

Child Development Institute

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**Guidelines for
Observing Young Children
in School**

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Guidelines for Observing Young Children in School

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**Child Development Institute
Sarah Lawrence College**

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Note to the reader

This brief guide is intended for students and teachers who are interested in learning the basics of observing children in their everyday surroundings. My review of works in the field led me to the conclusion that most books on the subject set out a list of requirements for “objective observation” that are daunting to all but the most devoted researcher and, in fact, can become a screen rather than a window between observer and observed. For this reason, I have attempted to provide a series of guidelines that should make the process of observation engaging rather than tedious, while yielding textured, nuanced material for interpretation. Three helpful works on observing young children are cited on the last page.

Aims

There are many reasons for observing children in preschool classrooms and day care settings. Observing children in one of their natural habitats is an excellent way to gain understanding of how young children experience their worlds and function in complex environments. At the same time, observations provide grounding for interpreting theory. For example, if you are reading about stages of development in Erikson or Piaget, you can think about your observations in terms of these psychologists' descriptions. Observations may provide illustrative material for a paper, or become the basis for developing a research project. Many classic studies in child development are based entirely on observational material. Teachers as well as psychologists depend on finegrained observation to develop their understanding of individual children as well as the functioning of a group.

Starting out

Instruction in observation previously emphasized the importance of being "objective," of not letting your own views or biases determine what you see. It is now widely recognized that obser-

vation is always selective. What we attend to and how we see it are shaped by our interests, purposes, and past experience.

While we necessarily see the world through our own lenses or interpretative schemes, systematic observation requires being objective in a particular sense – becoming aware of our own perspectives, considering how our perspectives enter into our perceptions, trying to imagine the views of the other, and comparing our observations with those of other observers. When making observation notes, it is important to concentrate on meaningful description. Evaluative comments come later.

Observation is a primary way of learning about the world and our place in it. Scientists and artists spend a great deal of time observing their environments and the creatures that inhabit these environments. So do the rest of us, although we may not be conscious of doing so. While we are all "natural observers," it takes time and patience to develop a systematic approach to observation.

Before you begin observing children in classroom settings, do some casual observations of kids in a local playground or another informal

setting such as the supermarket. Ask yourself what you learned from these observations. You might also try observing adults in several different situations, and ask the same question. Bring along a friend to observe a situation with you and then compare your impressions of what was happening.

If you are new to the classroom in which you will be observing, introduce yourself to the teacher and teacher assistants. Ask them to help you learn the children's names. Find out the general schedule of the day and acquaint yourself with the different areas of the classroom. Later, make a map of the classroom from memory, and then check it. Write down your recall of a few incidents, your impressions and reactions. You may want to begin a journal as a supplement to, or including, your observational records.

Your first observations in the classroom should be of anything that interests you. Keep in mind that the "ordinary" is as significant as the unusual. Try to think about how the world looks through the child's eyes – how does she see and understand the physical space of the room, other children, the grown ups?

Observational settings and the observer

Observational settings range from naturally occurring situations to highly controlled laboratory situations. The first are sometimes referred to as "natural field situations" and include both indoor and outdoor settings.

In a day care setting, preschool or other school classroom, you are observing children in one of their natural environments. These are physical environments made up of different kinds of equipment and spaces: classrooms filled with furniture and other equipment, hallways, and outdoor areas through which the children move. They are also social environments inhabited by children, head teachers, assistant teachers, and sometimes other adults as well (e.g. parents, visitors).

Whenever you observe a child, you are necessarily observing the child *in an environment*, not as an isolate. It is important to keep this in mind

and to make your observations in a way that includes the child's relation to, and interactions with, both physical and human surroundings.

If you are a student assistant, assistant teacher, or teacher, it is most appropriate to think of yourself as a *participant observer*. You are interacting with the children and observing them at the same time. On some occasions (and having previously consulted with the head teacher), you may stand back from the class to observe and take notes. We refer to these two modes of observation in natural settings as *observing in the thick of it* and *observing from the sidelines*. You may shift between these two modes in a relatively short period of time. The two modes of observation yield different kinds of records (described under *Observational records*).

Observing in the thick of it

When you know what you are interested in (for example, social interaction in the housekeeping corner), it is possible to do focused observation even while you are interacting with the children. Concentration is required to keep your mind going on two tracks simultaneously but, with practice, you can do it.

Carry a small pad or notebook in a pocket, and jot down a few words or phrases as things are happening, or very shortly thereafter. These notes will help you reconstruct the episodes.

Observing from the sidelines

You should try to make arrangements to do some observing from the sidelines. To do this, first consult with the head teacher about good times for observation and where you can stand or sit without being in the way. Observing from the sidelines means just that – standing back from the flow of events and taking detailed notes on what is happening. For teachers or assistant teachers, it is helpful to arrange times when you are not urgently needed in your teaching capacity.

