

Creating meaningful observations and assessments in the Early Years



Break down of what we're covering

Understanding observations & assessments:

05

- We get into actively capturing and understanding children's behaviours, interactions, and milestones.
- We walk through key qualities needed when making observations like empathy, patience, flexibility, and cultural competence.

Overcoming challenges:

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- We discuss how to overcome challenges, like time constraints, language barriers, and others, to improve observation quality.

Planning for observations:

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- We dive into how to define clear goals before starting any observation.

Types of observations:

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- We explore different types of observations, like learning stories, time sample observations, tracking, and sociogram techniques for unique insights.

Ofsted guidelines:

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- We stress the value of following Ofsted's guidelines and discuss why you should prioritise observation impact over methodology.

Turning observations into assessments


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- We look at how to review, reflect and analyse your observations for insightful assessments.

Collaboration

27

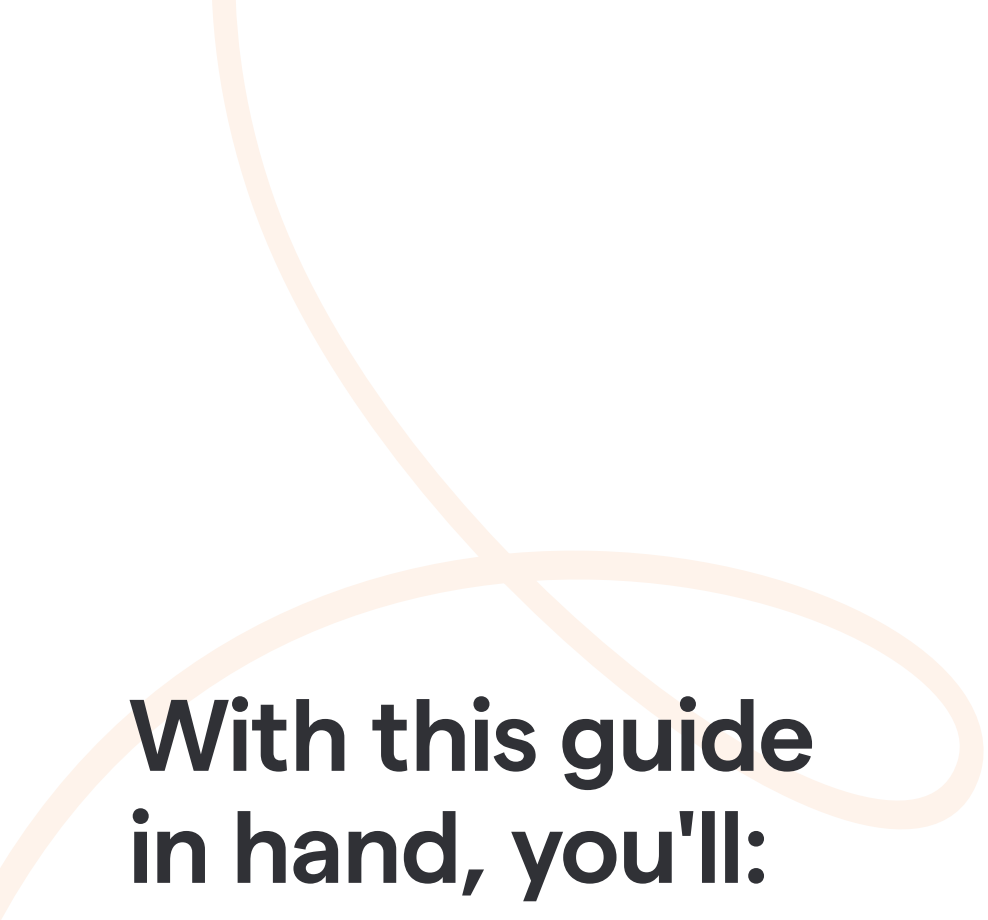
- We reflect on the importance of collaboration when making observations and assessments and offer tips on how to support parents in making observations at home.

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Welcome to Family's guide on mastering observations and assessments in the Early Years inspired by the principles of the EYFS.

