PART 5

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CHAPTER 22

OBSERVING AND ASSESSING CHILDREN

BY JANE MURRAY, JEMIMA HARRIS AND CHRISTINE O'BRIEN

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By reading and engaging actively with this chapter, you will be able to:

- distinguish who observes children
- explain why and how observation and assessment underpin early childhood provision
- select and justify how to observe, report, and store data gathered during observations and assessments of young children's development and learning
- know how to respond ethically to young children's voices as part of observation and assessment processes.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on a highly valuable tool used by early childhood education and care (ECEC) practitioners: **observation** and **assessment** for supporting and enhancing young children's development and learning (D&L). The chapter, which focuses predominantly on ECEC practice in England, is written from the perspective that ECEC practitioners can advocate for young children by ensuring that processes of observation and assessment prioritise the needs

of each young child with whom they work. Attention is given to who might observe young children, why observation is used, its historical roots, and how observations of young children's behaviours can be conducted in ECEC settings. The chapter also considers how child observation **data** might be recorded, reported, and stored safely and securely, and addresses practical and ethical considerations that ECEC practitioners may need to consider concerning their observations and assessments of young children's behaviours, D&L in settings.

WHO OBSERVES CHILDREN AND WHY?

'Observation educates the senses' (Daston and Lunbeck, 2011, p.1) and, in the professional ECEC setting, is 'the systematic watching and noting of people and phenomena' (Podmore and Luff, 2012, p.8). For this chapter, observation is defined as early childhood practitioners' systematic uses of their senses to capture data and **evidence** about young children's behaviours and related events. 'Data' and 'evidence' are defined later in the chapter.

Although the chapter focuses predominantly on ECEC practitioners observing and assessing in settings, other professionals also observe young children. This section acknowledges child observations undertaken by others as part of making holistic provision for young children. Wragg (2012, p.vii) suggests, 'Observing the behaviour of our fellow humans is something we all start in babyhood and never finish.' Intense parental observation that occurs during eye contact between parents and infants is key for securing successful early attachment (Underdown et al., 2013; Magagna and Pasquini, 2014). Additionally, the observations different professionals conduct feed into assessments of young children's D&L.

Radiographers and Obstetric Practitioners

Radiographers conduct scans to observe and establish the stage of the foetus and its development, according to specified norms (Nicolson and Fleming, 2013). Following birth, obstetrics staff observe newborn babies' capacity for independent life using the **Apgar score**,

followed by ‘careful physical examination and careful observation over the first few hours of life’ (Hughes et al. 2002, p. 642).

Social Workers

Social workers observe some children who may require special protection by capturing body language, for example, children’s gestures and posture, and qualities of verbal communication for children who have learned to speak. Social workers evaluate child observation data in conjunction with other data as a sound basis for deciding necessary actions to protect children (Trevithick, 2012).

Health Visitors, ECEC Practitioners and Parents

An important element of health visitors’ work in England is child health surveillance and screening. Parents are offered regular health and development reviews for babies up to two years, to check developmental milestones (NHS, 2020). Health visitors conduct observations for the 2-year-old health and development review in partnership with parents using *The Ages & Stages Questionnaires*® (Squires and Bricker, 2009), so it is often parents who conduct observations of their children, for report to health visitors. For children aged 2–3 years attending ECEC settings, the health visitors’ review is combined with ‘The EYFS Progress Check at Age Two’, completed by ECEC practitioners in settings. This integrated review captures data gathered over time through parents’, health visitors’ and practitioners’ observations concerning learning and cognitive development, including children’s speech, language and communication, personal, social, and emotional development, physical development and health. The data are used to assess individual children’s progress, strengths, and needs at 2–3 years to secure outcomes identified by government, including school readiness, to inform planning for children’s services and to initiate early intervention if needed (Public Health England, 2021). Using these data, practitioners must provide parents/carers with a written summary of their

child's communication, language, personal, social, emotional, and physical development (Department for Education, 2022).

