



Observation, Documentation, and Reflection

Observation, documentation, and reflection are important skills for high-quality infant and toddler care. Developing these skills can help teachers with the following activities:

- ◆ **Sharing observations with families.** For example, you might share how a toddler moved a toy shopping cart back and forth until she figured out how to squeeze it behind a table, and you might highlight how the child was learning about space and size. Sharing this information can also strengthen your relationship with families as you focus on celebrating children's growth and discoveries. Your communication may even inspire families to share more of their own observations with you.
- ◆ **Getting to know infants and toddlers better.** Through ongoing observation, you learn about children's strengths, needs, knowledge, interests, and skills, and you uncover any barriers there may be to learning. You might, for example, notice that when you sit quietly with a toddler after drop-off time and stroke his back, it helps him slowly adjust to the classroom and transition into exploration.
- ◆ **Appreciating the unique learning style of each infant and toddler.** For example, through observations, you may notice and appreciate how an infant is learning by banging objects together, and you may have back-and-forth interactions focused on this activity.
- ◆ **Encouraging children's competence and success.** Observations can help you notice how and when to intervene in ways that help children be successful. Instead of jumping in and fixing a "problem" for an infant or a toddler, provide just enough help, like loosening the lid on a jar but not taking it off. This encourages children to explore and learn more on their own.
- ◆ **Collecting information about infants and toddlers.** You can use observations to plan for learning experiences and interactions. Taking time to observe allows you to explore what infants or toddler are focusing on, what their intentions might be, and what strategies they are using to learn.
- ◆ **Conducting screenings and assessments.** Information from screenings and assessments can help you understand how infants and toddlers are progressing developmentally and help articulate concerns you may have about individual children.
- ◆ **Making informed decisions about organizing the environment.** For example, as you observe an infant's increasing interest in and ability to pull up to a standing position, you might make sure there are enough opportunities in the environment to support this exploration.



- ◆ **Finding ways to improve the daily routines.** As you observe daily care and routines, you may find that certain parts of the day go more smoothly than others. For example, you may find that when you and another caregiver go outside with eight toddlers it becomes a bit chaotic. After observing toddlers' reactions during transitions like going from indoors to outdoors, you might start earlier and try out small groups of three or four instead.

Video Example: [Exploring Dirt and Grass](#)

Video clips can be found here: <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/infant-toddler-resource-guide/supporting-videos>

In the following video clip, a teacher gently engages with toddlers as they explore outside.

- What are some ways the teacher was responsive to the toddlers?
- Did you notice how she waits to see how they will explore and follows their lead, asks questions, and repeats some of their words?
- In what ways does the teacher encourage the toddlers as they discover dirt and grass?
- What do you think each child might be experiencing?

Please note: All programs filmed in this project are in full compliance with licensing regulations at the time of filming. In each video, the required adult-to-child ratio is met and all children are supervised, even if other adults are not visible on the screen.

- ◆ **Deepening understanding of each child's developmental progress.** Learning about development is a continuous process. When you anticipate upcoming development and prepare for it, it is rewarding and exciting to see how infants and toddlers respond. Each state and territory has developed [Early Learning and Development Guidelines](#) (ELDGs), also called standards. You can use your state's ELDGs to help you see how your observations often include signs of children's development. These guidelines can help you to learn about, anticipate, and prepare for developmental changes. While standards vary, many include how infants and toddlers typically develop at different ages in the following developmental areas: social-emotional, cognitive, language, approaches toward learning, and perceptual and motor.

The Process of Observing and Documenting

Observation starts with being present and mindful as you watch how infants and toddlers explore their environment and interact with others (California Department of Education, 2012). Just watch an infant or toddler during care routines, while playing, and during interactions, and allow yourself to wonder about that child's development and behavior. You can learn a lot about an individual child and about development this way. You can ask yourself: What is the infant doing? How does she react to materials and other children? How does he respond to you and other care teachers? What are her emerging skills, interests, and needs?