First things first, so that we are all on the same page. The EYFS is based on 4 main principles:

- **Children are resilient and capable:** Children are constantly learning. They are resilient, capable, confident and self-assured.
- **Positive relationships:** Children learn to be strong and independent through positive relationships.
- **Enabling, nurturing environments:** Children learn and develop the best in supportive and nurturing environments. A supportive environment is one that responds to each child's individual needs and encourages strong partnerships between practitioners and parents and carers.
- **Every child is unique:** Children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates.



With this guide in hand, you'll:

1

Discover how powerful observations and assessments can be.

2

Learn how to use observations to make informed decisions and provide the personalised education that every child deserves.

3

Have the knowledge and insights to create meaningful observations and assessments.

4

Help you guide the children in your care on their journey to growth and future success.

What does observation & assessment really mean?

Observations and assessments in the Early Years involve actively capturing and analysing children's behaviours, interactions, and developmental milestones. With the little ones always on the move, it requires focus, keen attention to detail, objectivity, and effective communication skills.

Observations:

Observations can be documented in various formats, such as written notes, videos and photos.

Regardless of the method or medium, the key is to ensure that observations are clear, objective, and easy to understand by any other staff or external professionals.

For accurate observations, it's important to stay objective and hold back on using judgemental words about children's feelings, intentions or motivations. Observations are simply meant to capture the facts from an objective viewpoint.

Assessments:

After recording observations, the next step is assessment. This is where educators analyse the data to understand what stage a child is at in their development and what support they need.

With the insights gathered from observations and assessments, educators can plan for the next steps in children's development and learning. This holistic and structured approach offers educators the right information to plan activities that align with each child's individual needs.

7 skills needed to make insightful observations and assessments



Empathy

Ability to understand and empathise with children's emotions and perspectives.



Cultural competence

Awareness of cultural differences and diverse backgrounds in order to understand observations in the right cultural context and avoid bias.



Reflective practice

Regularly reflecting on your observations to improve and refine observation skills over time.



Critical thinking

Analyse observations to better understand children's motivations and learning processes on a deeper level.



Detail orientation

Paying attention to subtle nuances in children's behaviours to capture a full picture of their development.



Highly focused

Practitioners should capture meaningful moments and insights during observations while still being aware of a child's safety and immediate needs.

