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# Observation and Assessment

## Introduction

As part of the ongoing recording and monitoring system within early years settings, the usefulness and power of observation and assessment are sometimes overlooked as they may be deemed time-consuming when there is already a shortage of time to complete the other tasks required by agencies such as the government, parents, governors or committee and local educational authorities. However, observation can enable:

- informed planning
- informed understanding of a child's current competence levels
- reflection on the appropriateness of provision
- sharing of information with other parties
- assessment of specific children, groups, interactions, the learning environment and staff.

The Foundation Stage guidance (QCA, 2000) and Code of Practice (DfES, 2001d) acknowledge the value of observation and assessment, and place requirements on all early years practitioners to ensure these are part of the ongoing teaching and learning process. Thus practitioners need to have a clear understanding of the purposes and benefits, combined with practical examples, both of which are offered in this chapter.

In order to identify a child's current competence levels, we rely on observation of skills mastered which then informs our future planning. For children experiencing difficulties we should strive towards early identification, diagnosis of specific difficulties and the introduction of appropriate intervention strategies. None of these can take place without prior observation and assessment of the current situation.

Observation and assessment processes can also be used to identify the effectiveness of the setting, specific areas of the setting, specific activities and the practitioner. Arguably, to see the children progress and be happy is every practitioner's ultimate aim and one that gives us tremendous satisfaction and reward. We therefore need to be prepared to examine our own practices closely to ensure

that we are supporting and not compounding children's learning opportunities inadvertently. If we aim to provide appropriately for all children within our settings, then we should be prepared to capitalise on the value and practical usefulness of observational approaches and ensure observation is a regular activity.

Purposeful observation offers benefits to practitioners, parents and children, and is a positive way of responding to the needs of all children, not just those experiencing difficulties, and my own experience supports this view. For those children experiencing special needs we should ensure that we focus on assessing the child and not the difficulties being experienced. In the case of an autistic child, for example, while practitioners need to understand the effects and implications of autism, we should focus on the child's current skills, strengths, weaknesses, likes and dislikes which will inform planning. The autism is secondary. With each child we are thus increasing our knowledge and considering each child as individual and unique.

We usually observe children when they are involved in their everyday activities, but there may be occasions when we need to set up specific activities to support a specific observation. However we look at it, observation and assessment should be an integral part of every early years establishment.

## **Children's rights, legislation and guidance**

The Warnock Report (DES, 1978) emphasised the importance of effective assessment through initial, more informal, assessments through to the stages preceding formal assessment and the production of a statement of special educational needs. Early identification of special educational needs was also deemed essential within the report, acknowledging that: 'all professionals who come into contact with young children must be helped, through their training, to identify those showing signs of having special needs or problems, and to appreciate the educational implications of their special needs' (ibid.: s. 4.17).

Observations will clearly support the processes of early identification and appropriate intervention. The Education Act (DES, 1981) adopted many of the Warnock Report's key areas and thus continued the underlying philosophy of early identification and provision, supported by ongoing observation and assessments.

### ***Children's rights***

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child acknowledges the rights of all children to education which should be free in the primary phase. It continues to state that:

The education of the child shall be directed to:

- (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential;
- (b) The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms;

- (c) The development of respect for the child's parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own;
- (d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society;
- (e) The development of respect for the natural environment. (Internet 10: art. 29)

While it may not be explicit in the Convention, within the UK it could be suggested that to provide an education as thus defined it would be necessary to establish observation and assessment to ensure individual development to the fullest potential.

### ***Listening to the child***

The Children Act (DoH, 1991) supports the importance of listening to the child, which is echoed in the Code of Practice (DfES, 2001d). This is an important consideration as it is often presumed that very young children are incapable of contributing to discussions regarding their education and learning, when in reality they have valid opinions which can inform practitioners. Children can complete simple questionnaires and respond to questions about the areas of learning they are involved in. Such information can then be used in planning and should be included in the reports compiled. If children are capable of contributing to the process of assessment then their views should be valued and respected. The Code of Practice also echoes the importance and value of consulting with children, concluding that:

Ascertaining the child's views may not always be easy. Very young children and those with severe communication difficulties, for example, may present a significant challenge for education, health and other professionals. But the principle of seeking and taking into account the ascertainable views of the child or young person is an important one. (DfES, 2001d: s. 3.3)

### ***Practitioner requirements***

Within the Early Learning Goals document (QCA, 1999: 5) practitioner responsibilities for observation and assessment processes are defined as: 'Practitioners must be able to observe and respond appropriately to children, informed by a knowledge of how children develop and learn'. This requirement is discussed alongside the need for practitioners to offer a 'well-planned and well organized learning environment' and 'well-planned, purposeful activity and appropriate intervention' (ibid.). So the value of observation begins to emerge as clearly linked to the learning environment as well as to individual children.

Through observing the children and/or the learning environment we can revise plans and, perhaps, changes to the environment, to improve provision. Subsequent observations will further inform, so the process is a continuing cycle.

The *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (QCA, 2000) recognises the importance of observation and assessment in relation to effective teaching and learning in early years settings. Practitioners are advised that: 'Assessment gives insight into children's interests, achievements and possible difficulties in their learning from which the next steps in learning and teaching can be planned. It also helps ensure early identification of special educational needs and particular abilities' (ibid.: 24). So practitioners should identify current performance levels in order to plan the next steps to ensure progression for all children and should not be focusing solely on identifying weaknesses and/or difficulties.

With particular reference to children with special needs, observation and assessment will be a part of our everyday work at each stage of provision. When initial concerns are raised, observation can help to clarify thinking and identify specific areas of difficulties as well as strengths, which can both be used to inform subsequent planning. At the stages of Early Years Action and Early Years Action Plus, observation will continue to play an important role, ensuring progression and monitoring the effectiveness of intervention strategies in place.