Observation usually happens while you are caring for infants and toddlers. So you may not have uninterrupted time to record your observations. Often teachers record their observations (also called documentation) when children are sleeping, at the end of the day after children leave, or during planning time. If you are unable to write a full observation while you are with children, consider writing down a reminder note (for example, "Jay and

Resources for Screening and Assessment

[Infant/Toddler Development, Screening, and Assessment](#): Use information from this module to support an understanding of what screening and assessment looks like in child care settings. Developed by the National Training for Child Care Health Consultants.

[Screening Dual Language Learners](#): Explore this guide for program leaders from Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center (ECLKC) for suggestions on working with all dual-language-learners and their families.



stacking cups” or “Elie does not like peas”) that will jog your memory when you do find time to record the observation in more detail. You may find it is helpful to begin with short documentations of your observations until you become more skilled at the process.

Building Observation and Documentation Skills: Find Your Preferred Approach

Through ongoing practice, you can build your observation skills and develop different ways to document and interpret your observations. With practice, you can find the easiest and most comfortable way to fit it into your daily work with infants and toddlers. Just as you individualize care for infants, toddlers, and their families, it is important to consider what works best for you as you collect observations and documentations throughout the day. Different documentation styles work for different teachers, child care settings, and times of day. Try different approaches to see what feels right and does not interfere with your interactions with infants and toddlers.

Try these ideas for documenting observations. Share methods that work for you with a colleague.

- ◆ **Small notepad and pen kept in the pocket of an apron.** Wearing an apron can be a comfortable way to carry documentation instruments so they are easily accessible when you want to write down an infant or toddler’s actions.
- ◆ **Sticky note pads kept around the room.** You can write individual observations on separate sticky notes, place them in a central location, and at the end of the day, take a few minutes to organize the notes in a meaningful way.
- ◆ **Cameras.** Taking photographs or short videos, after getting parents’ consent, is an easy way to document infants’ and toddlers’ learning and development. This technique is most effective when paired with written notes that help explain images and or video clips.
- ◆ **File folders with blank pages.** This is a good way to organize your notes to make sure you capture meaningful information for every infant and toddler. You can keep a folder for each child with blank pages clipped inside for writing notes. If using individual folders throughout the day is too difficult, you can use the folders instead as a place to organize the notes you write on sticky pads or note cards.
- ◆ **Older toddlers’ art work and “writing.”** These work samples can give insight into children’s development, which can help guide your planning.
- ◆ **Child observation app.** A child observation app on a tablet or smartphone allows you to type observations, take pictures, or take short videos. These apps are often connected with child assessments.

Keep in mind that you can use more than one method. Each type of documentation captures a snapshot of the child in a certain way, and using more than one method of observation may help you create a more complete picture of each infant and toddler in your care (California Department of Education, 2012). It is helpful to have places you can put notes, pens, cameras, or smart phones that infants and toddlers cannot reach, such as small shelves installed at adult eye level in different parts of the room and play yard.

The Coaching Companion: A Tool for Videotaping Practice (COMING SOON)

A critical part of the Know, See, Do, Improve framework is that it can be difficult to measure “Do” without being side by side with a teacher in her program. The [Coaching Companion](#), an online digital observation tool, available on Early Educator Central makes it easier for teachers to receive feedback on “Do.” As part of professional development, teachers can record their teaching practices. After filming their own practices, teachers can share the videos with their coaches, trainers, and peer group as appropriate. The observation tool can be used as part of training, practice-based coaching, and communities of practice. The Coaching Companion is available for child care programs to use with their teaching staff, so a program would sign up for access rather than an individual teacher. Programs can sign up to access the tool at this link:

<https://earlyeducatorcentral.acf.hhs.gov/online-digital-observation-tool>



You may work in a program or a system that provides tools and guidance for observation and documentation. Here are some suggestions to consider:

- ◆ Start with a specific focus.
 - Pick an infant or toddler in your care to observe and make notes about what you see.
 - Focus on a specific domain or goal to understand how the child interacts with peers or family, or when exploring objects.
 - Use a checklist or other form to help you observe and track development.
 - Choose a time of day to observe a child, such as during drop-off and separation from family members, or during outdoor play.
 - If you have a teaching partner, ask for help so you can take a few moments for observation.
- ◆ Just observe for a while without looking for anything in particular, and see what you notice.
- ◆ Pay attention to your own responses and feelings.
 - Focused observation can often help an adult feel closer to a child, and maybe even more empathetic to the child's experience. How does observing a child affect you?

