

Watching the Babies: The Why, What, and How of Observation as Assessment in Infant and Toddler Care

Observation is a useful tool, even in infant and toddler classrooms. Applied correctly, observation and assessment can help lay a foundation for a successful education throughout life.

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You are entering a childcare center during the break time of a few of the infant and toddler careteachers. You overhear their conversation about their children. One teacher says, "I was watching Julia the other day. She just seems to keep banging the toys. I wonder when she will start using them right." Another teacher says, "When I put out the soft blocks the toddlers just kick them around. I hope they don't break them. I wonder why they keep doing that." Just then a third teacher enters the room and seems exasperated. She interrupts and says, "I just left the director's office and she says that everyone in the building had to start assessing their children because of the accreditation requirement." "Even we infant and toddler teachers have to assess the children, can you believe that?" The first and second teacher state that they already know their children well enough, they don't need assessments.

This scenario is becoming more of a reality in many programs. As appropriate practices are researched and policies change, teachers and caregivers of the youngest children (referred to as careteachers for this article) find themselves in the middle of the assessment challenge. Many early childhood programs and teachers struggle with implementing observation and assessment practices. With increasing demands of families and administration, the careteacher's plate can be very full. However, appropriate practices suggest that an ongoing assessment system should be implemented for all children in-group care settings (Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Accreditation criteria from the National Association for the Education of Young Children or NAEYC (2006) require a systematic and authentic

assessment program be implemented for all children. This system should include observation, screening, and criterion based strategies. Many schools are implementing these practices for their preschool programs but infant and toddler programs can benefit from them as well. This article will briefly address the why, what, and how of observation as assessment with infants and toddlers.

Why Observation as Assessment with Infants and Toddlers

Infant and toddler careteachers are able to meet children's needs because they know them well. Much like mothers, careteachers have watched the babies and gained a deeper understanding of who they are. This observation helps to create a deeper knowledge of the child's development and strengthens the relationship with the teacher (Jablon, Dombro, & Dichtelmiller, 2007). This deeper understanding of the infant and toddler development is very important in order to provide appropriate programs including the environment (Dichtelmiller & Ensler, 2004). Utilizing systematic and formal techniques of recording information helps to ensure a better match of experiences and the likelihood of developmental progress (Forman & Hall, 2005; Martin, 2004; Morrison, 2009). Observation can be used to help assess developmental skills and milestones and be utilized to gather data as part of developmental screening.

The benefit of using a systematic and formal approach to observation as assessment of infants and toddlers is mainly to reduce the likelihood of missing information (Early Head Start National Resource Center, 2000) and

paint a more comprehensive picture of their development. Infant and toddler careteachers are extremely busy people. They have to meet a great number of demands, often at the same time. Some babies are hungry, others need to play and be stimulated, while others need rest. A systematic and carefully planned approach to observation, screening, and assessment ensures that these experiences are maximized and utilized for understanding the child (Dichtelmiller & Ensler, 2004). It also ensures that information will be gathered over time and across settings about the child and therefore be more comprehensive, inclusive of changes in development (Gullo, 2005; NAEYC, 2006).

Another reason observation is useful as an assessment tool with infants and toddlers is it is an authentic form of assessment. Authentic assessment is when information is gathered from activities the children naturally engage in (Gullo, 2005) and can be conducted by using direct observation techniques with infants and toddlers. Consider the following example:

Mario is fourteen months old. He is on the floor playing with the large pop beads. Ms. Amanda notices that he takes the chain of pop beads and pulls one off. He does it again. He then picks up one of the loose pop beads and pushes it at the last bead on the chain. The chain moves.

In the above example, the teacher did not have to set up a task for the child to complete; she simply had to observe the child's play. From the observation she could gain and document a good deal of information about the child's developmental skills. For example, Mario had sufficient strength of grasp to remove



“Observation and assessment has to be appropriate for a toddler’s stage of development.”

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the pop beads. However, perhaps he did not yet have the cognitive understanding to know that he had to hold the bead chain in place to put them back. This type of observation can provide information about the child's developmental skills and milestones, and when combined with a developmental screening tool, it can help identify possible red flags in development (Cohen, Stern, Balaban, & Gropper, 2016).

The What of Observation as Assessment with Infants and Toddlers

The first piece of information careteachers need to know in sifting through all of the assessment rhetoric is what exactly is meant by the various terms and jargon used by the profession. The largest differentiations that should be understood the terms developmentally appropriate practices, observation, screening, and assessment. Some of these terms get used interchangeably by careteachers

but actually mean different things. Understanding the terminology of assessment helps to clarify the relationship observation has with assessment.

