



Observation: Strategies for Thoughtful Observers

Developing thoughtful observation skills can help infant and toddler caregivers improve quality. This article contains resources to support technical assistance (TA) providers as they help infant and toddler caregivers develop stronger observation skills.

Supporting Thoughtful Observation: A Video Example

In the following video clip, a teacher gently engages with toddlers as they explore [dirt and grass](#) outdoors.

Here is the link to the video clips: <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/infant-toddler-resource-guide/supporting-videos>

Reflective questions: Here are some sample questions a TA or professional development (PD) provider might ask during a training or coaching session to open a discussion about the video clip and the value of responsive care for infants and toddlers:

- ◆ What did you observe in the interactions between the teacher and toddlers?
- ◆ What are some ways in which the teacher was responsive to the toddlers?
- ◆ How do you think each child feels during this experience?
- ◆ What are some things the TA provider might do or say to build on this conversation?

Prior to filming, the child care programs in this video series were identified as fully compliant with required regulations. Every setting has the appropriate adult to child ratio and supervision of every child, even if other adults cannot be seen in the video frame.

Resources on Observation

[Look at Me! Using Focused Child Observation with Infants and Toddlers](#) is a video podcast and related materials from the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center.

[Observation: The Heart of Individualizing Responsive Care](#) from the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, shares information to support professional development providers.

Documenting Child Observations

Infant and toddler caregivers use documentation for a variety of purposes. Sometimes documentation helps caregivers share children's experiences with their parents or highlight particular developmental skills or concerns. Documentation completed by teachers can also be used in reflective sessions to help teachers think about responsive caregiving in a more in-depth way.

There are different ways to help teachers document observations. Begin by having a conversation with the provider about her experience with documenting observations—what has worked well for her in the past and what



has not worked very well? Why or why not? When deciding how to document observations, it may be helpful to try a few different strategies, then encourage the provider to choose the ways that work best for her. Especially if a teacher is new to documenting observations, consider sharing examples of documentation strategies.

For a comprehensive list of documentation strategies, go to the [Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center](#). You will find documentation strategies such as anecdotal notes, running records, and checklists. This site also provides exercises that technical assistance providers can use when working with teachers to determine the best documentation strategies.

Video Observations and Reflection

Videos can be an effective tool to help teachers build observation skills and practice documentation. If families in the teacher's program give permission, videos of the infants and toddlers in his or her care would be an ideal resource for observation and documentation.

Following is a sample video that TA providers can use to help teachers practice documentation that is based on observation rather than interpretation. In this clip, [Looking at Elijah](#), a young toddler explores the play environment in a classroom setting. He removes items from shelves, makes a pile, and explores the empty containers in many ways. While his behavior may seem to some to be creating a mess, note how careful he is with placement of objects, his pace, and his attention span during this uninterrupted play sequence.

Here is a link to the video clip of Elijah and others included in the Infant/Toddler Resource Guide video series: <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/infant-toddler-resource-guide/supporting-videos>.

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Ideas for Implementation

Share the clip with an infant and toddler teacher you are working with and then help him or her practice taking anecdotal notes. For guidance and strategies, try this resource from the Early Learning and Knowledge Center: [Collecting and Using Anecdotal Records](#).

Discuss with the teacher how to document using an objective perspective instead of a subjective perspective. If helpful, share additional information about documenting with anecdotal notes either before or after practicing with this video clip. Whether and when this additional information is needed will depend on the teacher's knowledge of anecdotal notes.

Video observations can also be used to engage teachers in reflection. For instance, a TA provider could show this video to an infant and toddler provider and then ask reflective questions such as the following:

- ◆ In what ways does Elijah explore his environment?
- ◆ What kinds of body movements does he use? How does he use his hands?
- ◆ What kinds of facial expressions do you observe as he plays?
- ◆ What do you observe about his attention as he plays?
- ◆ How does this clip relate to experiences you've had with children in your care or in your program?
- ◆ Does Elijah's interest in exploring containers give you ideas for changes in the environment (such as adding empty containers or providing space for larger container play)?



- ◆ How would you share your observations with Elijah's family?