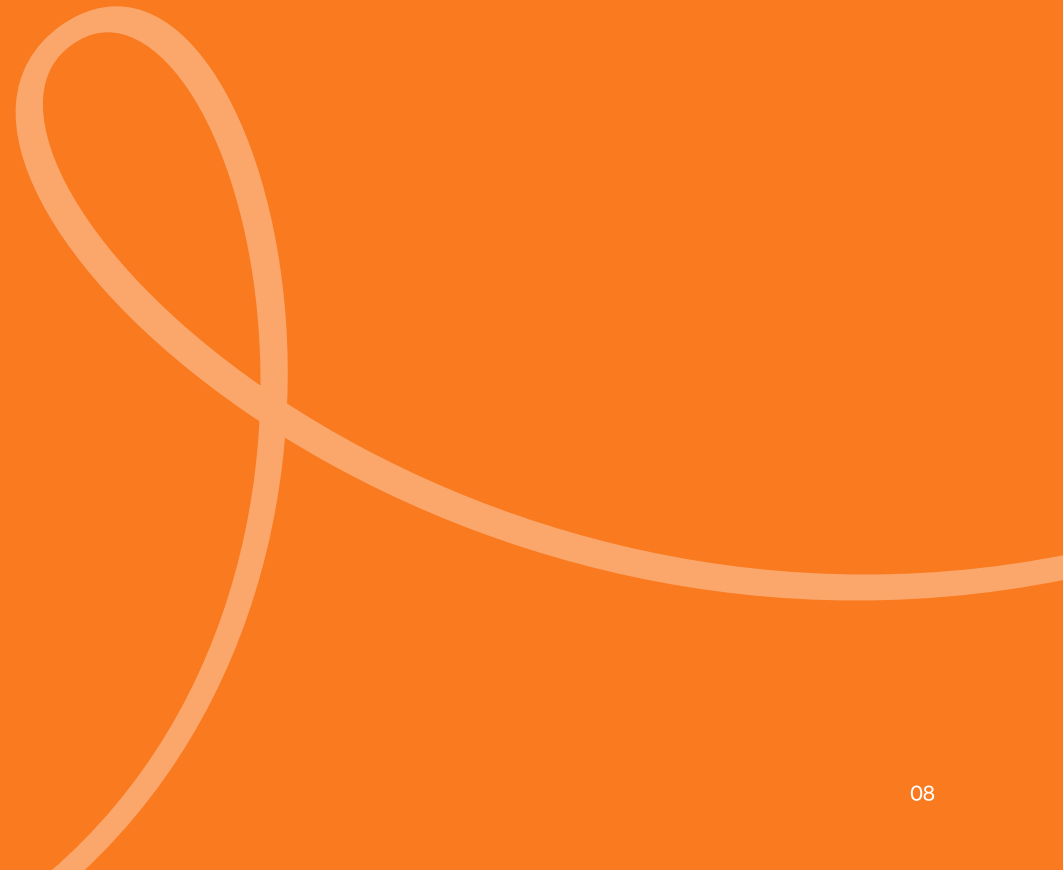


Good communication

Effective communication skills are essential so observations can be easily understood by other practitioners and the children's parents or carers.



Benefits of meaningful observations in the Early Years



Benefits of meaningful observations in the Early Years

Improve learning outcomes:

When detailed observations are made, educators can track progress and ensure that children are meeting developmental milestones. This also creates a supportive environment for learning and growth.

Early intervention:

Effective observations help with the early detection of potential talents or challenges, including neurological differences like Autism. Catching things early means we can jump in with the right support and tools, giving children a better chance to thrive with personalised help.

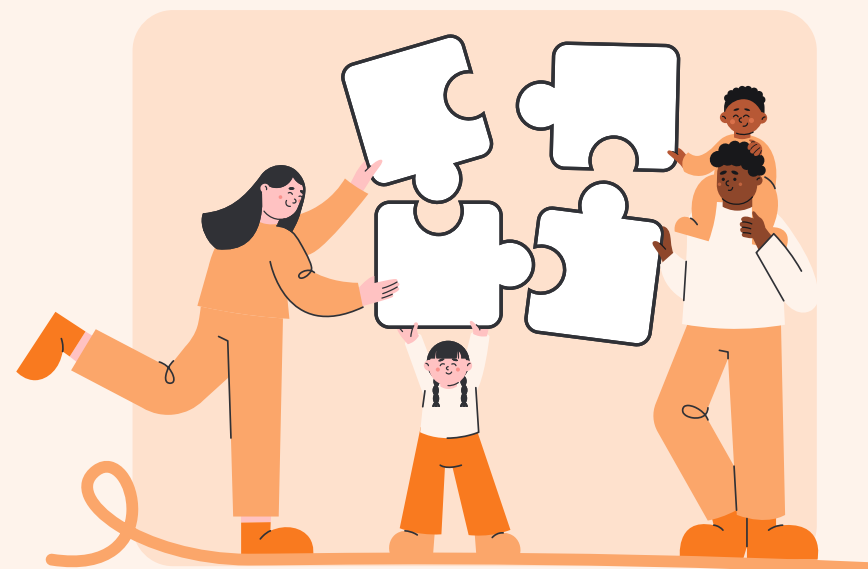
Improving parent-teacher collaborations:

Observations help us connect with parents and carers. They can spark meaningful conversations about their children's development, strengthen the bond, and make learning better for children both at home and at school.

Boosting children's self-esteem:

Recognising and celebrating children's achievements boosts their pride and confidence, motivating them to tackle challenges. Positive reinforcement sparks a love for learning and a resilient, unstoppable mindset!

To learn more about the importance of creating meaningful observations check out our [interview](#) with Dr Stella Louis where she discusses her experience with observations as an Early Years consultant and trainer.



Tips for navigating some of the common challenges around observations and assessments



Working at an Early Years setting inherently brings challenges to capturing and documenting observations. Let's tackle common hurdles and share tips to make observations and assessments more effective.

Time constraints

Challenge: Busy schedules and limited staff.