Observing Developmental Norms

'Progress' referred to in the integrated review for 2-year-olds in England is framed by developmental norms: the stages a child is expected to reach by each age (e.g. Sharma and Cockerill, 2014). However well intended such measures may be, there is potential for misjudgement caused by early labelling of children's progress, so practitioners should exercise sensitivity in conveying messages to parents/carers. Informed practitioners avoid assuming all developmental norms apply to all children; they constantly review and respect individual children's D&L, taking into consideration children's cultures, ethnicities, and other experiences.

Observing Children for Accountability

When thinking about accountability, data and evidence are usually considered. Data can be defined as 'distinct pieces of information, usually formatted in a particular way' (Wells, 2008, p. 98). Data that inform the educational improvement agenda have tended to focus on narrow measures, particularly standardised test scores (Pella, 2012), yet 'Data that include observations of students as they are learning, as well as artefacts from a variety of learning activities, contribute to the development of an informed and responsive pedagogy' (Pella 2012, p. 73). In respect of young children, **data** are defined as information about young children's behaviours and related events, captured by early childhood practitioners' systematic observations and notes that record those observations.

Although data form an important component of child observation, they can only help ECEC practitioners to address young children's D&L needs if practitioners interpret the data so that it becomes evidence to inform their practice. Evidence means different things in different contexts but is often regarded as the organisation and explanation of 'observable data' (Oancea

and Pring, 2009: 20). Effective ECEC practitioners build full pictures of children's D&L, not only by capturing their own observation data in settings but also by considering it in context with other trustworthy data concerning young children's behaviours. This includes D&L data provided by others, such as parents, other agencies, colleagues, researchers, and the children themselves. For this chapter, then, evidence is defined as data about young children's behaviours that have been captured, organized, and explained by ECEC practitioners to inform decisions about provision for young children's D&L**.** Evidence can then be used to assess children's D&L.

Practitioners in England must observe young children in settings to provide data that comply with government requirements because they are accountable for young children's progress. In respect of the EYFS (DfE, 2021), this accountability is characterised by practitioners' conversion of rich information from real-world observations of children's daily lives, into numerical data linked to Early Learning Goals (ELGs). ELGs are a set of developmental norms that children are expected to attain, or exceed, in England before entry to school, aged 5. However, many practitioners in England seem unenthusiastic about generating such data and about the ways they are used – and misused – for accountability (Bradbury, 2014). Practitioners' lack of enthusiasm may reflect their concerns that 'performance data' detract from their primary use of observation as diagnostic tool to support individual young children's D&L (Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016: 119).

Observing Young Children on a Global Scale

On a macro-scale, global monitoring is another way young children are observed. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has developed the *International Early Learning and Well-Being Study* (IELS) (OECD, 2022) to observe and assess children's performance aged 4½ to 5½ years across domains 'predictive of positive life outcomes'. Domains include social skills, language and emergent literacy, mathematics and

numeracy, self-regulation, locus of control, and executive function. A key purpose of IELS is to capture ‘in-depth insights on children’s learning development at a critical age’, to ‘provide countries with a common language and framework’ for ECEC (OECD, 2022). The IELS was designed to provide a large data set concerned with developmental norms and contains an assumption that all young children everywhere develop and learn similarly at the same age. This assumption runs contrary to an appreciation that every child has distinctive capacities and individual needs, which practitioners who work with children each day understand very well. For these reasons, the IELS is strongly contested (Moss et al., 2016).

REFLECTION POINT 22.1

How can practitioners share news about their children’s progress being ‘less than expected’ in sensitive ways that are supportive of the child and the parent?

THE TRADITION OF OBSERVING YOUNG CHILDREN

There is a rich tradition in ECEC of using child observation data as a rich seam of evidence for understanding young children’s actions and for taking that understanding forward to make appropriate provision for each child’s D&L. Pioneers including Froebel (1826), Pestalozzi (1894), Montessori (1912), Isaacs (1930, 1933) and Piaget (1962) all based judgements about young children they worked with on first-hand evidence derived from child observations. Earlier pioneers practised observation from a philosophical perspective, but more recently, Piaget, Montessori and Isaacs used their scientific training to develop further the tradition of observation as a key tool to enable practitioners to ensure provision addresses every child’s needs and interests.