### ***Baseline assessments***

Since September 1998 reception class teachers have been required to undertake baseline assessments of young children within the first seven weeks of starting school. We will see later, however, that this process is currently undergoing change. Guidance for schools via the DfES circular 6/98 stated that:

The assessment should cover as a minimum the basic skills of speaking and listening, reading, writing, mathematics and personal and social development. Teachers will be able to use the information from the baseline assessments to plan their teaching to match individual children's needs. Over time, schools will be able to judge children's progress against this baseline. (Internet 11)

Since their inception, baseline assessments have been the subject of much debate, raising a concern regarding their appropriateness so soon after children enter the more formal school situation. For some children it will take considerably longer than seven weeks to adjust to their new environment and, thus, it was suggested that the results could represent an inaccurate picture of a child's current competences. No standard assessment scale was offered but accredited schemes were identified for teachers, resulting in an array of formats and a general lack of consistency nationwide. In addition, a narrow perspective band of 'subject areas' was assessed with little evidence of an holistic approach.

A subsequent QCA consultation document (Internet 12) on baseline assessments has resulted in changes planned for September 2002, when a new 'Foundation Stage Profile' will be introduced. This will be 'a new national assessment for the end of the foundation stage' (Internet 12) and it is hoped that the documentation and guidance will support an holistic early years philosophy, not rely totally on a one-off snapshot picture. It is clearly hoped that a revised system

will eradicate some of the issues of concern, but there are still many early years specialists who remain concerned about the need for and value of formal assessments on very young children, as Pugh (2001: 74) summarises: 'Clearly, the only sensible move would be for baseline assessment in the early years of the 2000s to meet its demise, in favour of ongoing teacher assessment – fully supported by rich and challenging professional development.'

### ***Ongoing observations and assessments***

Assessment, informed by observation, is a key feature within the Code of Practice (DfES, 2001d) stating that both are fundamental to effective and appropriate provision for children with special needs. Practitioner monitoring forms the basis of ongoing provision using baseline assessment outcomes, regular observational records, outcomes relating to the National Literacy and Numeracy objectives, key stage performance indicators and standardised assessments (*ibid.*: s. 5.13).

If provision for special needs progresses throughout the stages of Early Action, Early Action Plus, School Action and School Action Plus, outcomes and interventions will rely heavily on the observational processes built into the setting's practices. If a statement of special educational need follows, then observation and assessment will continue to play a major role in the work of practitioners. This will inform ongoing planning and interventions plus the annual review meeting where a range of assessment outcomes will be discussed as objective evidence of progress made and areas of difficulty being experienced. With this information professionals and parents can make informed decisions about the future.

The abilities required to be an effective observer are not necessarily inherent and training should be available to practitioners covering:

- purposes and values of observation and assessment
- principles of observation and assessment
- range of observational methods available
- considerations required prior to observing
- adapting teaching, individual education plans and planning as a result of observations
- need to involve parents and children.

The need for and requirements regarding observation and assessment are now clear, but a more detailed examination of some of the above areas will deepen understanding and awareness.

### **Purposes and values of observation and assessment**

In any early years settings children will be busy throughout the session or day, involved in a variety of child-led and adult-led activities. Practitioners provide appropriate learning experiences to foster and encourage children's development across the range of skill areas and undertake informal observations

regularly. Within the working day it is often difficult for practitioners to be able to stand back and observe a child or a group, in a planned way as sufficient numbers of adults need to be present to ensure that the observer can be freed from their responsibilities and focus entirely on the observational process. Perhaps as practitioners our greatest reward is to watch children playing at and learning what interests them and marvel at their enthusiasm and natural curiosity, but through careful and systematic observation we can ensure we maximise the potential of the learning environment for all attending children and thus maximise their progress. Pugh supports the importance of observation and assessment concluding that:

Observation and assessment are the essential tools of watching and learning by which we can both establish the progress that has already been made and explore the future – the learning that is still embryonic. The role of the adult in paying careful and informed attention to children's learning and reflecting upon it is crucial to the enhancement of children's future learning. (Pugh, 2001: 70)

If a child begins at an early years setting with identified special needs, then practitioners will need to communicate with parents to establish which professionals have been involved to date, gather information from any previous assessments and/or reports, plus, perhaps most importantly, the nature of the child's difficulties and the implications for the child within the setting. Ideally this should take place during a home visit when the parent(s) and child are in their own environment which would be reassuring and hopefully give the child confidence in the situation with a professional or, as for many families, yet another professional.

With all the information to hand practitioners can then begin to plan appropriate learning experiences for the child and, as their knowledge of the child develops, more information will emerge that can be used in planning to ensure the maximising of the learning opportunities and the environment.

Ireton devised the Child Development Inventories and Teacher's Observation Guide and suggested that:

Young children's development is best appreciated by observing them in action in their everyday environments at home and in preschool. To make best use of their observations teachers need a systematic approach to observing what each child is doing. Observation guides, child development charts, and summary sheets are helpful tools for teachers. (Internet 13)

As previously mentioned, *observations can help to clarify a child's current levels of performance and skills mastered*, but it should be remembered that if interventions and provision are to be amended in the light of the observations then practitioners should not assume that if a child has not mastered a skill that he/she is incapable of doing so. We must check that the task is child appropriate (exactly at the right level to move the child forwards, thus stretching his/her knowledge and skills but without the risk of failure); capitalises on the child's interests; that

as practitioners we are supportive and encourage positive reinforcement; that difficulties such as a child's emotional development and/or self-concept are not prohibiting the child from accessing the task; that the room encourages support and learning for that individual child and that our classroom management skills are effective. Perhaps this may seem an impossible task, but it could make the difference between success or failure for many children.

As an illustrative example: if a large group of young children is given the same worksheet to complete, then the child for whom the task is too difficult or too easy may become bored and restless. This may result in task-avoidance strategies or the manifestation of unacceptable behaviours. Two conclusions can be drawn from this scenario:

- the child has behaviour problems, or
- the task is inappropriate for the child.