Observation is an important skill for infant and toddler teachers to learn. Improving your observation skills and reflecting on what you see throughout the day can become an important and useful tool for individualizing care, adjusting the daily schedule, documenting each child's learning, and planning meaningful curriculum.

Observation Resources

[Clearing Your View: Staying Objective in Observation \(2017\)](#): This podcast from the Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center (ECLKC) explains how to observe children and write down what you see in an objective way that will help you understand the meaning of the infant's or toddler's behavior.

[Look at Me! Using Focused Child Observation with Infant and Toddlers](#): Watch this video podcast from the Head Start ECLKC to explore focused observation techniques.



Video Example: [Teachers Reflect Together and Document Their Observations](#)

Video clips can be found here: <https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/infant-toddler-resource-guide/supporting-videos>

In this video clip, two teachers sit together, discuss, and document their observations of infants and toddlers in their care.

- What did you notice about the two teachers in the video?
- How did the two teachers work together to document their observations?
- What were some ways the teachers encouraged each other to say more about their observations?
- What are some examples of the observations the teachers made of individual children during the day?
- After watching this video, what comes to mind for you about the importance of documenting observations of individual children?
- How might observations about individual children be useful to you as a teacher?

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Reflection

For early care professionals, reflection is an important tool. In this context, reflection means the process of thinking deeply, either alone or with other professionals, about your work. Reflection, also called reflective practice, helps you to consider your caregiving practices and develop greater self-awareness so you can be more sensitive and responsive with children.

- ◆ Reflection can support your work to:
 - individualize care;
 - embrace the cultural diversity of families;
 - foster relationships with families;
 - make caregiving routines meaningful;
 - appropriately guide children’s behavior; and
 - build effective partnerships with co-teachers and others with whom you work.

In [Becoming a Reflective Teacher](#), early childhood experts Margie Carter, Wendy Cividanes, Deb Curtis, and Debbie Lebo created the following characteristics of reflective preschool teachers. Infant and toddler teachers can use this list to set professional goals, keeping in mind the developmental differences between infants/toddlers and preschoolers. As you read each of the characteristics, reflect on your own practice and ask yourself in what ways you do or could do these things in your work. Also consider the ways would it look a little different with an infant or a toddler.

- ◆ “Examines his or her own reactions to children or their actions to understand their source;
- ◆ Is curious about children’s play and watches it closely;



- ◆ Documents details of children’s conversations and activities;
- ◆ Takes time to study notes and photos to puzzle out what is significant;
- ◆ Eagerly shares stories about children’s learning with families and co-workers;
- ◆ Asks co-workers and children’s families for their insights;
- ◆ Reads professional literature to learn more;
- ◆ Shows children photos and stories of themselves to hear their views; and
- ◆ Changes the environment and materials to encourage new play and learning possibilities.”
(Carter, Cividanes, Curtis, & Lebo, 2010, p. 1)

Building Time for Reflection

All teachers can benefit from spending time in thoughtful, critical reflection. However, finding time for this practice can be a challenge. A good starting point is to consider times that already exist within your day. Here are some examples:

- ◆ Nap time;
- ◆ Before families arrive;
- ◆ After families depart;
- ◆ Staff meetings (in center-based programs, administrators can build in time during staff meetings to allow teachers to work in small groups or one-on-one with a technical assistant provider); and
- ◆ Curriculum planning time.

“Reflection is a time to slow down, to see what can be learned if we take the time to carefully look at and listen to ourselves, and those with whom we work.” (Parlakian, 2001, p. 16)

References

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