SPOTLIGHT ON PEOPLE 22.1

Susan Isaacs

Susan Isaacs pioneered progressive teaching methods with young children (Murray, 2021). Having studied infant teacher training, philosophy, psychology, and psychoanalysis, in 1924, Isaacs was appointed head of the progressive Malting House School (MHS) in Cambridge. She regarded children as researchers whose 'epistemic interest and inquiry' is no different from those of adult researchers (Isaacs, 1944: 322). Isaacs disapproved of child observations conducted in laboratory environments, as practised by Piaget (1936). The role of teachers at MHS was to observe children's behaviours naturalistically during play and apply their knowledge of child psychology to understand those behaviours and inform appropriate provision for D&L: 'Any judgement as to the educational value of the method followed must in the end rest upon the soundness or otherwise of the psychological basis' (Isaacs 1930, p.1). Later, Isaacs was highly influential in training teachers of young children to use observation and psychology as a basis for teaching. That legacy has prevailed in the UK and internationally (Gardner, 1969; Isaacs, 1929, 1930, 1933; Murray, 2021).

- Take some time to explore how the other pioneers used observation in their work with young children. Compare with how observation is seen and used today.

SELECTING, CONDUCTING AND RECORDING CHILD OBSERVATIONS IN A SETTING

Child observations can be carried out in many formats for different reasons (Sharman et al., 2007). To choose a type of observation ask:

'What do I want to find out?'

'What can I manage practically?'

This section summarises four observation techniques commonly used in ECEC settings: narrative, checklist, sampling and tracking observations.

Whichever technique is used, ECEC practitioners must report factually what they observe. The practitioner then evaluates the observation notes, spending time reflecting critically on what was observed, drawing on knowledge of child psychology theory and research, and of the child. This enables the practitioner to assess what observation data mean in terms of (a) what and how the child has developed and learned and their interests, and (b) what the practitioner can do next to support the child's D&L.

This section of the chapter focuses purely on capturing data during the observation. Examples of observation case studies are provided in the form of observations undertaken (see Figures 22.2–22.6). It is usually advisable to plan for observation, though not always feasible. When making observation notes, indicate the observation type, the objective of the observation, the date and time of the observation, the child's name and age, and the practitioner's name (Figure 22.1).

Insert Figure

Figure 22.1 Observation information

It may also be useful to include contextual information about the setting. At the end of each observation, a space should also be made for 'Evaluation', which is conducted after the observation to assess how it informs understanding about the child's D&L, and what that may mean for practice in the setting.

Narrative Observation

There are different forms of narrative observation, including child study, structured narrative, unstructured narrative, and anecdotal narrative (diary).

Child study

The practitioner observes a child and makes detailed notes at intervals over weeks, months or even years. The purpose of conducting a child study might be to capture data to inform assessment of overall progress.

Structured narrative

The practitioner observes a child and makes notes according to a pre-determined set of criteria, to capture data for a specific reason, for example how a child plays with other children.

Unstructured narrative

The practitioner observes the child to capture data about the child's naturalistic behaviour and writes down what the child does. An unstructured narrative provides rich detailed data about everything a child does over a medium period of time, for example 30 minutes. An unstructured narrative might be used to get to know a new child in the setting, or to assess how a child engages in free-flow play activities, for example.

Anecdotal narrative (diary)

The practitioner observes the child over one day, several days, or weeks and makes unstructured notes about what the child does each time. The purpose is to build a picture of a child's behaviour over time to spot patterns in behaviour. An anecdotal narrative may also enable a practitioner to understand the antecedents for a child's behaviour.