Interpretation (or misinterpretation) of this simple example will clearly have significant effects on the child, practitioner and future planning. Therefore the skills of the observer, combined with their knowledge of the child and the setting will be paramount.

*Observations can be shared with parents* to discuss progress made and to consider parental observations from outside the setting. A child may demonstrate skills at home, but not in the setting, for a variety of reasons, including self-confidence. This information will help the practitioner to create a 'holistic' picture of the child. In addition, parents and practitioners can work together to maximise progress.

It may be that a child is reluctant to participate in dressing up due to issues of gender and/or culture, so the practitioner should seek information from discussions with parents. Information gained will then enable greater understanding on the part of the practitioner and setting, combined with an acknowledgement and respect of these important family factors. A child whose grandfather is seriously ill in hospital may be distressed with stories about doctors and/or role-play. With practitioner understanding these needs can easily be supported.

*Observational outcomes will also be shared with a range of supporting agencies* working with the child and the family. At progress review meetings or annual reviews for statements, evidence from all parties will be needed to inform further decision-making. Observational evidence will support this process with clear indicators of progress made, the child's likes and dislikes and strengths and weaknesses. When combined with reports from the child's parents and other professionals working with the child, the holistic picture can again emerge and inform decisions and planning.

Observations can be undertaken on:

- individual children – focusing on one or more specific areas of development or progress, e.g. social interactions
- groups of children – to focus on one or more area, e.g. abilities to share and take turns

- the whole group – to assess whether all children have mastered one skill, e.g. jumping with two feet together
- an area of the room – to assess whether the area is well used, appropriately used and what interactions occur there
- a practitioner – to assess an area of professional skill, e.g. appropriateness of interactions with the children.

Evidence from such observations could be included within a report for a meeting with parents and/or outside agencies as a way of sharing information about the child and his/her progress.

Thus the purposes and values of observation and assessment can be summarised as to:

- develop our own understanding of children's current competence levels (to assist with individual planning)
- reflect on the appropriateness of provision (tasks securing failure for some children, mismatch of curriculum)
- inform planning (organisation of room, session)
- inform others (parents/carers, outside professionals, staff)
- assess interactions (adult:child; child:child; adult:adult; child:adult)
- assess specific events (behaviour, speech and language, physical development, social interactions etc.)
- assess staff (performance, interactions with children, supporting children with activities etc.).

Information gathered can then to be used in our monitoring, evaluations and future planning, as Woods summarises:

With the insight from the observations we are better equipped to:

- devise optimum environments to promote the holistic development of each child and respond to his/her needs;
- take appropriate action if any aspect of a child's development, behaviour, health or well-being causes us concern and does not appear to be within the range typical for his/her age;
- interact more sensitively with children and form happy relationships with them;
- monitor, evaluate and improve the provision we make for children, i.e. the care we give, the curriculum we devise and the outcomes we achieve. (Woods, 1998: 16)

## Principles of observation

The principles of effective and purposeful observation and assessment processes are interlinked with their purpose. If we have a clear understanding of the purpose of our intended observations then that will be our guiding principle. Bowers suggests useful key factors on which to base our decision regarding



whether to observe, what and how to observe:

- Why do I need this information? What is the purpose of my efforts?
- Based on what I need to know, what kind of information will be helpful? Test scores? Written records? Works found in portfolios?
- How often and when do I need to collect such information, and how can I best assure the information is accurate and valid?

In addition, any method used should be selected for its appropriateness for the children on whom it will be used. Two important criteria are developmental appropriateness, e.g. 'Is it designed for the age of child I'm testing?' and cultural appropriateness, e.g. 'Is it relevant to the background and daily circumstances of the child?' (Internet 14)

As well as our own observational skills we have available to us a range of checklists and assessments that can be used by early years practitioners, for example the Portage developmental checklist (Bluma et al., 1976), the PreSchool Behaviour Checklist (McGuire and Richman, 1988), Playladders (Mortimer, 2000) and Griffiths Developmental Scale (Griffiths, 1970). These checklists can be used as they stand or, as in many instances, sections can be taken out as they are most appropriate to the individual setting and situation, in a 'mix and match' approach.

Before undertaking observations practitioners should ensure they have reflected on ethical issues, such as gaining permission from the child's parents and considering the responsibilities of the observer. Any parent has a right to refuse permission but this will be unlikely if the purposes and potential benefits are explained thoroughly as most parents will be supportive of initiatives that will encourage progress. The responsibilities of the observer would include consideration of the safety of the children, confidentiality, appropriate behaviour and perhaps, most importantly, entering the process with an open mind. If practitioners have preconceived ideas and/or expectations of the outcomes then there is a risk that outcomes will be affected, or worse, invalid.

The principles for observing and assessing can be summarised as the need for practitioners to:

- be clear on the need for and purpose of assessing
- ensure the appropriateness for the child
- ensure the process is meaningful
- consider ethical issues
- ensure the validity of outcomes
- use appropriate observational methods for the child and the setting
- consider the timing of the observation as children can perform differently in mornings to afternoons, and Mondays to Fridays
- ensure there is adequate staffing to free the observer from additional responsibilities if necessary
- be clear on how the outcomes will be disseminated, and to whom.

Perhaps the key to effective assessment is an understanding of the observational process as a whole, with thorough planning being central. Practitioners will need to work through the following stages:

- 1 Decide on the need and purpose.
- 2 Plan the process.
- 3 Be clear on ethical issues.
- 4 Begin assessment.
- 5 Reflect on outcomes.
- 6 Decide ways forward as supported by outcomes.
- 7 Adjust planning appropriately.
- 8 Monitor progress.

This process may resolve the issues under examination, in which case observations will cease to be needed or, if not, practitioners will need to revise the process. The effectiveness of the process will depend on careful planning and implementation, resulting in outcomes that positively inform future practices to the benefit of the child(ren), practitioners and parents alike.

