any difficulties.

## 7. Next Steps

Observations on children are only useful if you do something with them. They are used to make an assessment on the child’s learning and development. Once an assessment is made, what then happens? It may be that you identify a “next step” for the child to extend their learning and/or development. It may be that you enhance an area, or plan an activity based on the child’s interest.

In Wales, the National Minimum Standards (revised April 2016, standard 7.10) states

*“What children do is observed and recorded to help plan the next steps for the children’s play, learning and development.”*

You should not spend long periods away from the children, just doing observations or planning. The Department for Education, EYFS Statutory Framework (2017 p13 2.2) states

*“Assessment should not entail prolonged breaks from interaction with children, nor require excessive paperwork. Paperwork should be limited to that which is absolutely necessary to promote children’s successful learning and development”.*

## Remember

- Who I am doing my record keeping for?
- Why I am doing the observations?
- Do my observations reflect the child’s achievements?

Observation, assessment and next steps are not always written down. Children develop fast and to keep up with children’s interests you need to consider if a response to something you have just observed needs to happen in the moment. In reality most practitioners do this all the time, every day without ever really stopping to consider that they are in effect carrying out *moment by moment*, observation, assessment and planning. Consider this scenario;

*Esme crawls across the room and pulls herself up using the storage unit. She starts stepping sideways and quickly reaches the edge of the unit. Letting go with one hand she attempts a further step but loses her balance and lands on her bottom. Pulling herself up again she looks around the room. I walk over to her and she smiles holding out her hand. "Do you want to walk" I ask holding out my hands toward her. She smiles again and reaches towards my hands. Taking a moment to balance herself she then starts stepping forward. "Good walking" I say.*

The practitioner has:

- Observed the child crawling, reaching the end of a unit and looking about the room
- Assessed that the child is interested in practicing walking but needs some further support
- Planned to support the child learning by walking over in the moment and offering her hand

### Activity"

Using the observations from the assessment section, plan some "next steps" for these children. For those working in England you can use the non-statutory guidance Early Years Outcomes (DfE 2013) or Early Education, Development Matters Guidance (2012) if necessary. In Wales you can use the Foundation Phase Profile Handbook (revised September 2017) and the Foundation Phase Framework (revised 2015) if needed. Think about the adult's role (positive relationships) and what the adult could provide to enhance the child's learning and development (enabling environments).

If your planning is always based on what children can do, enjoy doing and are interested in, then this will ensure that your planning is child centred. Remember also to adapt the activity and/or environment to ensure that all children can take part if they wish.

## 8. Learning Journeys

You now have all these great observations and assessments on individual children, how do you store them to ensure they are assessable and representative of the child? In most settings children will have what is known as a learning journey or learning record.

A learning journey can be called different things, depending on your setting. It is however, usually a file of different documents showing a whole picture of the child's learning and development through their time in the setting. The purpose of the learning journey is to build up a unique picture of what each child knows, understands, can do and wants to do, and how he or she learns best.

It is usually put together by the child's key person (in the case of a childminder, they are the key person). In a group setting it will also have contributions from other staff members if they have made an observation or completed an activity with the child.

The Learning Journey should always have contributions from the child's parents and carer, affirming the child's starting points. Parents and carers are the most important people in the child's life and know their children better than anyone. You therefore must take into account the experiences and observations that parents share about their children. This might be in the form of "all about me" information from the beginning, showing the child's likes and dislikes; needs and development. Parental contributions should be integral to the



file/journey and can include any observations from home – this could be;

- Pictures or anecdotal
- Signatures to show parents have read seen observations
- Or assessments on children’s learning, development and progress

Other documental evidence might be:

- Setting observation, including what children have said and done
- Photographs which should be anecdote
- Art and craft examples; pictures, drawings and any other forms of mark making

The pieces of work and evidence in the learning journey should make reference to the areas of learning and development within the Early Years Foundation Stage in England, or the areas of learning within the Foundation Phase in Wales.

The learning journey belongs to the child and the family. Children should always be involved in putting their learning journey together and ‘taking ownership of it. They are then involved in their own assessment and planning.

Ideally, it is better if the learning journey stays within the setting so that additions can be made as an ongoing process. Parents and carers must be allowed to take it home on request. To ensure confidentiality, personal information such as addresses and personal details must not be included. The learning journey should go with the child and family when they leave the setting. Photocopies of some of the evidence can be retained for Ofsted, CIW or childminder agency evidence if you so wish but only with the written permission from the parents and carers. You might also want to share some of the information with another setting that the child attends, but again only with written parental consent.

### Activity

Make a list of the types of observations and evidence that you might include in a child’s learning journey.

- What sort of things can you do to involve children and their families in contributing to the file?
- How will you ensure that the journey shows clearly how the child is making progress in each of the seven areas of learning and development?