The following resources from the National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning provide further information that may be helpful to use with teachers:

- ◆ [Presenter Notes: Collecting and Using Anecdotal Records](#)
- ◆ [Helpful Resources: Collecting and Using Anecdotal Records](#)

You can find more videos to use with teachers on the [Early Educator Central](#) website. These videos can be used for additional documentation practice and to help foster reflection.

Reflecting on Practice

TA providers can help teachers think critically and reflect more deeply on their own practice through observations. A reflective session with a teacher may include video observations of the teacher working with infants and toddlers, written reflective notes on caregiving routines, interactions, use of the environment, or other documentation.

As noted earlier, the type of documentation used will depend on what works best for the individual teacher.

TA providers help infant and toddler caregivers reflect on their observations and think about their own practice in several ways. Here are some resources that may help support your work with teachers:

Resources to Support Self-Awareness

In this video clip, Douglas Quiett, LMSW, discusses the power and importance of self-awareness and how it affects teachers who provide services for young children. This video may be helpful to share with infant and toddler teachers to help develop their reflective skills: [Douglas Quiett, LMSW – Self Awareness](#).

Here is the link to the video clips: <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/infant-toddler-resource-guide/supporting-videos>.

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Resources to Support Self-Reflection

[Family Connections: A Mental Health Consultation Model](#) is a short paper written by the Family Connections Project at Children's Hospital in Boston that discusses the use of self-reflection (including observation) and shared reflection to help improve skills.

["For the Record: Using Observation and Documentation"](#) is a video resource from First 5 California that explores various strategies for observing and documenting young children's learning and development, including anecdotal records and work samples.

[PD2GO: Observing with Purpose](#) from First 5 California and West Ed provides strategies for observing young children, as well as information on documentation.



Resources to Support Technical Assistance

[The Center for Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation \(CECMHC\)](#) develops strategies to support Head Start programs in building strong mental health foundations for children, families, and staff. On the website, you can find downloadable resources for Head Start mental health consultants, Head Start administrators, Head Start staff, Head Start families, and training and technical assistance providers. Popular resources include teaching tools for young children, stress and relaxation tools, a temperament tool, and other toolkits and tutorials.

[The Center on Social Emotional Foundations Early Learning \(CSEFEL\)](#) is a national resource center located at Vanderbilt University and funded by the Office of Head Start and the Office of Child Care to help Head Start and child care programs improve social and emotional outcomes of young children. The center develops training and technical assistance materials, including chat sessions, decision making guidelines, family tools, practical strategies, state planning resources, training kits, training modules, and videos.

[Coaching for Quality Improvement: Lessons Learned from Quality Rating and Improvement Systems \(QRIS\)](#), from Child Trends, summarizes findings from a literature review and a multicase study of coaching in QRIS. The report concludes with an overview of implications for QRIS policy and practice.

[Developing a Statewide Network of Infant/Toddler Specialists: Technical Assistance Guide for States and Territories](#) focuses on the development of statewide networks of infant/toddler specialists. These specialists work directly with infant and toddler providers to increase their skills, knowledge, and practice-based competencies, which helps the workforce offer high-quality early care and learning experiences for infants and toddlers across early childhood settings.

The [Early Childhood Education Professional Development: Training and Technical Assistance Glossary](#), by the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies, focuses on definitions for professional development and training. The section with definitions for technical assistance, mentoring, coaching, and consultation is of particular interest.

[The Infant-Toddler Video Clips page on the Early Educator Central website](#) has videos that show diverse caregivers working with infants and toddlers in different settings. The footage includes infants and toddlers engaging in routines and interactions, and showcases different skills. The clips can be used to help teachers practice observation and engage in reflection.

[Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center \(ECLKC\)](#): The Office of Head Start provides leadership and direction to programs through evidence-based training and technical assistance resources. The ECLKC website organizes training and technical assistance resources by topic, including resources specific to infants and toddlers. Here you will find information on Early Head Start and school readiness, and products such as audio conferences, online lessons, short videos, and a webcast series called “Teacher Time,” as well as events and conferences.

[Practice-based coaching resources from the ECLKC](#): Practice-based coaching (PBC) is an approach to coaching focused on helping teachers implement practices through targeted feedback. You can learn more about this model by watching an introductory video and downloading other resources available on the Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center website above.



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