

Ideas to Use When Observing Children

Simple prompts to support professional thinking

Observation is more than writing down what a child did. It is the professional process of noticing, thinking, deciding what matters and deciding what needs to happen next.

Not every moment needs to be recorded. Some moments simply help you know the child better. Other moments may need to be noted because they tell you something important about learning, development, well-being, inclusion, behaviour, safety or safeguarding.

Start with what you notice

Before interpreting the observation, pause and separate what you saw or heard from what you think it may mean.

- What did the child do?
- What words, sounds or gestures did the child use?
- What choices did the child make?
- What did the child repeat or return to?
- How did the child use people, objects, space or the environment?
- What changed during the moment?
- What did you actually see, and what are you assuming?

Think about what it may tell you

Once you have noticed the moment, think about why it may matter. One observation will not tell you everything, but it may give you useful clues.

- What does this show about the child's knowledge, skills, confidence or understanding?

- Does it show persistence, curiosity, problem-solving or independence?
- Does it suggest an interest, schema or repeated pattern?
- Does it show something new, or something the child is practicing again?
- Does it connect with something you already know from home or from previous observations?
- What else would you need to know before making a firmer judgement?

Link it to learning and development

Good observations are not about linking everything to everything. Look for the strongest and most genuine links.

- Which EYFS Areas of Learning and Development are most clearly reflected?
- Which Characteristics of Effective Learning can you see evidence of?
- What might this suggest about the child's age or stage?
- Is this something the child is secure with, practicing, or beginning to explore?
- Is the child learning something new, using previous knowledge or applying a skill in a different way?

Think about inclusion

Observation can help us notice whether a child is fully included and able to access the learning, routines, relationships and environment around them.

- Is the child able to join in meaningfully?
- Are they choosing not to join, or are there barriers stopping them?
- Does the environment support the child's communication, movement, sensory needs, confidence or independence?
- Are they being heard, seen and responded to?
- Do they need a change in adult support, resources, routine, language, positioning or expectations?
- Could this observation help you understand something about belonging, participation or access?

Decide what comes NEXT

The value of an observation is not only in the note itself. It is in what you do with it. NEXT needs to be considered carefully, because this is where observation begins to influence practice.

- **Adult response:** What might the adult say, model, notice, revisit or make time for?
- **Narrate:** What useful language could be added without taking over the child's play or thinking?
- **Nudge:** What small extension, question, resource, challenge or change might support future learning?
- **Provision:** What could be added, removed, repeated or adapted in the environment?
- **Home link:** What might be useful to share with the family, and what might they be able to tell you?
- **Watch again:** Is this something to keep noticing before deciding on a bigger response?

Examples of other types of observation matter too

In early years, observation is not only about learning and development. Practitioners are observing all the time, often without calling it an observation.

Health and safety

- Repeated accidents in the same area.
- A supervision blind spot.
- A child using equipment in a way that increases risk.
- A routine that regularly becomes unsafe or unsettled.
- An environmental change that may reduce risk.

Behaviour and well-being

- Repeated behaviour linked to transitions, noise, tiredness, hunger or particular situations.
- A child withdrawing, becoming unusually quiet or appearing unsettled.
- Changes in confidence, mood, interaction, sleep, eating or toileting.
- Behaviour that may be communicating a need, worry or frustration.

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- Patterns that help adults respond consistently rather than react in the moment.

Possible additional needs or SEND

- Communication differences or difficulty being understood.
- Sensory responses that affect participation or comfort.
- Repeated difficulty with transitions, routines or changes.
- Physical, social, emotional or language development that may need closer attention.
- The need to adapt the environment, expectations or adult support.

Safeguarding

- Unexplained injuries or repeated minor injuries.
- Concerning comments or changes in behaviour.
- Fearfulness, withdrawal or sudden changes in presentation.
- Poor hygiene, hunger, tiredness or signs that care needs may not be consistently met.
- Concerning interactions, patterns or information shared by a child or adult.

When to record more formally

Some observations can stay as professional knowledge. Some need to be recorded more formally so they can be seen, understood and acted on by the right people.

- Record when the information may affect the child's learning, safety, well-being or inclusion.
- Record when a pattern may be forming.
- Record when another adult, leader, SENCO, DSL or parent may need to know.
- Record when the information may need to be followed up, reviewed or shared.
- Record safeguarding and well-being concerns securely and in line with your setting procedures.

A final thought

Observation is skilled work. It asks practitioners to be present with children, notice what matters, make professional judgements, communicate clearly and decide what should happen next.

This is why systems matter. A learning observation may sit in a learning journey or system such as spark. If what you notice relates to safeguarding, well-being, complaints, inclusion or concern, it needs to be recorded securely, seen by the right people and acted on. This is where On the Button supports settings.