General points

Depending on the purpose of your observation, you will note the child's real name or use a pseudonym, initials, or a code number. In most cases, you will do the latter in order to protect confidentiality.

For both kinds of observation, if a child asks you what you are doing, you can say "I'm doing my work" or "I'm taking a few notes so I'll remember what happened" or something else that feels natural and is true but doesn't make the kids feel self-conscious or uncomfortable.

After your first time in an observational setting, make a mental list of the children in the class. Is it complete? Draw a map of the classroom, with approximate locations of major furniture, etc. Is it more or less accurate?

What to observe

What you observe will depend on your purposes. After your first weeks in a classroom, there will be a focus, or several foci, for your observations. Are you aiming to learn about young children in general and their patterns of development? Are you gathering data for a paper or research project on children's pretend play? Are you studying how young children communicate with each other? Are you interested in how children make friends? Do you want to learn about a specific child's patterns of behavior in the classroom?

In any case, observe specific incidents or events, and describe each as fully as possible. Remember that actions are meaningful. Note *what* the child is doing, but also consider *how* she is doing it. For example, a child is riding a bicycle from one place to another. What is the child doing while she or he rides? Does she attend to her social and/or physical surroundings? What is the quality of the movement, the general attitude or stance, etc.? Consider another example: Two children are building together. Do they seem to be working collaboratively, or is each working alone although in physical proximity to the other? Do the children seem planful in their work on the building, or do they have a more carefree approach? What is each actually doing that makes you think she is "planful" or "carefree"?

Concentrate on the moment. General statements, about the child or the meaning of the activities, are not part of the observational record *per se*. They belong in your commentary and/or conclusions about the observations.

Be sure to note:

- Setting (area of classroom)
- Date, starting time
- Participants (pseudonym, age, gender)
- Actions of each child in relation to context (and, if more than one child, in relation to others)
- Verbalizations
- Length of observation (or indicate ending time)

Observational records

There are many kinds of observational records, ranging from field notes (sometimes termed 'anecdotal recordings') to check lists and rating scales. In addition, observations from the sidelines can be done as event samples or time samples. In event sampling, you observe episodes of a particular kind of behavior; in time sampling, you observe whatever happens within, for example, the first 5 minutes of every 20 minutes. Two types of observational records will be considered here: *field notes* and *running records*.

Field notes

Field notes are accounts reconstructed from observations taken when the observer can jot down only a few phrases describing the event and perhaps fragments of the children's speech in the situation. It is very difficult to remember details of an event, particularly dialogue, after more than a little time has passed. As soon as possible – not more than few hours later – use your notes to write an account of what you observed, or speak it into an audio recorder. If you don't recall parts of the event, or couldn't hear part of what was said, indicate the gaps rather than trying to fill in.

Running records

A good running record is a detailed observation done at the moment the observed event is occurring. Generally, the observer has to stand back from the situation, but not necessarily for more than a few minutes.

A running record includes the major actions and verbalizations of the child or children, described in relation to the context, and within a time framework. The time of observation, setting and passage of time should be clearly indicated.

Doing complete running records is difficult and requires experience. It is a good idea to begin by observing an individual child engaged in some action (such as building with blocks) and move on to observing more complex situations (such as conversation at snack time, or collaborative play).

You may want to prepare record sheets with a place for entering date, time, setting, and participants. Time (in intervals of 5 or fewer minutes) should be indicated at the left. You may want to record verbalizations and actions together, in sequence (as in Examples 1 and 2).¹ Another possibility is to have a column to record the activities and verbalizations of each participant; this format allows one to get a quick sense of sequences and interactions (Example 3) A third possibility is to describe verbalizations in one column and actions/context in another (Examples 4 and 5).

Maps, drawings and photographs

A map of the classroom or playground is a helpful addition to observation notes. It provides the reader (as well as the observer later reflecting) with a concrete sense of the spatial environment. While you are doing this, try to imagine what the space and objects look like from the child's point of view, both literally and psychologically. You might want to draw a second map, embodying what you imagine to be the child's point of view.

Drawings, diagrams and photographs provide an interesting addition to observation notes. For example, even a rough sketch of a

block building – or a sequence showing different phases of construction – gives a kind of information that is difficult to communicate in words. With permission of the lead teacher, you may be able to take photographs or do audio- and/or video recording.

Photographing and recording are not a substitute for note-taking; they are different ways of making and processing observations, and can be used effectively as a complement to written records.

