

Common Observation Strategies

Knowledge of common strategies as well as the skills to employ these strategies will ensure that goals of observation are met. It is important to recognize that observation is far more than looking at a child; rather, effective observation is comprised of numerous strategies that have varied uses and applications within the environment. Table One summarizes common observation strategies, their potential use, and suggestions for how to incorporate these into the early childhood environment.

Table One: Common Observation Strategies and their Usage

Observation Strategy	Description	Potential Use	Suggestions for incorporation
Running records	Detailed narrative accounts of events as they occur. Running records record everything observed in a factual manner.	Running records can serve as a tool for documenting children's behavior for later reflection, where the information provided is processed and analyzed within the larger context.	Running records require time to observe, as well as attention to the periods of time you are most interested in observing within. Comfortable chairs, notepads, and writing instruments are effective tools
Anecdotal notes	Detailed narrative accounts that describe a particular event.	Anecdotal notes can present information in a story format, which are recorded after an event has concluded. Anecdotal notes, over time, can provide stories of a child's development and interactions with the environment.	Anecdotal notes require material considerations similar to running records. However, the transcription of events can be done at a convenient time, and does not require real-time notations.
Brief notes	Quick written records that provide a reminder of events observed	Brief notes can be compiled on a daily or weekly basis to present a cumulative picture of children's development.	Placement of post-it notes throughout the room with easy-to access writing instruments. Notes are collected on a daily basis and placed in a child's folder.

Checklist	Form used to indicate whether a particular behavior or developmental milestone is present or absent.	Checklists can provide a quick assessment of children's development, and serve as an indication for where further observation or more formal assessment measures should be targeted.	Strategic observation organized around particular content items. Checklists can be completed in real-time by asking a child to complete certain tasks, or—more appropriately—by deriving information to address checklist items from collected observations.
Event Sampling	Observing the occurrence of a specific event, as well as what happens before and after the event.	Also known as ABC sampling, this can be used to look at factors that might reinforce or contribute to particular behaviors.	Event sampling requires time and materials that are conveniently placed. In addition, skilled observers will focus on the child's interactions with the environment on a continuous basis in order to “catch” what precedes the actual event.
Tallies	Recording of the number of times a specific event occurs within a specified period of time.	Tallies can be used to target the prevalence of specific behaviors, and can serve as an indication for where further observation or more formal assessment measures should be targeted.	Tallies require a set observation target, for example, the number of times a child physically interacts with a peer during snack.
Time Sampling	Observing the occurrence of a specific event within a designated period of time.	Time sampling occurs at selected intervals, and requires recording targeted behaviors during these periods of time.	Time sampling requires targeting a particular behavior, as well as developing and adhering to a schedule for sampling. In addition, the observer must recognize that the designated behavior might occur outside of the designated sampling times.