Checklist Observation

The practitioner observes the child to see if they present with a specific behaviour, usually over an identified period, for example one week. The practitioner makes a note with a tick or another symbol when the behaviour presents, and the practitioner may also add brief notes. The purpose may be to identify if a specific behaviour presents, or a pattern of behaviour emerges over an identified period. Examples might include a phonics checklist, a Portage checklist which breaks down the norms into smaller steps to develop a plan for parents and carers, or an activity list to

help a practitioner ensure all children have access to an activity. A checklist observation is quick and objective but lacks detail. Figure 22.2 shows Sukina's checklist observations of children in her key group who can jump, hop, and kick a ball in the autumn term.

Insert Figure

Figure 22.2 Sukina's checklist observations

Sampling Observation

Practitioners use sampling observations to capture data about children's specific behaviours; for example, a practitioner might observe a child who struggles to interact with other children. Different types of sampling observations include:

- time sampling observation
- event sampling observation
- snapshot observation.

Time sampling observation

The practitioner plans several observations at intervals, for example noting briefly what the child is doing every two minutes for ten minutes (Figure 22.3). Time sampling observation may be useful for knowing what a child is doing when, identifying antecedent behaviours, and observing children's involvement in activities.

Event sampling observation

The practitioner plans to observe, then observes a child's behaviour related to an event (Figure 22.4). Event sampling observations may help practitioners to understand individual children's behaviour and setting management issues, for example how children cope with transition into lunchtime.

Insert Figure

Figure 22.3 Fergus' time sampling observation

Insert Figure

Figure 22.4 Jemima's event sampling observation

Snapshot observation

The practitioner observes a child's behaviour briefly, usually spontaneously, often on sticky notes or labels. The practitioner might include photographs and usually transfers the short notes to an assessment record to build a picture of a child's behaviour over time (Figure 22.5).

Insert Figure

Figure 22.5 Jemima's snapshot observations

Tracking Observation

The practitioner observes and charts a child's movements on a setting map over a specified period (Figure 22.6). A tracking observation might help to identify if a child goes outside during free-flow play, or avoids messy play, for example.

This section has illustrated the central role of observation to ECEC practice. However, as Isaacs demonstrated (1929, 1930, 1933), observation can be equally valuable for ECEC researchers who use observation to capture data to provide answers to research questions. Ethical protocols must be used when observing for research in the UK (e.g. EECERA, 2014), yet aside from the Data Protection Act 1998 and General Data Protection Regulations 2018, similar protocols are rarely used for practice purposes.

Insert Figure

Figure 22.6 Will's tracking observation

ACTION POINT 22.1

Select and use one of the observation techniques indicated above to observe a child, then use these points to structure your evaluation and assessment of the observation:

- Keep the evaluation short, succinct, and critically analytical.
- Referring to the observation objective, consider critically what the observation data tell you about the child's interests, behaviours, D&L.
- Include other evidence (e.g. information from parents, other agencies, other observations), as well as data from this observation.
- Map your evidence to statutory requirements (e.g. DfE, 2021) as a minimum, plus relevant additional achievements.
- Consider what the evidence tells you the child is ready to learn next. What provision might help them?

EVALUATION OF CHILD OBSERVATIONS AS AN ASSESSMENT TOOL

Assessment can be used for teaching and learning, management and accountability and research (Carr, 2001; Nutbrown, 1999). Observation is valued as the basis for assessment in ECEC settings (Podmore and Luff, 2012) and emerges from the explanatory element of evidence that practitioners produce from child observation data. For this chapter, **assessment** is defined as ECEC practitioners' explanations of data they have captured young children's behaviours, and are used to enhance young children's D&L.

Child observation evaluations should be conducted after the observation. Practitioners evaluate observations of children's behaviour to understand what observation data mean. Evaluating child observation data enables practitioners to:

- turn data into evidence they can use to assess children's D&L

- understand children's behaviours, motivations, and interests
- identify if a child is not developing or learning, and why
- identify provision children may need next to continue to develop and learn
- reflect on the quality of their own practice.