Equipment

Taking notes: You should have a small pad and a pen or pencil for taking notes while you are in the thick of it – that is, involved in the ongoing work of the classroom. It is very helpful to wear pants or a shirt with a pocket that holds the pad and writing implement so you can easily reach for these. You will also need a larger notebook for entering more extended accounts, whether these are in the form of *field notes* or *running records*, and for your interpretive comments.

Photographing and/or recording: If you take photographs, try to use fast film (or digital equivalent) and a setting that does not require flash. It is difficult to use a tape or DVD recorder in the classroom setting because as much background noise as anything else will be picked up, but in some circumstances such recording is possible. Do not hide the recorder. Video recording is preferable to audio recording because you can see who is acting as well as speaking.

Observation and interpretation

We bring our cognitive and emotional framework to the process of observing, and at the same time try to “stand back” and be aware of how our personal stance may color what we see. Observations are not the same as interpretations – they are descriptions that become the raw material for interpretation. Interpretations are a level removed from the phenomena. Searching for patterns among a group of observations is an important form of interpretation. In other cases, you may make inferences. For example, observing a child's behavior in one setting and then in

¹ Sample records begin on page 6

another, you may note inconsistencies and then infer underlying reasons. In some cases, you may bring a specific theoretical framework, such as Erikson's or Piaget's, to bear in considering your observations. It's important to be aware of the different levels: (1) observing (with record keeping); (2) searching for patterns or configurations; (3) making first level inferences; (4) constructing interpretations that draw on a specific theory or theories. The finer your observations, the more grounded and textured your interpretations will be.

Sample records

Example 1.

The following is a complete observation of a play episode outdoors, done in the Fours' group at the Sarah Lawrence College Early Childhood Center.

Participants: Two girls (G1, G2) and a boy (B).

Setting: It is the beginning of the outdoor play period. The children are waiting around for the shed to be opened. In the shed are numerous play accessories including shovels, buckets, bats and balls. The shed is flung open by the head teacher, and all of the children rush to the toys.

B: Does anyone want to build a sandcastle with me?

G1: Yes

B: A big, big one?

G1: Yes!

The two children disappear behind the shed door momentarily, and return with one shovel each, exuberant smiles on their faces. They rush to the sandbox and quickly dig in the sand.

G1: I don't want to get sand in my leggings. (She steps outside the sandbox and begins to play in the sand from outside only, with her hands touching the sand).

B: We have to use the soft. (He slides his shovel into the sand, scooping it up and turning it over, and pats it out with his hands).

G1: Let's make a stream.

B: A street.

G1: No! A stream!

B: O.K. (He begins to dig long and windy patterns from a mid-point of the box to different areas at the edges).

G1: (She is building a mound of sand that I suppose to be the foundation for the castle). These are only fish in the river (not looking up from her sand pile).

B: (Looking down at G1) Nope. No fish, only boats. Let's make a short cut to the castle. (He digs a straight trench to the castle in the sand).

G1: O.K., you do everything but the castle, cause I can't come in there. (She slowly continues to build her mound of sand).

B: 'Cause you'll get sand in the shoes.

G1: No, not my shoes. In my leggings.

At this point, another girl comes along, apparently looking for someone to play with. She walks over to the boy and sits down beside him.

G1: Oh you! (said rather angrily)

G2: Why are you getting mad at me?

B: You're sitting on the river.

G2: (Picks up a leaf from the pretend river and says:) Look, no more leaves in the river. (All the children laugh).

B: I made some steps for the Jacuzzi. (He points out a series of riffs in the sand and a small hole). Let's make a chimney for the castle... (Play ends as teacher says it's time to pick up and go inside).

Example 2.

The children (B- boy, age 5 and G- girl, age 8) are playing in a waiting room over a ten to fifteen minute period. The children have met and playing together before in the same setting. The 5 year old boy has (again) brought a collection of small plastic toys—“Power Ranger” and Megazoid transformers and action figures.

G: Did you bring the foot this time?

B: Yeah.

The children kneel at a large round coffee table, unpack the figures from a plastic box and begin to play, pretending to be the characters.

B: No one's gonna mess with me!
Oh no! It's Cyclo-claws!
Follow me everybody.
Get rid of the helmets. We don't need it.

(Inaudible narration/dialogue)

B: I need this one.

G: Can I have that piece? (B nods assent.)

B: Welcome to our city. We'll get rid of those Power Rangers. Welcome to the city of fighting!

G: (Moves toy figure over table in concert with B.)

B: No, the helmet's supposed to be in the middle. (Reaches over and adjusts part of G's toy figure).
I'll get rid of you! (Picks up toy sword with same hand that is holding toy figure. B's toy figure pursues G's toy figure.)

G: (Stands and moves two to three feet away from B, “flying” her toy figure slightly above the level of B's head.)
The helmet is magic. The helmet shoots.