## **Methods of assessment 1 – observations**

For most practitioners observation is a feature of everyday working life and practitioners can often be found with a notebook and pen close to hand to jot down unplanned observations that can be added to normal recording systems at a later time. However, as previously discussed, specific observations should be planned. Prior to beginning the observation practitioners should work through the stages outlined in the previous section and, as a part of this process, the most appropriate observational method should be selected from the range available. It will also be helpful to produce a cover sheet including such details as:

- child's name
- child's age
- date
- name of observer
- the specific setting or area of setting
- permissions gained
- aims and purpose of observation
- start and finish times.

Using a cover sheet attached to records of observations can be added to a child's general records as evidence to staff, parents and outside professionals of actions undertaken by the setting to evaluate an individual child's performance. When working with children with special needs records are crucial to enable all parties access to the information. When seeking the support and advice of outside professionals such evidence will provide accessible and useful information.

### ***Time sampling***

This can be defined as the observer making a note of the child's actions and interactions at regular intervals over a set period of time. It may be that practitioners are concerned about the amount of time a child spends at the sand tray and the time sampling approach will enable collation of evidence. It may be that the child is observed every ten minutes throughout a session of three hours, on a Tuesday morning and a Thursday afternoon, giving over 36 recorded entries during the period. At each ten-minute interval the observer will note exactly where the child is in the room, or simply place a tick or cross on the record sheet to indicate whether he/she is at the sand tray or not. The outcomes of such an observation will clarify to the staff (and others) the amount of time spent at sand play and action can be considered. Perhaps removing the sand tray from the activities available to the children two or three days a week will encourage increased involvement in alternative activities. So, through this relatively straightforward approach the child's opportunities, and thus potential, can be extended. If staff are also concerned about the child's interactions with others, then the process can record with whom he/she is interacting and the nature of the interaction.

Time sampling is also useful to investigate aspects of the learning environment. For example, staff at the setting may be concerned about the lack of use made of the book corner and a time-sampling approach can be used in the same way as in the example above, to note if there are children using the book corner or not at the preset intervals. If results indicate that the book corner is used for a minimum amount of session time, then the staff can devise ways to make alterations to encourage greater usage. Similarly, if the quality of language used in the book corner is a concern, then this can be recorded at the same time intervals.

Devereux (1996: 83) identifies the key uses of time sampling as: 'particularly useful for tracking children's activities and interactions over a period of time, for building up a picture of particular children, and for appraising the value and use of equipment'.

### ***Event/frequency sampling***

Event or frequency sampling is useful when practitioners wish to clarify their understanding of a specific event as it records the frequency of an event. As an example, if we are observing a child's unacceptable behaviour, for example hitting another child, the information can be used as a baseline. A programme or strategies can be implemented to reduce this behaviour and possibly encourage an alternative behaviour. Then at a later date the observations can be repeated, hopefully to highlight the improvement in behaviours demonstrated and success of the intervention. Recording can take the form of a simple tick sheet to indicate the number of times the behaviour occurs or more details can be included, such as time of day, antecedents, consequences, whether an adult

was present and so on. Additional information will enable more individualised strategies to be introduced. For example, if the child only hits one other child when that child interferes with his/her play, practitioners would need to consider which child the strategies should be aimed at. Results of the initial observation can be presented within a report as a simple table of 'scores' or as a graph or chart (Figure 5.1):

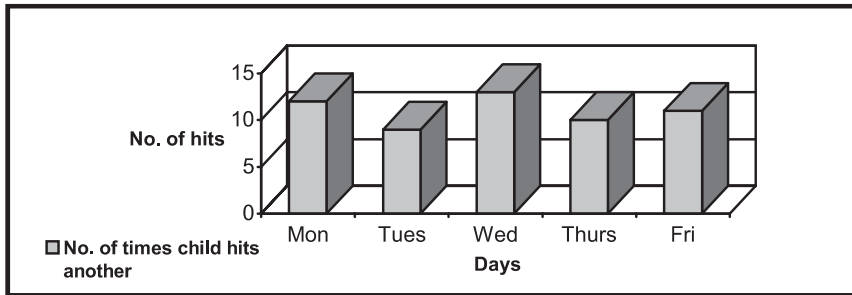


Figure 5.1 Baseline observations

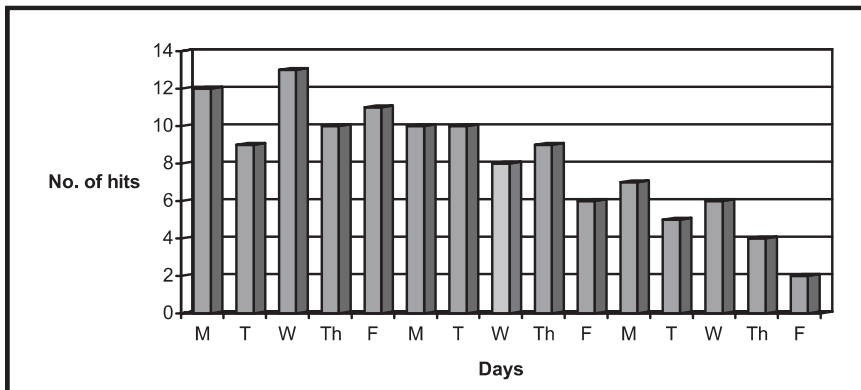


Figure 5.2 Baseline and intervention observations

When strategies have been implemented graphical representation clearly summarises the process, as in Figure 5.2, where the first week was the period of baseline measurement and during the second and third weeks the intervention strategies were in place. The outcome of the process is that the number of times the child hit another is successfully being reduced.

