

OBSERVATION **METHODS**

Event sample

In an event sample observation the observer is looking for particular events or behaviours, and makes a note of when it occurred as well as the context in which it occurred.

This method is used when there are concerns about a child's behaviour, e.g. a child who appears aggressive.



Time sample

Time samples are a narrative snapshot of what a child is doing at a particular moment in time. They are completed at pre-determined intervals, e.g. every 15 minutes, depending on the total length of time you want for your observation.

Although they do give some idea of what a child is doing over an extended period of time, they are limited as they do not record anything significant that occurs outside of the planned times.

Sociogram

This method of observation looks at social interactions. It usually records who a child interacts with, the nature of the interaction and anything that was said.

A sociogram is often used to identify a child who may be being left out, but the results may change from day to day as friendships in young children are less stable than in older children.

Narrative or free description

This is essentially a running commentary of what you see and is usually only done in short bursts.

You should include as much detail as possible such as the child's expression, what they say, how they are positioned, their interactions with others. It is often difficult to identify what is significant at the time a narrative observation is being completed, but this may become apparent afterwards during the evaluation.

Target child

As the name suggests in a target child observation you are concerned with observing one specific child. The observation is conducted over a predetermined period of time.



This is a very intensive method of observation and so a coding system is usually used for recording what is happening, identifying who the child is using language with, their level of involvement in the activity, whether they are alone / group size, etc.

Deciphering the code

Settings may have their own coding system for target child observations or practitioners may devise their own personal codes.

As well as the challenges presented by deciphering notes written at speed during an observation, practitioners also need to consider whether the codes used are consistent and understandable to others who may need to review the observation.

Child tracker

A child tracker or movement record observation is an observation that focuses on where the child chooses to spend their time.

The record usually starts with a layout of the room and arrows are drawn as the child moves from one area to the next. Sometimes times are included to reflect how long the child spends in each area.

Checklist or tick chart

Checklists or tick charts are generally quick to complete.

They are not concerned with the process a child uses to achieve a task, simply whether or not the task is achieved.

Checklists rely on the observer being objective and having strict criteria for when a task is considered achieved.

Observation sheets

The sheets you use when completing an observation will vary depending on the method used and the purpose of the observation.

Your setting may have a number of different checklists or observation forms that are used.

Making sure that observation sheets meet the needs of the observation method and the purpose for the observation, should form part of your planning.

Participant or non-participant

When conducting observations you should record whether you are a participant or non-participant observer.

- Are you interacting with the child while observing or staying back and observing others (children or adults) interacting with the child?

Bias

- At what point could you consider that a child has mastered a task?
- When you have seen them do it once? Three times? Two weeks in a row?

Observations can be affected by observer bias, an unfamiliar situation, how the child is feeling on the day, etc.



Observation awareness

It is important that you understand that a child's (and adult's) usual behaviour may change if they know they are being observed.

The child may try harder to impress you or alternatively may become nervous and not want to 'perform'.

Avoid single observations

So many factors can affect an observation of a child that it is important not place too much weight on the results of a single observation.

Observations done at different times, by different people and using different methods are more likely to provide a more accurate reflection of the child and their abilities, needs and interests.

Objective and accurate

Try to remain as objective as possible when completing observations. Be aware of observer bias and try to recognise it in yourself.

Observations rely on you recording what you think is important. The more detailed the observation method the more difficult it is to capture everything and you may have to decide what is important and what is not. As you develop your observation skills you will find this comes more easily.

Activity

Look through the observation methods in this presentation.

Consider the advantages and disadvantages of being a participant observer or non-participant observer in each one.

- Do particular observation methods suit one observer type more than the other?