Tip: Schedule dedicated observation times throughout the day. Even short, focused observations can be valuable. Don't be afraid to use both spontaneous and planned observations.

Large group sizes

Challenge: Hard to observe individual children in big groups.

Tip: Rotate focus among staff so every child gets attention. Use group observation techniques, focusing on specific activities or areas.

Subjectivity

Challenge: Personal biases.

Tip: Stick to clear observation criteria to stay objective. Use peer reviews or team observations to keep things fair and unbiased.

Language and communication barriers

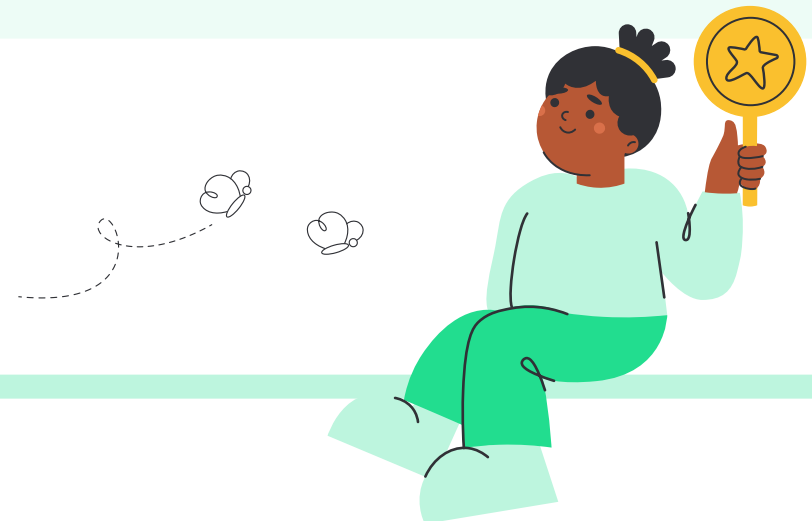
Challenge: Interpreting children's cues, especially in diverse settings.

Tip: Create a supportive environment for children to express themselves. Use visual aids, gestures, or translators to help with language barriers.

Consistency and reliability

Challenge: Keeping consistency and reliability across different practitioners and settings.

Tip: Offer regular training to improve observation skills. Set clear standards for conducting and documenting observations.



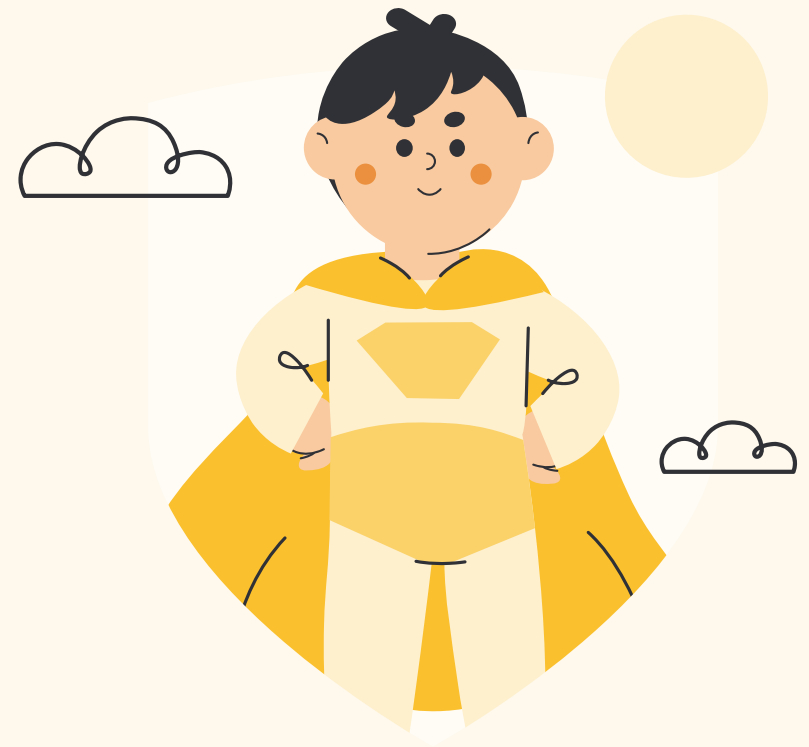
Now to write those observations



Now to write those observations

First of all: Privacy & respect

Make sure you've got the green light from someone with legal parental responsibility before you start your observation. When you're jotting down notes, always be mindful of children's boundaries and wishes. A comfortable and respected environment leads to more accurate observations.



