

Writing a Good Quality Observation 1st September 2025

Reason : recent review of observations, revealed that although staff were producing observations, it was clear from the samples that they were not consistent or detailed to fully capture the child's experience

What is the point of observations in the early years?

At its most simple, the answer to this question is two-fold:

- To improve your provision for the children in it.

Sounds simple enough. In essence, it's all about understanding the children in your setting, including how they're developing, what they have been up to, and what they are learning through their play.

For you, this means learning more about the effectiveness of the provision for each child. That's why it's about more than just observing the child, but reflecting on your role in the process too, and including that in your staff mentorship and your planning.



What does a high-quality observation look like

1. A rich description

An observation should be descriptive. It doesn't need to be a novel, but it should tell the full story of the interaction.

Clive said to Jason, 'Jump!' Jason jumped and landed in the puddle. 'I do it,' said Clive, and he had a turn but missed the puddle. Jason said, 'Oh no, Clive, you have to do it like this.' He jumped again. 'You look at the puddle and jump on it.' Clive said, 'OK, Jason.' He got on the step and had another go.

'Look at the puddle, Clive. Ready, jump!' said Jason. This time Clive landed in the puddle. He laughed.

It doesn't need to use complex language that takes hours to write. But it is perfectly descriptive and tells you the story of the interaction. What's more, it goes well beyond 'Clive loves jumping in puddles', which so easily could have been written.

As you can see from this example, quotes are a great way to give a real feel for who the child is and how they engaged. You can hear the child's voice very clearly.

Look over your latest observations. Can you hear the child's voice? Do you get a feel for the child's play? If you can't, then it's time to be more descriptive.

2. Beyond the description

Once you've mastered that, it's time to go deeper. This is where your skill as a practitioner can shine – anyone can write down a description of a child, but only you know how to interpret what is going on in that little brain.

This might be recognising certain skills emerging in the child, it might be noticing a schema that the child is displaying an interest in, or you might be explaining the thinking behind their actions.

It takes time, talent, and knowledge to do this, but it will take your planning and understanding of children's interests to the next level. A description alone will not do that.



3. Include the adult role

It's not just about assessing the child, you're assessing yourself too. Maybe even more so.

Self-reflective practice is the key to building an environment you can be proud of, and observations are a great tool to do that. Are you seeing [sustained shared thinking](#) in your observations? Are you asking the right open-ended questions? Are you [helping to scaffold a child's play](#)?

By making sure you note down what you did in a descriptive (and honest) way during the observation, you have a great resource that you and your team can look at when you want to improve your own practice.

4. Spotting something new

High-quality observations often record more than just the everyday, or the mundane. They should give you improved insight into the child.

That might be:

- A new skill they've learnt
- An emerging interest
- A new link they've noticed between existing knowledge

- A barrier to their learning

We want to be clear on this – that doesn't mean you have to wait for an obvious new skill or fully-fledged mastery of something new.

5. The complete observation

All the best observations in the early years tend to have a sense of completeness about them.

What we mean by that is that there is a clear storyline. They begin with a spark of interest, are followed by a pursuit of that interest, and then finish with some sort of completion of the whole journey.

In between, you might have an extending of that interest, conversations, new ideas, or a million and one other things. But a good way to spot a great topic for observation is by identifying that clear spark and the follow up of that spark to its conclusion. *That* is what tells you a learning experience has taken place.

6. What is an observation not?

- **A quick scrapbook moment** – Remember the puddle example from earlier? Imagine if we were to classify that rich, descriptive example as “Clive loves jumping in puddles”. It might be an entertaining picture and a great moment but it doesn't tell the full story of what happened.
- **A rewording of Development Matters** – There's nothing wrong with recognising development matters statements in an observation, and helping to track a child's journey through the EYFS. But only making observations that you can tick off a list is no way to get a complete picture of the child.
- **An interruption** – You need to respect children's play at all times, and be sensitive to their interests. This includes extending play in the right ways and not forcing children to take their play down a route they don't want to.
- **Evidence coming first** – Evidence is important, but it should be second to learning. You shouldn't disrupt a learning opportunity by prioritising a photograph over helping to extend or scaffold a child's learning.

Ideas to improve your observations in the early years



1. What? Why? How?

One great framework for struggling staff is to think of 'What? Why? How?'. It goes like this:

- What have I observed?
- Why was it important?
- How has it improved my knowledge of myself or the child?

This can help staff to focus on everything we talking about in the beginning of the article. The description, the thinking behind the action, and the adult's role.

2. SHARE

If "What? Why? How" isn't working for you, here's a handy little acronym that might do the trick. SHARE stands for:

- **The Spark** – What started the moment?
- **What Happened?** – Describe the moment, and what went on.
- **The Assessment** – What is your assessment of the meaning behind what happened?
- **The Response** – What did you do to extend or scaffold the moment.
- **The End Result** – What happened after your response?

Again, the key here is that you're also addressing what you did as a practitioner, and it also comes with a timeline of the moment which might help staff who struggle with being more descriptive.