Developmentally Appropriate Practices

First let us address developmentally appropriate practices. Often when the topic of assessment is mentioned people get an image of sitting down and taking a test or a professional sitting down and administering a battery of tasks for a child to complete or respond to. While these images do accurately capture assessment they do not depict assessment practices for infant and toddlers (Mindes, 2007). There are many assessment practices that are developmentally appropriate for infants and toddlers. These practices include discovering what the children already know or can do, exploring what they should do next, and monitoring development for possible signs of difficulties. Developmentally appropriate practices,

as it pertains to assessment, implies that the methods and strategies being used to obtain information about the child's development match the child's age, developmental abilities, highlights the child's strengths, and utilizes natural contexts (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). The term also suggests that the strategies used will match the language, culture, and unique qualities of the child being assessed. Finally, the term implies that all practices will be carried out to benefit the child. In short, developmentally appropriate practices as it relates to assessing infants and toddlers means careteachers are observing and assessing in ways that match the child and for purposes that will support the child (Dichtelmiller & Ensler, 2004).

Observation and Screening

The next term to explore is observation. Careteachers need to have an understanding of the meaning of observation for infants and toddlers. Observation itself is not assessment. It is actually a means or method used in assessment. The actual act of observation can be defined as watching children with care and purpose as to better understand them (Jablon, Dombro, & Dichtelmiller, 2007). The use of the term as it relates to assessment implies that the observation itself will usually, or at least sometimes, be documented in some way. Any observation that is to be counted as a formal form of assessment is to be documented.

Screening is the next term that we will address. The term screening, like observation, is not actually interchangeable with assessment; it is only a piece of the assessment puzzle. However, stand-alone screenings are not a complete picture of the child's abilities, needs, and strengths

(Early Head Start National Resource Center, 2000). It does not give that desired picture of the *whole child*. It only gives a brief picture of what is going on in a particular period of time. Screening is a formal periodic look at the child's development in an effort to monitor developmental progress as well as identify any *red flags* that may lead to potential difficulties. Careteachers are the best people to administer developmental screenings because of the number of waking hours they spend with children in the early childhood settings, as well as the various engagement experiences for the child. Developmental screenings should be implemented by careteachers periodically over time. Due to the dramatic changes in development in such short time periods, most screening tools follow the rule: the younger the child, the more frequent the screening. These developmental screenings should be conducted across developmental domains. Most screening tools require teachers to present a battery of developmentally appropriate tasks for the child to participate in, while utilizing direct observation of the child.

Infant Toddler classrooms can also benefit from observation and assessment.

The important part of the "what" of observation as assessment is, understanding the role observation plays in the assessment process. Understanding the terminology in the

world of assessing infants and toddlers helps delineate the relationship observation has with assessment.

The *How* of Observation as Assessment for Infants and Toddlers

Getting the job done is the toughest part on careteachers of infants and toddlers. Most careteachers agree to the need, usefulness, and purposes of observation as assessment once they hear the theory behind it. Observation involves the use of a variety of strategies that the careteacher can use to understand the development of the infants and toddlers, in particular very young children (Cohen, Stern, Balaban, & Gropper, 2016; Jablon, Dombro, & Dichtelmiller, 2007; Giardiello, McNulty & Anderson, 2013).

The first step that infant and toddler careteachers should do is, familiarize themselves with the goals and objectives for their infants and toddlers. Careteachers can do this by reading and revisiting developmental milestones of their age group, reading and revisiting any early learning benchmarks or standards set by their state or governing agency, and by having conversations with the families of the children (Cohen, Stern, Balaban, & Gropper, 2016; Dichtelmiller & Ensler, 2004).

Reviewing child development milestones for the specific age group is useful because it helps careteachers become familiar with the developmental expectations that can and should be held for the children (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Mindes, 2007). This knowledge serves two important purposes in relation to assessment. Child development milestones can be observed for in the infants and toddlers, and

when they are observed the teacher can use upcoming milestones that have not been mastered yet to set as curriculum goals. Knowledge of the milestones is also useful for screening purposes. All developmental screens use developmental milestones to monitor typical development and the possibility of delays. Knowledge and familiarity with the milestones helps the screening process go smoother and decreases the chance for errors in the observations during the screening process.