Here are some key things you should be looking for when documenting observations.

- Descriptions of actions.
- Descriptions of children's vocalisations.
- Direct quotes of children's language.
- Descriptions of facial expressions and gestures.
- Descriptions of creations (e.g., stacked blocks, scribble drawings, finger-painted pictures).

Define your objectives:

Start by figuring out clear goals and objectives of your observation. Consider what aspects of the child's development or behaviour you're interested in exploring.

Plan your observation methods:

Choose the best method to observe the children based on what you want to know. Mix it up with stuff like talking to them, watching them in action, or giving them tasks. We discuss more on the different types of methods below. But remember, adjust your methods to fit the child's age, interests, and stage of growth for the best results.

Set the scene:

Make sure to describe the setting clearly when observing, including details like time, place, and who's there. It helps paint a picture of what's going on.

Reflection and assessment:

Once you're done observing, it's important to reflect on what you've seen. This means thinking about the child's behaviours and interactions, chatting with parents or colleagues for more insight, and asking questions. This reflection helps you understand the child better and figure out how to best support them as they grow.

Types of observations





Tips for observations and assessments

Learning stories

In learning stories, educators observe a child's learning journey over time through narration. These observations go beyond descriptions of actions but they also capture their emotions, thoughts, and interpretations. By weaving together experiences, learning stories offer rich insights into a child's evolving skills and interests, making learning more visible and meaningful.



Time sampling

Time sampling involves brief observations at regular intervals, typically every five minutes over an hour. It's a handy tool for tracking a child's engagement and preferences in different activities. While less structured, it requires consistent observations to spot patterns effectively.

Tracking

Tracking observations map out a child's movements and activities within a setting. By documenting where they go and what they do, educators can uncover behaviour patterns and schemas, revealing underlying interests and developmental progress.

Sociograms

Sociograms focus on a child's social interactions within peer groups. This technique, which is often overlooked, provides valuable insights into a child's social skills and group dynamics. By observing who they play with, for how long, and how they interact, educators gain a deeper understanding of their social world.

Documenting observations

Each method has its own benefits, but understanding which is the most effective for your objective will save you time and ensure you get the most out of your observations. Remember, everyone processes information differently, so choose the documentation method that works best for you.

Now, let's explore the most common observation methods, their advantages, and how to determine which one is the best fit for your goals.

Written notes:

- Great for detailed descriptions of children's behaviours and interactions.
- Provides a written record of significant milestones.
- Helps maintain objectivity and accuracy.
- Ideal for narrative observations, time samples, and learning stories.






Photographs:

- Effective for visually documenting activities and progress.
- Offers tangible evidence of achievements.
- Complements written observations.
- Best for capturing special moments and tracking progress.

Videos:

- Comprehensive recording of behaviours and learning processes.
- Useful for reflecting on development and planning activities.
- Best for in-depth observations, especially social interactions and problem-solving.

Ofsted and observations & assessment



Ofsted makes clear the importance of meaningful observations and effective assessments in Early Years settings.

Following their guidelines doesn't just boost education quality—it keeps children on the right developmental track.

Even though Ofsted probably won't peek at your observation documents, they will definitely ask you questions about each child's development. So, being able to talk confidently about each child's journey is crucial, and detailed observations will help you.

Here are a few questions Ofsted inspectors may ask you where observations can support you.

- What progress has the child made since starting with you?
- What is the child working on/towards with your support (what are you doing in terms of teaching, resources, activities, and experiences)?
- How did you establish the child's starting points on entry?
- How do you plan for the child's future learning?
- How do you know if the child is progressing typically for their age?
- How do you communicate effectively with parents to share information?
- How do you plan a curriculum that supports each child's learning and developmental needs?

Things to remember before an Ofsted inspection

- Ofsted doesn't want observations and assessments to take you away from attending to the children at your setting. Rather than looking at observations, inspectors will want to understand your practical use of them by discussing the progress children make with you.