**Illustrative example**

The results of such observations can inform practice greatly, as in my own experience a child's hitting out and anger was observed by event sampling, but in addition to recording the number of times the child hit out at another the antecedents were noted. It became clear that the child reacted this way when the

group was asked to tidy up and he was in the middle of a task or project, such as building a garage from bricks and another child began clearing the equipment away. The strategy that supported this child was to speak to him five minutes before tidying up time and decide on how to store or protect his work until later, if not finished. Incidents of hitting out and anger reduced dramatically. A significant discovery was made through the observational process and the learning environment was successfully adapted to suit his individual needs with very little effort from anyone.

Time sampling and event sampling are both relatively straightforward to undertake and give precise data to work with, however, finding the time to complete observations within a busy setting may not be so easy, as additional staff may need to be brought in to cover. In addition it is not easy to remain detached from the children and focus solely on the observations in hand and the children themselves may make it difficult by constantly asking you to help or support them, as you would usually do during the session. Children are not used to staff members sitting on the perimeter of the room and writing, instead of playing and working with them.

### ***Focused or target child observations***

A full, detailed written record of a child's movements during a predetermined time can offer practitioners a full account of:

- which specific activities the child has selected
- which area(s) of the learning environment he/she has been working in
- with whom he/she has interacted
- with whom he/she has spoken
- evidence of expressive language used.

While observing a child in this way it is useful to have a watch nearby and to note the time at frequent intervals, clarifying the exact time spent at each activity. To ease notation, codes can be evolved which should be written on the record sheet for clarity of understanding by others. Possible codes could include:

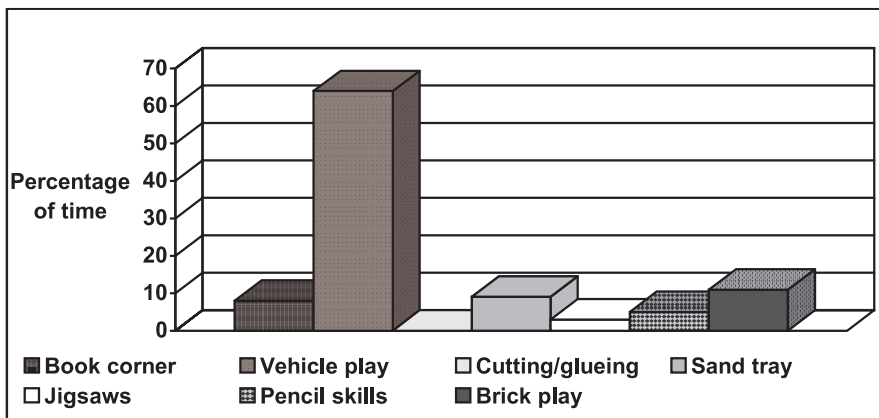
TC = target child	A1, A2, A3 ... = adults
B1, B2, B3 ... = another boy	AC = art corner
G1, G2, G3 ... = another girl	HC = home corner
ST = sand tray	P = cooperative play
BP = brick play	SP = solitary play
BC = book corner	PP = parallel play
PT = puzzle table	

As a result of the observations strategies can be implemented to promote changes for the child, the practitioners and/or the setting.

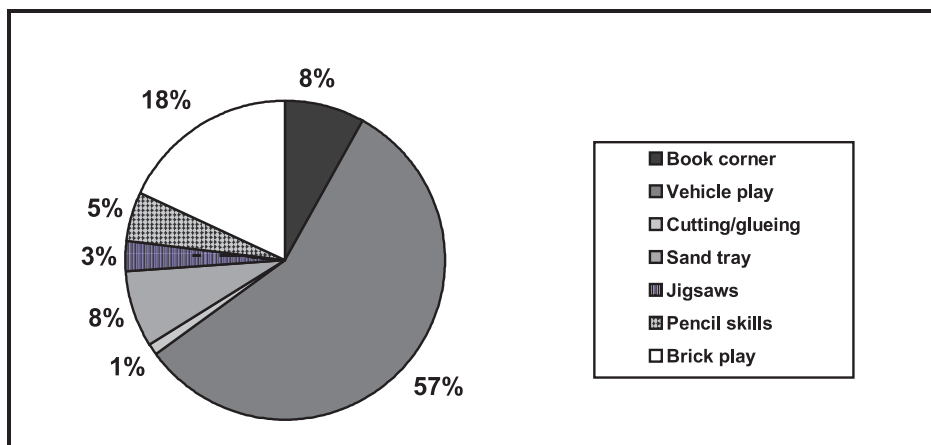
### ***Illustrative example***

Through the process of focused observation minor changes were made to the learning environment and planning for a three-and-a-half-year-old boy, Adam. Adam was generally perceived to be lacking in application to tasks other than cars, lorries and train play, and had a tendency to run from one end of the room to the other regardless of who or what was blocking his way. He had been referred to an early years special needs unit as the local pre-school group could not cope with his 'disruptive behaviour'. While these behaviours could be deemed age appropriate for a two-year-old, they were clearly impeding his opportunities to access the learning environment in a meaningful way. The observation over a 45-minute period was repeated three times during one week and identified the following key issues:

- Adam spent his time flitting between activities, but rarely settled to any activity for more than three/four minutes at a time. (This could also be represented in graphical form – see Figures 5.3 and 5.4.)
- Adam did not once walk around the room – each time he got up to move elsewhere, he ran.
- Adam mostly avoided all table-top activities such as puzzles, sharing or turn-taking games, cutting and sticking, art, colouring or writing-based activities.
- Adam resisted attempts by adults to participate in table-top activities.
- At any time that Adam remained at a table-top activity he needed immediate success or he was unable to cope and would leave the table.
- Adam needed to be in control of any activity he was involved in and did not appear aware of interrupting other children's play and sometimes annoying the children.
- Adam's speech and language skills were advanced for his age.