Evaluation is the highest order learning skill (Bloom et al., 1956). It is also a high order teaching skill: to identify what children are ready to learn next, we must identify, appraise, and assess what children have already learned. Evaluation is the practitioner's critical interpretation of the objective observation data. Together, the data and critical interpretation provide evidence on which to base:

1. assessment of what observation data reveal about the child's D&L, related to the observation objective, and
2. new, informed decisions about what the child may be ready to learn next and the provision likely to help.

To make secure assessment judgements, practitioners support their critical interpretations of observation data by drawing on professional experiences, knowledge of the child, policy documents such as the EYFS (DfE, 2021) and relevant literature and research.

ACTION POINT 22.2

Using guidance in this section, evaluate the examples of different observation techniques in the section 'How to choose, conduct and record child observations in a setting'. What is helpful for making each evaluation? Does anything make your task difficult? How will you apply this experience in future?

USING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES FOR CHILD OBSERVATION AND ASSESSMENT

Whilst child observations and assessments documenting a child's D&L and progression – often referred to as 'pedagogical documentation' - may be in paper format (PF), popularity of digital formats (DF) has increased globally (Cowan and Flewitt, 2021). DF examples include EvidenceMe (2Simple, 2022), Learning Book (2022), SeeSaw (2022) and Tapestry (2022). In this section, we compare and critique PF and DF, experienced and reported by practitioners working in ECEC settings in England.

Accessibility is an important condition for PF or DF to work effectively. Both support practitioners to build evidence-based child profiles by sharing two-way information with parents and carers. Unlike PF, DF can almost always be available to parents, carers, and practitioners, so all parties can upload observations, photographs, and videos any time. However, this level of accessibility can create expectations that practitioners cannot always fulfil, for example equal numbers of observations for every child. Yet PF may mean parents and carers who work and rarely pick up or drop off their children at their settings communicate less with practitioners.

Both formats require resources. PF is often time consuming and must often be completed outside practitioners' contact time with children, whereas DF tend to be easier to use ***in vivo*** with children. DF therefore enable practitioners to be with children more, though they may be tempted to focus on the DF rather than the children, and they are modelling screen use to children rather than human interaction. If several children are taking part in one activity together, practitioners can include them all in one observation which the DF can link to individual children's D&L, saving practitioners time, though parents will see other children as

well as their own. DF are also more environmentally friendly than PF; however, digital software and updates create additional financial costs, and DF systems must shut down regularly for maintenance.

Parents may be more likely to engage with DF than PF, and if they have more than one child, they can see all their children's profiles on one DF platform. Although some DF are easier to navigate than others, most practitioners find DF simple and quick to use after training and practice. Nevertheless, DF require competent IT skills, devices and good internet access which cannot be assumed. Equally, once an observation is posted to parents it cannot be changed or removed, so accuracy is important. While both PF and DF require good literacy, translation may be easier via DF: an advantage when languages used in settings and homes differ.

PF and DF both operate effectively within a **Key Person** system (see Chapter 3 for further explanation), though DF may situate power with managers as they readily offer a quick overview of each practitioner's observations. DF software also quickly shows children's D&L progress across a whole cohort - often aligned with statutory framework requirements - and highlights and tracks aspects of individual children's D&L that practitioners must observe, promote, and provide for. These DF features make it easy for all practitioners in a setting to identify every child's achievements, next steps and additional support needs, and make it less likely to lose information. However, DF tend to focus on normative development, rather than children's individual achievements, and if practitioners become over-reliant on DF pre-prepared links, they may not think critically about children's D&L.

DF easily accommodates video footage which may be beneficial (Kind and Argent, 2017). For example, capturing a child's actions, language, and nuances more effectively than written

narratives. Many children enjoy watching themselves and their friends on DF videos, provoking language development and engaging children in documenting their own learning (Cowan and Flewitt, 2021; Fleet, Patterson and Robertson, 2017). However, not all DF capture drawings well and some video observations are not usable, for example if a child cannot be heard, or if a video is lengthy. Equally, contextualising small video snippets can also be difficult.