B: Oh nooooo.
It's going away from its normal place.
(Begins rummaging in toy box) Where's that sword...that gray sword...

G: It's getting more powerful!
Where does this go?

B: You mean where does it attach?
(Reaches over and attaches accessory to G's toy figure.)

Episode ends. B and G discuss attachments and construction of the toys.

Example 3.

The following is excerpted from a student's record of two children in a Fours group at the Sarah Lawrence College Early Childhood Center.

Participants: A (boy, age 5;2), J (boy, age 4;7).
Setting: Blockroom; the kids are building together.

Child A

Whoa! (block is falling down; A tries to steady it) I...because...but this goes onto there (placing block on top of tower structure)

I...know, Joe, but the boat will...I know how...wait a minute...I'll tell you what happened. The boat will go through the bridge (rearranges the "tower" to make a bridge structure)

And now other people will come over here and go in this. (The toy boat is pushed under the bridge, then in an arc toward Joe's arrangement where there is an opening like a harbor).

{Diagram, not reproduced here, was appended to the record}

Child J

I know, but this goes into there and then the people can walk and sit... (inaudible)... We need a boat to...(gets toy boat from shelf)

Yeah, and then go into there

Example 4.

The following is the first part of a running record taken in the Twos-and-parents group at the Early Childhood Center. The exchange recorded is between a child and the head teacher.

Participants: A (1;11) and T (teacher).

Setting: Classroom.

Verbalization

Action/context

A: What's my name? What's my name?

Said to the teacher, while rocking boat

A: Get out.

Starts to get out of the boat, awkwardly

T: Do you want to get out of the boat?

Teacher moves toward boat and extends hand to A., helps her out of boat

A walks over to block shelf and starts taking blocks off shelf, piles a few blocks and knocks them over

A: (laughs wildly as blocks fall)

T: They all fell down!

A moves over to table, picks up piece of playdough and reaches toward teacher, as if intending to hand it over

A: Oof! Here! (handing playdough to teacher)

T accepts offered playdough...

T: Thank you.

A gets up and looks toward corner of room with easel

T: Would you like to paint, A.?

A nods, looks at T and walks toward easel. T puts smock on A as A starts reaching for brushes. A takes brush from paint jar and makes sweeping gesture across paper on easel...does this a few more times...

Observation ends

Total time: 10 minutes

Example 5.

Two girls making sand “cakes” inside the playhouse in the playground.

Participants: B (girl, age 3;4), L (girl, age 3;4), and M (observer).

Setting: outside in the playground in the playhouse.

Verbalization

Action/Context

L: I’m going to get more sand

Both girls leave the house and run over to the big sand box in the middle of the play ground, scoop up sand in their hands and run back to the house

B: Me too
(about a minute goes by)

L: Here we go

She drops sand on the “cake” (some sand doesn’t make it into the bucket, but it doesn’t bother her). B drops sand on “cake” and picks up stirring sticks stirs sand in the bucket

L: We need even more sand to make soft, it’ll taste good then

Runs back to big sand box

B: (singing) I’m stirring, I’m stirring!!

Singing as she stirs sand in bucket

M: What kind of cake is it?

B: (thinks for a minute) banana cake, my mommy makes it the best

Doesn’t look up at me, just keeps stirring

L: Yeah, banana cake

Comes back with sand in her hands and drops it on “cake” just as B says “banana cake”

B: Careful, don’t spill it cause we don’t have any more eggs

She picks up some of the sand that has fallen outside the bucket and puts it into the bucket

B: No, I’m stirring!

L and B pick up the stirring stick at the same time...B is starting to look a upset

L: No, it’s my turn now!

L is trying to hold onto the stick as B is pulling it away

B: No, I’m still...!

B is still trying to hold the stick away from L

L: My turn!	L is getting more upset and aggressive – pulling harder on the stick
B: Let's look for another	Gets up
L: I'm getting another...okay?!	At the same time both loosen their hold on the stirrer and look at each other (their distressed faces fade) and decide to get up and look outside the house in the bushes for a new stick for L
B: Here	Comes running up to L and hands her a much smaller, thinner stick
L: No, too small, cake spoons are much bigger	Looks at the stick and shakes her head no and throws it back into the bushes and gets up again
L: Look, I found one	Runs back into the house holding a stick about the same size as B's. She now has a smile on her face
L: I'm mixing now	Both are mixing again
B: We're done...now to bake it	Puts stick down and flattens the sand on top gently puts stick down and picks up the "cake" and runs to a table and sticks it underneath – the oven

Readings

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The Child Development Institute was established in 1987 to enhance existing programs in child development at Sarah Lawrence College and to serve as a base for new activities.

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