**Figure 5.3** Baseline observations – percentage of time spent at each activity.



**Figure 5.4** Baseline observations – percentage of time spent at each activity.

Through these and subsequent observations designed to focus more specifically on certain aspects of Adam's performance the following key issues were highlighted:

- Adam did not have the necessary skills to participate successfully in the table-top activities.
- Adam's social skills were delayed or he was demonstrating inappropriate social skills.
- Adam felt a need to run between activities.
- Adam particularly enjoyed activities involving a range of vehicles.
- Adam demonstrated good imaginative skills in his vehicle play.
- Adam demonstrated good creative skills in his building with bricks or Duplo – but these mostly centred on roads, rails, tunnels and bridges.

As a result the staff discussed Adam's progress with his parents to suggest possible ways forward. The following strategies were employed:

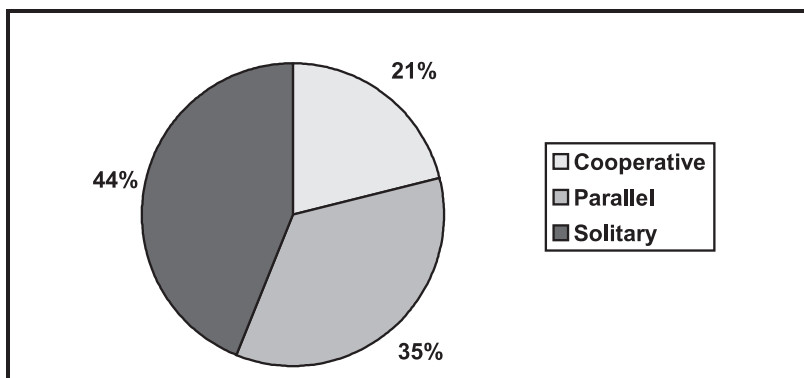
- The layout of tables in the room was changed to limit free running space.
- Whole-group and small-group activities were planned into the curriculum around a theme of 'fast and slow vehicles'. This had a dual purpose of capitalising on Adam's love of vehicles and also exploring slow and fast movements.
- One-to-one activities were planned and introduced to help develop Adam's skills required for the successful completion of table-top activities, such as turn-taking, sharing, achieving success and patience. This was supported by increased praise as positive reward.
- Role-plays and stories were used to develop Adam's awareness of appropriate and inappropriate social interactions, with adults and Adam's peers acting as positive role models.

Adam's behaviour and progress within the group situation improved consistently and in some areas surpassed expectations. It became apparent to the staff that he had somehow 'missed' some stages of skill development and simply needed steps to be retraced and strategies introduced. For example, it was soon clear that rather than not having the patience to complete a jigsaw, he simply did not know how to tackle the task. The steps needed to complete a jigsaw were introduced to Adam in small stages to ensure success, and within weeks he had advanced from six-piece jigsaws to 50+ pieces – a very pleasing outcome for the staff and Adam's parents alike.

It was the carefully planned and instigated processes of observation that enabled this structured response to Adam's very individual needs yet many of the activities implemented were also of benefit to the other children in the group. Through the sharing of information with parents at every stage of the process, changes were also implemented within the home that further supported Adam's development. The information gathered was further shared with Adam's health visitor at his progress review meeting so all parties involved were informed and able to support the process.

### ***Sociograms***

Continuing to assess Adam, a sociogram could have been used to develop greater understanding of Adam's social interactions. A record would have been established and observations carried out for a set period of time to note, for example who he shared time with, the nature of the interactions and what verbal interactions took place. Again this could be represented graphically if desired and even reflect gender relationships or type of play Adam was involved in (Figure 5.5). While a sociogram can clearly focus on one particular area of development, practitioners should note that children's friendships and favoured playmates can fluctuate on a fairly regular basis and this should be reflected in any interpretation of the data.



**Figure 5.5** Types of play



### ***Movement/tracking charts***

These are a rapid method of noting a child's movements during a set period and can be easily interpreted. Starting with a basic sketch of the room layout, arrows and times can be added to indicate a child's movements between activities so that conclusions can be drawn about how many activities are approached and the length of time spent at each. If subsequent movement charts are taken at different times of the day and the week then a fuller picture will emerge, but as can be seen in Figure 5.6, the mass of arrows can be very difficult to interpret easily and if the times were added onto this chart it would appear even more muddled. If we reflect on Adam (previously highlighted) and his difficulty with rapid and brief times spent at activities the chart would have been very confusing. In addition, the same information can be elicited from a target child/focused observation.

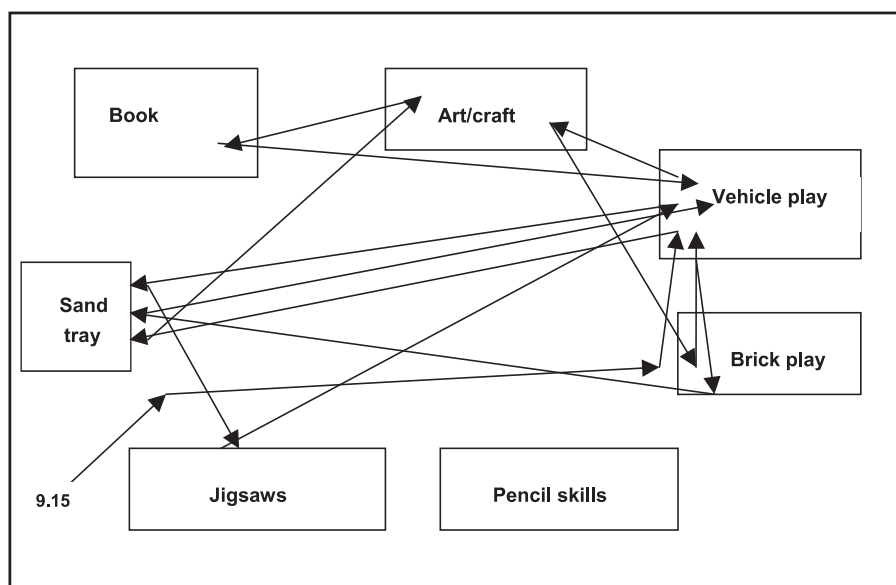


Figure 5.6 Movement sample chart

### **Methods of assessment 2 – checklists and questionnaires**

Checklists are often the preferred choice of early years practitioners and are viewed by some as easier to implement and interpret. However, certain considerations should be reflected upon before relying on checklists for assessment evidence. First, checklists only offer a snapshot picture of what a child can do, on that day and at that particular time, and tend to note achieved milestones. So, for those children experiencing complex special needs, by nature of the large gaps, they equally represent the skills a child has not mastered. If the checklists do not cover, for example, every physical skill, then only those checked can be com-