Reading and reviewing early learning standards can also help with the observation and assessment process. Careteachers should visit the standards that their state and their curriculum have set for their particular age group. Familiarity with the standards allows careteachers to effectively observe and assess the children and gives some guidance as to what to look for to improve their program particularly for infants and toddlers.

The second step the careteacher takes in implementing a developmentally appropriate and effective observation and assessment system for infants and toddlers is to become familiar with good observation as assessment practices. These practices can and should involve the careteacher's delivery and role in the observation, the recording of the observation, and the scheduling of the observation (Cohen, Stern, Balaban, & Gropper, 2016).

Observation and Assessment Practices Related to the Delivery and Careteachers Role

Assessing and teaching

One practice that is helpful is to separate observation from teaching.



Photo courtesy of Nancy Alexander

"Careteachers are great at observation because they really get to know the children as individuals."

When the careteacher intervenes to scaffold the children's understanding, the outcome cannot be documented as the child's ability. Careteachers are often urged by their nature to support and scaffold their children's abilities, which is a positive attribute. However, it must be remembered that when observing or assessing it is the child's actual natural ability that should be recorded. Otherwise the information, or data, is invalid and inaccurate.

Participation on the part of the careteacher

Participation in observation on the part of the careteacher can be in four ways (Gullo, 2005; Wortham, 2001). First, it involves direct participation. Second, it involves if the children know you are observing or not. Participant observation is the most common used in infant and toddler programs. This is when the careteacher is an active part of the

class by interacting with the children. Non-participant observation is when the care teacher is off in a corner or behind a one-way window observing and recording, and not interacting with the class. Overt observation is when the children know you are watching and writing down what they are doing. Covert observation is when the children do not know you are writing down what they do and it is kept a secret. Each of these can be used in whatever combination is most conducive to the situation.

Observation and assessment practices related to the recording of the data:

Objective and subjective

Another important observation skill is to be able to separate objective information from subjective information within the observation itself (Bentzen, 2009; Cohen, Stern, Balaban, & Gropper, 2016; Jablon, Dombro, & Dichtelmiller, 2007). Keeping objective and subjective information separate within the observations helps the observation and assessment to be more accurate and also helps prevent teacher bias from contaminating the data. Objective information is the actual behavior that occurred, it can be seen, heard, and measured. An example of objective information may be: *Juanita picked up the puzzle piece with her left hand. While smiling, she banged the piece on the top of the toy mailbox.* She then put the puzzle piece in the slot of the toy mailbox. Subjective information is more opinionated and less factual. While the information may be true, it also may not be. Often subjective information includes inferences, or conclusions

drawn based on the observation. An example of subjective information that would be recorded in an observation may be: *Juanita has developed strength of grasp. She is excited about playing with the puzzle. She is developing good eye hand coordination.* It is important to state that sometimes subjective information is important in understanding the child and what is happening and can be included. However, it should be included separate from the objective information, such as in the comments section of the observation tool.

Assessment looks very different for infants and toddlers.

Shorthand in recording notes

With all the writing involved in observing and recording for assessment with infants and toddlers, careteachers find themselves needing to create a sort of shorthand to make it go faster and be more usable (Bentzen, 2009; Cohen, Stern, Balaban, & Gropper, 2016; Jablon, Dombro, & Dichtelmiller, 2007). Teachers will write the observation notes as the observation takes place, and then later when things calm down they will transcribe. Try to transcribe as soon as possible, because it is easy to forget what you meant. Each careteacher has their way of note taking. Practicing will help you develop your own style.

Usable system of recording and storing

Another practice related to observing and recording is developing a usable system (Martin, 2004).

Usability is important because if the system is too overwhelming the careteacher will not observe and record. Systems can include keeping a note pad or observation cards in the pocket of your apron so you can pull it out and record when the moment presents itself (Martin, 2004; Wortham, 2001). If this is your system, you will need to frequently look over observations to be sure there is adequate representation over time and domains. Additionally, storage should be considered. Where will you keep the observations? How will you stay organized so they are easy to add to or revisit? How will you ensure confidentiality? There are so many systems they cannot be discussed here. Some examples may be a folder or portfolio for each child in a box (Gullo, 2005; Martin, 2004). Other careteachers have a notebook per child. Other teachers keep a digital portfolio on their computer. Whatever system you choose, it shouldn't be too elaborate or you will end up losing things. You do not want your system to take up too much of your time for upkeep and use.

