

Clearing Your View: Staying Objective in Observation

[Music]

Laura Annunziata: Early Head Start and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start environments are full of people observing children. Observation happens when you're not even thinking about it – noticing a baby's eyelids droop, for example, in getting her ready to nap, or helping a mother take in the way her toddler climbs into her lap when the home visitor arrives.

Observation is important to the relationships you build and the understanding that you develop of the children and families around you. But formal observation, the kind used to collect data for assessments and monitoring a child's development and progress toward school readiness goals over time, requires a different kind of attention and skill. In everyday interactions, you watch or observe, ask questions about what you see, and adapt your responses. So this baby does something, moves or acts; and first, you watch, wanting to understand. And then you take in as much information as possible and then make an educated guess. That's your interpretation about what you see. And last, you act or not based on your interpretation.

In a formal observation, you take a break from your interactions with the child to observe. So the baby does something, and first, you watch; and then take in as much as possible. And then, ordinarily, you'd make an educated guess about what it all means. But in formal observation, you record only what you observe. Objective observation is about noting exactly what you see and hear without interpreting what that behavior means for the baby.

Why is it important to be objective in formal observation? Has anyone ever told you that you wore rose-colored glasses? When they said that, they meant you were seeing things with a rosy glow that was clouding your ability to see and interpret. We all see things with different colored lenses sometimes. The way you're feeling today, your temperament, even your own personal experiences can tint the way you see and interpret a baby's behavior.

Consider this one. If I'm feeling grumpy and this is a mess that I'll have to clean up later, I might see an infant who's not using all her skills. Or maybe I'm fiercely independent myself. I might see a baby who's getting closer to get everything in her mouth. Or maybe in my family adults carefully spoon-feed their children well into toddlerhood. So I might see here a baby who didn't get the kind of care she needed today. All different interpretations of the same baby. If I record these notes, am I describing something about the baby or I am really describing my own opinion about the baby? By removing interpretation and focusing on the facts, you create a much more solid picture of the skills this baby is showing you.

In objective observation, it's helpful to focus on what you record in your notes. Pay attention to how you describe what you observe, being as concrete as possible. Describe behaviors and vocalizations and write down direct quotes. Describe facial expressions and gestures, but not what you think they mean about how the baby might be feeling. Avoid using adjectives like successful or happy or mad or pretty or hyper. Record what happened first and what happened next without including why you think it happened. This might be challenging at first.

We asked a group to watch this new toddler, Matthew, in his family child care provider's backyard and describe what they see.

[Video begins] Observer 1: Matthew wants something up that hill.

Observer 2: Oh, he's not completely stable.

Observer 3: He's trying to put his hand in his mouth.

Observer 4: The dog startles him and he falls down. [Video ends]

Laura: They describe a lot here, but these are all really interpretations of Matthew's behaviors. Let's watch again. This time, as you watch Matthew, name one behavior you see. [Video begins and ends] How'd it go? Here's some of what I heard from the group when I asked them to name only behaviors.

[Video begins] Observer 1: Matthew stretches his arms in front of him as he starts up the hill.

Observer 2: He keeps his elbow bent, his left hand in front of him. Eventually, he puts that hand in his mouth.

Observer 3: He walks with a wide stance, his toes pointed slightly out.

Observer 4: The dog runs in front of him. His body moves, but his feet don't. He bends at the waist, touches the ground with both hands, and stands again. [Video ends]

Laura: Hear the difference? This level of description allows us to capture in more detail what we notice this toddler's doing. Now, rich as this observation is, you can't get a good picture of a child with one observation or even two; but over time, with data collected from several observations like this one, Matthew's parents and caregiver can accurately track his progress as he masters walking on uneven ground and all the other skills he's building, including school readiness skills.

Objective observation takes practice, but as you do it, you'll notice that you're better able to separate your own interpretations from what the baby is doing. Cleaning your lens to get as close as possible to a true picture of that baby's skills. And with that clear vision, you have the most accurate tool possible for conversations with family or staff for planning services and for tracking progress. Look for more information on observation under Early Head Start on the ECLKC. In the meantime, we wish you the very best in all of your work.