



## **Observing children in the early years**

In this case study we speak to Shelley Rees, Service Manager for PACEY Cymru on the importance of observation and the part it plays in supporting babies and young children's development. We also include feedback from practitioners who've spoken to PACEY Cymru about observing children as they embed Curriculum for Wales into their practice.

Babies and young children will have a strong internal need to explore and play. They are born curious about the world around them.

As childcare and early years professionals we understand that play is a fundamental right for all children, and we need to support this by offering engaging experiences and effective environments for play. Noticing and tuning in to these to support progress and next steps is a key part of the role of childcare and early years professionals.

## **Why is it important to observe children?**

Observing children in their play is paramount to understanding the child's needs, behaviours, preferences, well-being and interests. This does not have to be through formal, planned observation but can happen 'in the moment'.

Enabling adults who keep the developmental needs of children at the forefront of their practice while ensuring that their differences are respected, supported, and valued, will have a much better understanding of the children in their care. It will provide the best conditions for their development and progress.

Planning in the moment practice needs to be child centred, keeping the child at the heart of all decisions about what type of play and experiences are offered and nurtured, considering their interests and preferences. This can often include the child in the decision making to support their learning and understanding.

Effective observation enables us as practitioners to:

- get to know each child
- build a holistic picture of each child
- gain a greater understanding of the needs, interests, behaviours, skills and progress of individuals and groups of children
- understand how observation supports assessment
- plan future learning experiences and the environment
- seek further advice or signpost families to other sources of support.

*'We're observing children all the time organically. After childminding for many years, you just know what makes the children tick and the next steps you need to take'*

*Childminder, Wales*

### **What is our responsibility in terms of observing children?**

The [National Minimum Standards for regulated childcare](#) Standard 7.9 states that *'what children do is observed and recorded to help plan the next steps for the children's play, learning and development'*. It also states in Standard 7.10 that *'there is clear planning of babies' activities.'* Therefore, our duty of care requires us to provide play opportunities and activities to promote emotional, physical, social, creative, linguistic and intellectual development.

*'We had a child struggling with speech and through observations and next steps and not hitting development targets we were able to evidence and seek help from a speech therapist who then gave us tips. By the time the child was in full time education their speech had improved.'* *Childminder, Wales*

[Curriculum for Wales](#) states that, as childcare and early years professionals we should use observation and our knowledge of child development to plan learning experiences that support and challenge the children we care for, which will in turn help them towards the four purposes to become:

- ambitious, capable learners
- enterprising, creative contributors
- ethical, informed citizens
- healthy, confident individuals.



### **How can we support the progress and development of children in our care?**

As an enabling adult you have an essential role in creating and sustaining relationships and an environment where care, trust, and a love for learning can thrive. We need to model a joyful approach to learning, and:

- support children in their exploration of the world around them.



- model kindness, and positive, secure relationships.
- help young children to regulate their emotions and behaviours through empathy and understanding.

Curriculum for Wales has brought a new approach to planning which is child centred and recognises the importance of the knowledge of the enabling adult in providing experiences to supporting learning and development. The move away from the outcome or product driven approach has been well received and has made childcare and early years professionals much more efficient and responsive in their planning.

By standing back, observing, and then intervening and supporting appropriately, the adult can enhance the child's learning through sustained shared thinking. This is where they explore ideas and concepts together, and there's a flow to the interaction whether verbal or non-verbal. Meaningful exchange and extended thinking occur through discussions or physical communication which builds on current understanding and provides further opportunities aligned with developing at their own pace and following their interests.

*'Observing children is listening, observing and watching without putting an agenda on to it. Seeing what they are actually doing without trying to analyse it at the time but taking or noting a 'snapshot' and reflecting on this later.'* [Childminder, Wales](#)

### **What types of observations can we use?**

There are many types of observations. We can start by thinking of our role, whether that's as a:

**Participant**, which means we're playing whilst also observing.

**Or as the observant**, when we're watching on, this can mean standing close to the play, or further away.

Our observations can be:

**Incidental**, when we notice something that is significant to record as we're going about our everyday play.

**Or planned**, when we've scheduled or created something to gauge the child's reaction, development or progress.

We should ensure we observe children, the effective environment, as well as the engaging experiences being offered. It helps to record how children interact; their choices and the impact others have on them and their levels of engagement.

*'We record our observations through sticky notes, notebooks and scrap books which are updated every 6 weeks. We add photos, write up what we have been working on, identify next steps, and then send them home to parents to comment and add to and offer suggestions of what they would like me to work on next.'* [Childminder, Wales](#)



Here are some examples of the types of observations that you may want to consider:

- **Magic moments** are brief observations in a specific moment, that captures an exceptional or unusual event.
- **Time samples** are observations that capture a child in a snapshot of time. These can be repeated to capture a series of time samples.
- **Learning stories** are as they say, a record over a period of time.
- **Sociograms** are observations based on the social groups that children play in. This could include who the child plays with, what they're interested in together, the length of time spent playing and any roles the children may take in their play.
- **Tracking choices** are observations based on what choices the child makes, this can include playing alone or with/alongside others, it may even relate to what items they explore and engage with.
- **Tracking the use of the environments** are observations based on what children do in the environment. Do they prefer to be indoors or outdoors? How do they use the environment, do they adapt what's set out? What length of time do they play? Is there a space they don't use?
- **Narratives** are usually longer observations that the main carer will carry out and will often include many of those observations noted previously. These can include input from parents and partners and are often at scheduled times.

To learn more about the types of observations go to the [Hwb: Observation training module](#) which has been commissioned by the Welsh Government and is part of a suite of modules designed to assist practitioners to reflect on practice and provision.

### **What is your top tip when it comes to observing children?**

My one thing to consider when observing children is to actively listen as they play. Active listening is a skill that is broader than listening alone and involves recognising a child's body language or facial expressions to help understand and support an emotional connection with the child. By doing this we get a much better understanding of the child as a whole and it demonstrates our respect which reinforces stronger and deeper attachments and relationships.

Even non-verbal children will let you know through sounds, noise, cues and gestures, how they're feeling, their enjoyment, their awe, wonder and of any needs. Remember to enjoy the interaction, engagement and conversations and share in their joy and achievements.



*'We are facilitators, facilitating play. Facilitating children to carry out their ideas'*  
Childminder, Wales

**Further reading**

[Assessment arrangements for funded non-maintained nursery settings - Hwb](#)

[Curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings - Hwb](#)

[EAS Non-Maintained Settings](#)

[Inspiring Environments / Amgylcheddau Ysbrydoledig - PACEY](#)

[CEY smart training - The business end | PACEY](#)

[Enabling learning - Hwb](#)

[Bing Videos](#)