DF may also present security and safeguarding challenges. Using DF means children's images and personal information go beyond the parameters of their own homes and settings via the internet, creating an early digital footprint without their informed assent (Nottingham, 2019). Moreover, online material is also open to abuses which could put children at risk.

ETHICAL MANAGEMENT OF OBSERVATION AND ASSESSMENT DATA

Practitioners record, store, and report child observations for different reasons, which might include:

- capturing and celebrating a child's D&L progress over time
- identifying a child's interests and achievements to inform their next steps in learning and what provision can best support those steps
- monitoring concerns about children's behaviour, D&L
- reporting data on children's performance to feed into big data sets
- practitioners' own performance management and accountability

- reporting children's progress to parents/carers
- practitioner research (see Chapter 23).

Practitioners are increasingly obliged to report children's progress to large-scale agencies to inform local, regional, and national data sets and to satisfy performance and accountability demands (OECD, 2022; Roberts-Holmes and Bradbury, 2016). These requirements raise significant questions about:

- who owns child observation data
- what ethical protocols are adopted to identify appropriate data uses (Lindgren, 2012)
- what protects children from abuse and misuse of data concerning them
- how children can be empowered in collection, storage, and reporting of data about themselves (Bath, 2012).

When practitioners conduct observations of children purely for professional use, they are not required to invite parents to give their informed consent for those observations to be undertaken. This approach differs from stringent requirements in the UK for researchers who conduct child observations (e.g. EECERA, 2014). Yet, even for research purposes, under English law children can give no more than 'affirmative agreement' because consent brings legal compulsion (Coyne, 2010; Rossi et al., 2003: 132).

When child observation data are stored digitally, data protection legislation means children's individual identities should be protected. However, hacking means such protection is difficult to guarantee. Moreover, we must consider how data might be used in future with tools not yet invented.

Respect for children means that we do not treat children as data sources in our observations (Fielding, 2001); rather we engage with children as partners in their learning and our own. This may mean:

- finding legitimate ways to resist demands made by powerful agencies for data about children to inform performativity agenda
- giving children ownership of their own data, by enabling them and their parents to share in collecting, evaluating, assessing, reporting, and using child observation data
- using child observations to create experiences children value
- co-constructing learning with children at a pace suited to each child (Murray, 2017)
- adopting appropriate research ethics for all child observations (EECERA, 2014).

SUMMARY

- Early childhood practitioners from a range of disciplines use observation in their work with young children including Radiographers and Obstetric Practitioners, Social Workers, Health Visitors and ECEC Practitioners.
- Observation and assessment underpin ECEC provision for a variety of reasons including establishing the stage of the foetus and its development before birth, child protection, child health surveillance, and assessments of young children's development and learning.
- Practitioners can select from a broad array of different observation methods, including narrative, checklist, sampling and tracking observations. ECEC practitioners report factually what they observe, then evaluate their observation notes, to assess the child's development, learning and interests, and identify what provision will support the child's progress, going forward. Whether practitioners use digital or paper formats for recording and evaluating their observations, they are required to ensure observation data are gathered, evaluated, stored and

reported using methods that secure children's safeguarding and protection.

- Ways of responding ethically to young children's voices as part of observation and assessment processes include engaging with children as partners in their learning and our own, rather than treating children as data sources.

FURTHER READING

McDowall Clark, R. (2016). *Exploring the Contexts of Early Learning: Challenging the School Readiness Agenda*. Abingdon: Routledge.

This book shows how evidence can be used to justify provision that supports the development of self-regulation and autonomy that young children need to flourish cognitively and emotionally.

Murray, J. (2017). *Building Knowledge in Early Childhood Education: Young Children are Researchers*. Abingdon: Routledge.

This book is based on a series of real observations that demonstrate the ways young children build knowledge in their early childhood settings and at home, and how adults can support them.

Palaiologou, I. (2016). *Child Observation: A Guide for Students of Early Childhood*, 3rd edn. London: Sage/Learning Matters.

This book provides further practical guidance for using observation to understand young children's actions and use them to plan and provide for new learning.

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