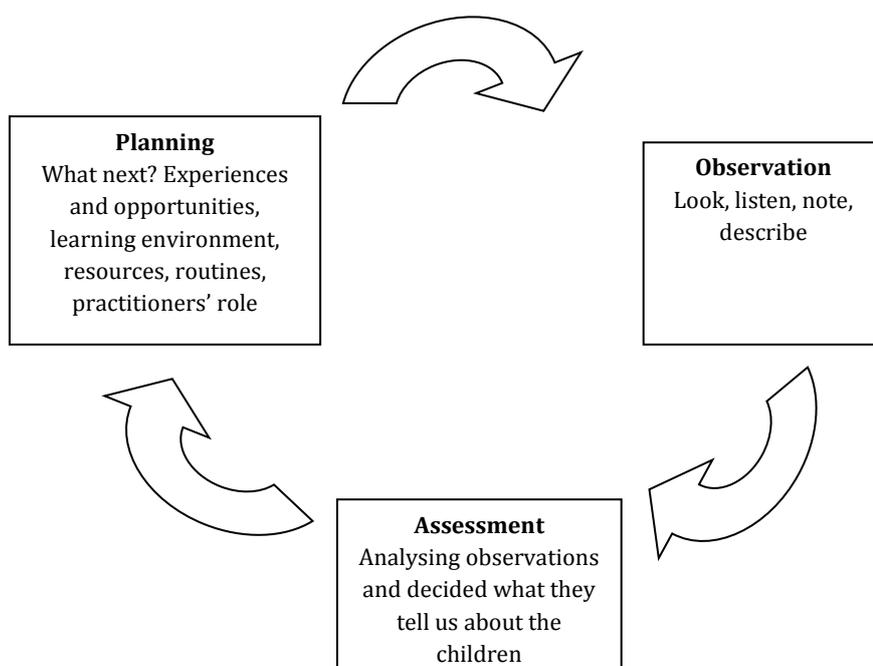


## 9. Observing your setting

Finally, it's worth remembering that it is great practice to take the time to observe your setting from time to time. Just standing back and observing how the space is used by the staff and children is a really valuable tool that can be lost in the day to day. Consider making time to stand back and watch with a fresh pair of eye's things like;

- How is spaced used?
- Are there areas that children never go to or only spend a short time in? Why is this?
- Are there area's that you hadn't considers as "child space" but that children always take toys to?
- How are children flowing through the space? Do they get stuck in a bottle neck? Have they turned a piece of furniture into a roundabout to run round?
- Is there an area where fights and squabbles always seem to start from?
- How are children accessing outside space? And practical things like their coats to enable them to go outside?
- What happens at lunch time? How is it working for the children *and* staff?

## 10. Summary - The Planning Cycle



## Ten principles

Hutchin, V. (2007 pgs. 35–41) describes ten principles that underpin practice when observing children. As you read these principles, think about what implications these have on your own practice.

- The starting point for assessment is the child, NOT a pre-determined list of skills against which a child is marked
- Observations and records show what the children CAN do - their significant achievements - not what they cannot do
- Practitioners observe children as part of their daily routine
- Children are observed in play, in self-chosen activities as well as planned adult-directed activities

- Observations should note the child’s interests, passions and concerns as well as how the child is learning
- Observations are analysed to highlight achievements and needs for further support, and used for planning “what next?”
- Parents’ contributions to the assessment process are central
- Children must be involved in their own assessment, and their voices heard, regardless of age or ability
- All records are open, accessible and shared regularly with parents and the children concerned
- The child’s record of achievement should be regularly reviewed and summarised, to ensure the child’s progress is tracked and learning and development are appropriately catered for

### Links to PACEY Professional Standards

Here are the areas of professional standards that this practice guide relates to. Remember reading practice guides can count towards your CPD and can support you in reflecting and completing the professional standards audit tool.

PACEY Professional Standards
<p><b>Member</b></p> <p>Observing the children in your care will help you meet the standard: <b>C1.1 Organise activities, routines and experiences to promote children’s development</b> by making informal observations of different children by noticing their responses, behaviours, actions and progress towards development milestones?</p>
<p><b>Affiliate</b></p> <p>Observing the children in your care will help you meet the standard: <b>C1.2 Organise activities, routines and experiences to promote children’s development</b> by observing, listening to and assessing children informally at all times, taking note of their responses, behaviours, actions and progress towards development milestones.</p>
<p><b>Fellow</b></p> <p>Observing the children in your care will help you meet standard <b>6.3 Empower children to reach their full potential</b> by understanding and applying a wide range of relevant and up-to-date theories of child development and childcare practice to help make sense of children’s behaviour.</p>

## 12. References

Department for Education (2017) *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* DfE Publications

Department for Education (2013) *Early Years Outcomes*

Early Education (2012) *Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage* Early Education

Hutchin, V.(2007) *Supporting Every Child's Learning across the Early Years Foundation Stage*  
Hodder Education

Early Years Inspection Handbook (2015)

Welsh Government (revised April 2016) [National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare for children up to the age of 12 years](#)

### **13. Resources - websites, reading materials and books**

Carr, M. (2001) *Assessment in Early Childhood Settings: Learning Stories, Effective Early Learning*  
Paul Chapman Publishing

Sharman, C, Cross, W. et al. (2000) *Observing Children, a practical guide Second Edition* Cassell

[www.foundationyears.org.uk/early-years-foundation-stage-2012](http://www.foundationyears.org.uk/early-years-foundation-stage-2012)

<http://gov.wales/topics/educationandskills/foundation-phase/foundation-phase-profile/?lang=en>

### **14. Framework and/or Legislation**

Department for Education (2017) *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* DfE Publications

Department for Education (2013) *Early Years Outcomes*

Early Education (2012) *Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage* Early Education

Welsh Government (revised April 2016) [National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare for children up to the age of 12 years](#)

Welsh Government (revised 2017) [Foundation Phase Profile Handbook](#)

Welsh Government (revised 2015) [Foundation Phase Framework](#)

### **14. Support from PACEY**

As a PACEY member you can get more help by visiting the website [www.pacey.org.uk](http://www.pacey.org.uk) or by calling 0300 003 0005.

PACEY is the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years. A standard-setting organisation, we promote best practice and support childcare professionals to deliver high standards of care and learning.

Since 1977 we have provided high quality support to our members and have worked with government, local authorities and others to raise standards.

Together with our members - childminders, nannies and nursery workers - we are working to become the professional association for everyone in childcare and early years and ensure our members are recognised for the vital role they play in helping children get the best start in life.

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