mented on. A checklist may indicate that a child can hop, jump, run and catch a large ball at 2 metres but may not show whether the child can pedal a tricycle. Caution should therefore be employed in the interpretation of outcomes if a thorough understanding of a child's development is required as opposed to a snapshot picture. Within the philosophy of holistic provision for young children checklists can be interpreted as more like a preordained assessment check that clearly does not fit with an holistic philosophy. Secondly, checklists are created around a sequential approach to development and assume that all children will proceed through the defined stages in much the same systematic order. Practitioners working with young children with special needs, or any early years children, will be aware that not all children progress this way. However, despite reservations, developmental checklists are used within many early years settings and do have some usefulness, for example, baseline assessments.

Usually presented in tabular form checklists are generally easy to interpret and therefore accessible to all, but they can also be represented pictorially so the children themselves can be involved in recording their own progress (see Figures 5.7 and 5.8).

NAME	Hops X4	Jumps from 50 cm	Climbs 6 steps		
Ian			√		
Mark	e	√	√		
Michael		√	√		
Kate		e	√		
Tracy	e	√	√		
Samantha		√	√		
Rowan	e	e	√		

Figure 5.7 An example of a tabular checklist, (e = emerging skill)

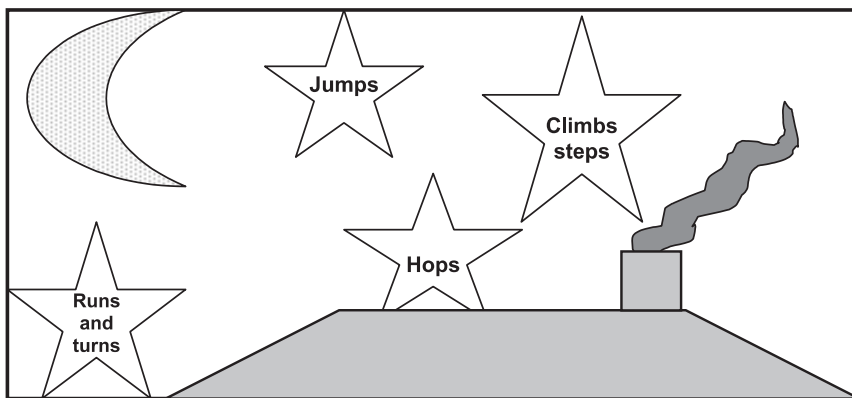


Figure 5.8 An example of a pictorial checklist

Strategies needed to support children who need to develop particular skills further can be devised and implemented using the evidence from the checklists which can be updated regularly as part of an ongoing monitoring process.

Some local authorities may have their own checklists, either self-created or taken from a standardised checklist, for use within all registered settings or within special needs settings. Portage workers base all their work on the portage developmental checklists (Bluma et al., 1976) covering all skill areas and breaking down tasks into achievable steps to ensure success. Health visitors and speech and language therapists will use their own specific checklists or screening tools to monitor children's progress. Mortimer (2000) has devised the Playladders checklists, originally created for use in early years settings and using existing checklists as a foundation. They are designed to avoid the developmental checklist approach in favour of approaching observation and assessment from the realities of children's activities. Mortimer summarises the process:

Early years educators are encouraged to play alongside the child as part of their regular activities within a group of children. By observing how a child is playing, it becomes easy to visualize and record the stage on the playladder later, once the children have left. Play thus proceeds uninterrupted by the assessment and recording. Once the play behaviour is recorded on the checklist, a 'next step on the ladder' is suggested, and this new skill can be encouraged or taught at a future play session. (Mortimer, 2001: 125)

Mortimer's particular approach fits in well with the Foundation Stage's breaking down of steps into achievable targets to ensure success for all children.

### **Methods of assessment 3 – observing through play**

Much debating continues surrounding the difference between play and learning, but current thinking supports the view that learning through play, with appropriate support or 'scaffolding' by adults, is an ongoing process in which all young children participate, be it the baby who places everything into his/her mouth as part of early discovery, or the child who struggles to build a bridge to pass trains under and, through a process of elimination combined with trial and error, learns about shape, size, balance and develops fine motor skills. If we therefore accept that much learning transpires from play situations then it seems sensible to find ways of recording evidence through observing children at play.

One of the problems with observing play is objectivity. As adults we may assume we understand what a child is doing and learning in a play situation, but it may be difficult to assess progress and record it in a meaningful manner. Moyles suggests:

The problem appears to be that human beings are all unique and all perceive situations in different ways, depending upon their own experiences, expectation, attitudes and values and, therefore, interpretation of what individuals

observe and what they assess as progress will be different from person to person as we each operate our own selection systems. (Moyles, 1989: 101)

Perhaps the key is to be clear on our intended learning outcomes for play-based activities and from this we should be able to identify if outcomes have been met or not, thus informing future planning. If, for example, a setting is working within a theme or topic entitled 'Travel', then the activities will have been planned and the early learning goals to be addressed identified. One activity may involve planning and building a railway station, with accompanying railway lines, buildings and interconnecting roads. There will be a range of learning objectives that such an activity will support and, once these have been identified, outcomes can be matched against them. Record sheets can be devised to note the learning objectives and evidence of the children's outcomes that can then inform future planning. Observational methods can be selected according to their appropriateness for the task.

