

## Learning and Development

### Observation, assessment and planning

#### Explaining the Observation, Assessment and Planning cycle

Observation of children is a fundamental professional skill, used in everyday practice in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), which enables us to fully understand how a child develops, learns and progresses. Observation is also essential in building relationships with children to find out what really makes them 'tick', who they are and the influences which surround them and shape their lives. In effect, observing children is our window (looking, listening and noting) into their lives, which we need to *reflect on* (assessment) and *respond to* in respectful ways in order to provide relevant opportunities, support and teaching (planning – what next?).

The Observation, Assessment and Planning cycle (below) explains the way in which observation enables us to be aware of and 'see' the unique child in the broader context of their lives including their family, culture and community (the bigger picture) as well as the context of their everyday development and learning (the detailed picture) and how what we provide supports their progress (the curriculum).



**The Observation, Assessment and Planning cycle (Birth to Five Matters, 2021)**

The cycle is based on Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Ecological Systems theory, which nests the child at the centre surrounded by their other contexts and influences. The New Zealand Early Years Curriculum, Te Whariki, is also influenced by Bronfenbrenner's model and the importance of the surrounding context of the child, especially the way in which:

....curriculum and pedagogy recognise that family and community are integral to learning and development, with every child situated within a set of nested contexts that includes not only the ECE setting but also the home, whānau, community and beyond (Te Whariki, 2017, p. 62).

The Birth to Five Matters guidance emphasises that effective practice starts with the child and grows in partnership, with observation being the way in which we 'tune into the child and build a relationship', taking all the aspects included in the cycle into consideration and valuing each child's own unique pathway of

development and learning, with the many elements woven together in a holistic form (Birth to Five Matters, 2021, p. 35).

The child is not passive in this process, which is why they are acknowledged as a Unique Child with the right to express their views and have their views taken seriously (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 12) and also seen as competent, capable and active learner (Child Development p. 15-16).

## How to use the OAP cycle?

### ***Starting from the centre***

We start with the Unique Child as they engage with their surroundings. In Te Whariki (2017) children, babies, toddlers and older children, are described as engaging with '*people, places and things*' which is exactly what young children do!

Adults focus attention on children engaging with *people, places and things* in everyday practice through the process of Observe, Assess, Plan. It is how they get to know the child, understand them and engage with them; a very familiar cycle from Development Matters (2012, p. 3). Adults who work with young children are always involved in observation-assessment-planning in some way. For example:

- Being aware of children's actions, communications and responses while they are in the middle of practice engaging with children through their play and activities (observation-in-action); considering and seeking to understand the child's thinking, learning and feelings in the midst of play and activities (assessment-in-action); making professionally informed decisions about responses which enable them to support, extend and deepen interactions and learning through playful encounters/teaching (planning-in-action)
- At other times adults Observe, Assess, Plan whilst watching from a distance to observe how children are leading their play, on their own and with others, and assess how far they have understood and embedded their learning. While not leading to immediate planning (in action), this will inform how the adult goes on to support the child's learning in later situations.

In both of these situations adults make professionally informed decisions as to which observations to record and document. Because adults engage in the process of observation-assessment-planning continually, they hold a vast amount of information in their minds with no need to record it. Decisions about recording the process should be based on whether children are showing significant moments in their development which need to be documented in order to extend their learning. It may be important to share with other professionals, it may support practitioners' memories, or it might be valuable to share with the child and the parents. For children, documentation can offer an opportunity to deepen their learning through talking about their ideas and thinking, build their awareness of what and how they are learning, and promote a sense of ownership through being involved in decisions about what is documented.

Importantly, the experience of the child and our observations, assessment and planning are all informed by the way in which the curriculum which surrounds them is shaped. We need to ensure that young children are supported by and nestled within a curriculum which is responsive and reciprocal, based on their experiences and context. This is why the curriculum is sandwiched between the inner circle of the child's experiences and development and the outer circle of the child's wider context of their parents, family, culture and diversity etc., as they both influence the way in which the curriculum is constructed.

Each child will experience the curriculum in a unique way, which will be evident through the adult's observation, assessment and planning. What needs to be consistent, however, is a curriculum that is shaped by the EYFS Themes and Principles; the Characteristics of Effective Learning; responding to children's interests, including their funds of knowledge and cultural capital; balancing play and the Areas of Learning and Development, and enabling environments. The quality of the curriculum will be determined by the way in which all these aspects are woven together in meaningful and relevant ways to support children's development, learning and progress.

The outer circle enables adults to understand the 'bigger picture' of the child's life and what they bring with them into the setting/school. This is all part of who the child is, their identity and roots, described in the following statement from Te Whāriki, the New Zealand Curriculum Guidance (2017. p.12):

I come not only with my own strengths but bring with me the gifts, talents and strengths of my family, tribe and ancestors.

<https://tewhariki.tki.org.nz/assets/Uploads/files/Te-Whariki-Early-Childhood-Curriculum.pdf#page=8>

### ***Starting from the outer circle***

Being aware of the wider context (the bigger picture) within which the child is situated helps us to understand and value the influence of family, culture, language, community, diversity and inclusion on children's development, learning and progress. It means that we can build strong, authentic relationships between the child, family and setting by being fully informed and respectful of the diverse communities that children grow up in. At a more global level we can also be aware of the even bigger influences on children's lives such as climate change, sustainability, and the Black Lives Matter movement.

In turn, this awareness and respect will influence the way in which the curriculum is shaped and what needs to be included to meet the needs of those children and families. The curriculum is shaped in a bespoke way for every child and will have far more relevance to their current and future lives.

At the centre of the circle, where adults are building positive relationships with children and understanding their developmental and learning needs, we observe, assess and plan for them at a more detailed level in a more informed and respectful way by valuing the child's family and cultural context.

The uniqueness of every child is better understood and respected by adults who are much more aware of their families' cultural and community roots.

### **Reflective questions**

- How does OAP demonstrate each child's potential and help you consider developmentally appropriate, stimulating, challenging provision to support their learning and development?
- How do you decide which children to observe, when to observe, where to observe?
- What helps you make an informed decision about which observations to record and document?
- How will you ensure that the 'voice' of the child is included in your observations, assessments and planning?
- In what ways do you use OAP with families and children to show that you value their culture, their language and their diversity?
- How does OAP support you to better understand and appreciate the uniqueness of children and their families?
- How will you ensure that a holistic view of a baby's, toddler's or young child's learning and development is captured?
- How do your observations (recorded or not) and assessments show the progress that children make?
- How will the OAP process ensure continuity for children's learning and development through the various transitions they undertake such as from home to your setting, through your setting and on from your setting to the next setting or school?
- What are your own strengths and areas for development in the OAP process? What skills and knowledge do you need to observe and assess babies', toddlers' and young children's learning and development?