Observation and Assessment Practices Related to the Scheduling

Data collection over time

One important practice in relation to scheduling observation and assessment with infants and toddlers is conducting a variety of observations over time. A periodic observation gives a careteacher a clear picture of changes in the child's development and ensures that a more accurate picture of change is accounted for. It is important that careteachers select observations over time (preferably monthly) that can give a look at the

child's ability both at different times of day and various times of month (Jablon, Dombro, & Dichtelmiller, 2007; Mindes, 2007).

Data collection across areas

Careteachers also do well to collect information through observations across areas (Jablon, Dombro, & Dichtelmiller, 2007; Wortham, 2001). This includes developmental areas, or domains, as well as activity areas. Careteachers should be collecting observations for assessment purposes that include gross and fine motor ability, cognitive ability, language skills, social and play development, and emotional and temperament information. Additionally, samples of observations should be taken from time to time in the following activities: meals, arrival and departure, play time inside, and playtime outside. Observing and recording over these domains and activities will give careteachers an idea of holistic development for the child. A final word about the key practices is practice (Bentzen, 2009; Jablon, Dombro, & Dichtelmiller, 2007). Practicing observing and recording infants and toddlers leads to improved skill. The more you do it, the better you get at it.

The third step careteachers should take in implementing observation as assessment for infants and toddlers is select observation tools to gather and record information (Gullo, 2005; Martin, 2004). There should be a variety of tools that will best match the types of information gathered. When selecting tools, careteachers should be familiar with the uses and purposes of the tools and the way they must be implemented. The careteachers should consider the dynamics of their daily program operation, the time they

have to conduct observations, and the type of information they need prior to choosing an observation tool (Cohen, Stern, Balaban, & Groppe, 2016). The following are brief descriptions of observation tools that lend themselves nicely to infant and toddler programs.

Anecdotal record

The anecdotal record is a brief snapshot in words. It briefly describes what is happening in a brief scenario (Bentzen, 2009; Mindes, 2007; Nissen & Hawkins, 2008). They are detailed enough to see the scene in your head as you read the record. An example may be taking down an observation of a child on the playground because you wish to get an idea of his motor skills.

Careteachers can use developmental milestones to set goals.

Descriptive-interpretive or running record

The descriptive-interpretive observation is for a longer period of time. It is a collection of scenarios. This tool requires two columns. In one column you write the descriptive observation. This is usually in more specific detail than the anecdotal record. You mark each scenario with a date or a time. Once all of the scenarios are documented, you go back at the end of the day or during a break and write in your interpretation of each scenario. The interpretations should be next to the respective observation of the scenario so they visibly line up. If the documentation

is at various times during the day it is a descriptive-interpretive. If it is a collection of scenarios chronologically ordered over various days, then it is being used as a running record (Bentzen, 2009; Mindes, 2007). An example of this tool being used would be to see what social play stage the child is engaged in during free indoor play (descriptive-interpretive). Another would be if you used the tool over the course of a week to see how the child's fine motor skills change during center time (running record).

Frequency count or event sampling

This tool is not narrative in nature like the first two tools (Bentzen, 2009; Mindes, 2007). This tool has a few predetermined behaviors the careteacher would like to observe written in rows. The teacher then decides the time frame for the observation. The time frame creates a sample of the child's program day or week. Whenever the child is observed engaging in the predetermined behavior, the teacher makes a tally on the appropriate row. When the predetermined time frame is at an end the careteacher goes back and writes in comments and interpretations at the end of the document.

Checklists

The checklist is another non-narrative tool. The checklist has preselected behaviors that the careteacher would like to keep track of and observe. When the child exhibits that specified behavior, a mark is written on the tool to show the presence of the behavior (Bentzen, 2009; Mindes, 2007). The mark used can be a check mark, an x, or even a date. Checklists can be organized around a specific topic. For

example, the careteacher can have a checklist that is for book exploration behaviors, or a checklist that revolves around the eating process. Careteachers can design their own checklists to meet the observation needs of the program.

Conclusion

Observation as assessment is an integral part of offering a high quality program for infants and toddlers. Careteachers of these children can implement observation for screening and assessment purposes in ways that are developmentally appropriate for the children and usable by the careteachers themselves. The careteachers are in the best position to do the observing and assessing of the infant and toddler because they get to see them in the most play and social situations. As careteacher implement the strategies discussed in this article, they will find assessment of infants and toddlers is doable and important. Observation can help you get to know your children better than ever before. All you have to do is use these strategies and watch your babies.

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