- There is no required way of carrying out observations or recording assessments, as long as they are effective and positively impact the children's learning, development and progress.

- Ofsted looks for settings that actively keep parents and carers informed about their child's progress and development, fostering an open dialogue between parents and practitioners.

- The only written learning and development document they may ask for are any relevant 2-year progress checks as these are statutory.

Turning observation into assessments

Review and reflect on observations:

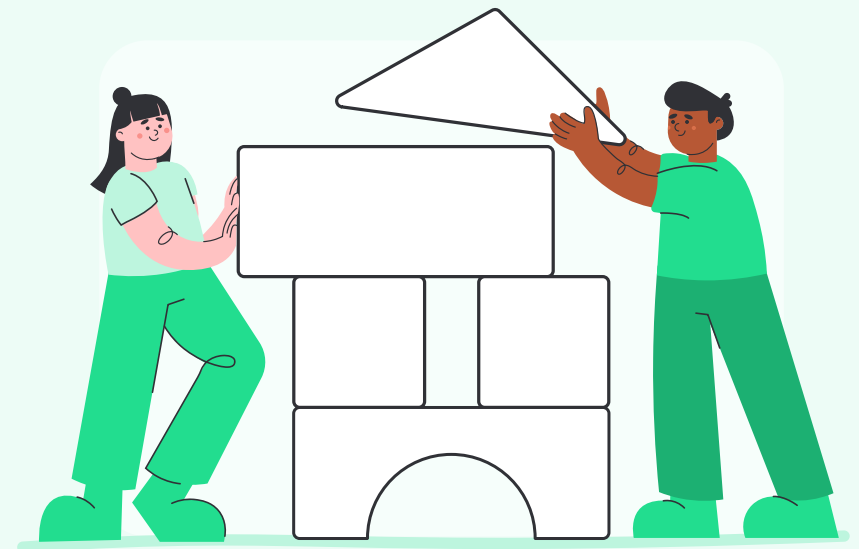
- Review your observations to identify patterns, strengths, and areas for improvement.
- Consider context, including environment, social dynamics, and individual differences.

Analyse observations:

- Cover cognitive, social-emotional, physical, and language development.
- Use insights to plan tailored interventions and support strategies.
- Adapt activities, provide extra resources, and collaborate with professionals and caregivers.

Frequent evaluation:

- Regularly update assessments based on new observations.
- Ensure interventions remain responsive to children's evolving needs.
- Enhance support for children's learning and well-being with a dynamic approach.



**Meaningful observations
and assessments are a
team effort!**

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Meaningful observations and assessments are a team effort!

To paint a clear picture of a child's development and remain objective, observations should be done consistently and with insights from different team members.

Teamwork makes the dream work!

Observations and assessments also strengthen the partnership and "team bond" between practitioners and carers. Parents might feel a bit lost or worried about not getting things right, so observations are a way to lend a hand and make it easier for them to support their little ones.

Meaningful observations and assessments are a team effort!

In addition to sharing observations, here are a few ways you can help parents:

- **Offer resources:** Give parents handy tools like observation templates, recording sheets, and tips for effective observation to use at home.
- **Encourage individual approach:** Acknowledge that every parent has their own style. Encourage them to use the resources as a flexible guide, adapting them to fit their family's needs. There's no one-size-fits-all approach.
- **Open communication:** Foster a welcoming space where parents feel at ease sharing their observations and insights. Let them know their input is important. Encourage regular communication through meetings, calls, or digital platforms to discuss any questions or concerns about their child's development.



Collaborating with children

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 12 states the right of the child to express an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account, in any matter or procedure affecting the child. Sharing the child's progress and milestones with them in a way they can understand provides an ideal opportunity for celebrating achievements and building trust and confidence. We must involve children in their own development and learning and ensure their voices are heard.

Curriculum planning

We've yet to cover curriculum planning but it's not one to miss! Assessments can be super helpful for planning fun engaging activities that match each child's abilities and needs. By getting to know each child, you can set personal goals for them. For example, if a child needs help with fine motor skills, you can include activities that improve their pincer grasp. This way, each child gets the support they need to thrive.