Practitioners support a child's learning through skilfully intervening to encourage progression to the next stage of learning. This lies within a Vygotskian philosophy that suggests children have a 'zone of proximal development' indicating their learning potential, with adult support. This philosophy encouraged further research into the effects of adult input on the development of young children. It should be remembered that practitioners, often feeling pressured by legislation and requirements, may feel inclined to direct or lead children's play, learning, progress and development too much by telling them what to do next or informing them how to overcome obstacles they are facing without giving them the time and opportunity to discover solutions for themselves. Perhaps more useful and practical learning will take place through a child's own process of trial and error and elimination. Identifying the problem and trying to discover ways around it can often produce more lasting knowledge and skills.

Practitioners can play alongside a child and then use the Playladders approach to recording, or take notes throughout the period, which can be transcribed in more detail later if required. Alternatively, an adult can observe a child playing with another adult and make detailed observations. Sometimes this approach has the benefit of enabling greater objectivity and can highlight issues surrounding the practitioner and his/her approach, as opposed to the child's development. Subsequent observational records can then be shared with parents and other practitioners at progress review meetings. In addition, discussions after the observation could highlight different adult interpretations of the same event.

Play therapy, for children with specific difficulties, has become an increasingly favoured approach, particularly when providing for children who have been abused or those experiencing emotional, social and/or behavioural difficulties. Play therapy requires the support of highly trained play therapists who have specialist skills in this area and is not for use by the unqualified practitioner, although play in general may be perceived as a therapeutic approach as well as a learning experience.

## **Methods of assessment 4 – involving the children**

Since the Children Act (DoH, 1991) children have had a right to be heard, but perhaps there is an assumption that very young children are not mature enough, knowledgeable or verbally capable of contributing anything of value to our observations and assessments. It must also be acknowledged that there are discrete differences between listening to and truly hearing and understanding what a child is saying. The Code of Practice (DfES, 2001d: s. 3.2) clearly highlights the importance of involving children in decision-making processes at every stage of their provision: '(The children) should, where possible, participate in all the decision-making processes that occur in education including the setting of learning targets and contributing to IEP's, discussion about choice of schools, contributing to the assessment of their needs and to the annual review and transition processes.'

For very young children with special needs difficulties may occur due to limited verbal skills and recording skills, but ways can be developed by which children can be empowered and feel a part of the process. Knowing a child's likes and dislikes can enable more successful progress through heightened motivation for the child to participate, so it would be of greater use to plan activities that the child would prefer, to achieve targets, than to continually present them with tasks they do not particularly enjoy. As we saw earlier Adam's likes and dislikes were identified and used successfully within future planning, benefiting all the children in his setting.

For very young children likes and dislikes can be discovered through simple pictorial records, which can be added to the child's records and shared with parents and other practitioners. Simple drawings or photographs of a range of common activities can be presented alongside three faces – one happy, one indifferent and one sad. The activity can be discussed with the child and then he/she could colour in the appropriate face to indicate preferences. To ensure understanding, an adult could complete a similar chart alongside the child, making sure that the child is not simply copying the adult's selections. With the advent of information technology (IT) and the extensive IT skills of many practitioners, the production of such charts would be straightforward, but children are generally quite happy with an adult's attempts at drawing, however limited and inaccurate they may be. If practitioners do not feel able to produce a recording sheet then there may be a parent or friend of the setting who is willing to help. It should not, however, be forgotten that children have a tendency to want to please the adult and may give the responses they think the adult wants to hear.

Young children can also be involved in progress recording through progress books, collecting and presenting evidence of their work in portfolios, responding to interviews (to identify their likes, dislikes, views) and through the self-completion of charts as previously described. In my own experience, sticker books (made from sugar paper) were a successful way of involving children as they helped to make their own book and they were allowed to enter at least one smile each time they attended, with an adult adding the reason for this success. When

supporting children with behavioural, social, emotional and/or self-esteem difficulties, many smiles were added on a daily basis to celebrate achievements (no matter how small) and to encourage continued progress and effort.

Circle time can be a valuable tool to facilitate listening to others and even children with limited or no communication skills or withdrawn children can still participate, albeit in a different way. If appropriate, the practitioner can tell the group what the child has achieved and how much effort they have made. This way all children can be positively rewarded through the respect of being heard and their efforts being acknowledged and valued.

## **Methods of assessment 5 – children’s behaviour**

Children demonstrating unacceptable behaviours can be supported in early years settings through observation and appropriate interventions. While approaches to behaviour difficulties will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7, there are a few key points relevant here.

First, it should be remembered that children develop and learn inappropriate behaviours, they are not born with them, and, secondly, the behaviours are the problem and not the child. If a child is persistently told he/she is naughty or unkind then the self-fulfilling prophecy can allow that child to remain naughty or unkind, and it may well be that the negative adult responses received are exactly the reinforcement necessary for the child to continue demonstrating the same behaviours.

In my own experience I have received many children into the special needs setting with behavioural problems. If we are not careful, practitioner expectations can severely compromise our responses to the child. If we are convinced the child will continually ‘be a handful’, ‘be naughty’, ‘be difficult’ and achieve little, then our provision may well reflect this. Through detailed observations over a period of time intervention strategies can be designed and put in place to reduce the unacceptable behaviours and increase acceptable behaviours. It may be that a combination of event sampling, time sampling and target-child observations are undertaken to give a detailed overview of the child’s current difficulties and the issues surrounding them. The outcomes could highlight problems with practitioners, the setting, the tasks and/or the behaviours, and each should be carefully reflected upon before intervention strategies are devised. In addition, the child should be considered within the wider context and all the possible causal factors leading to the behaviours identified. Some of these may well be beyond our control or intervention, but most we will be able to address.

Links between behavioural difficulties, academic achievement and low self-concept have been highlighted consistently over several decades, as summarised by Lambley:

Pupils who lack success in learning often react to failure by non-involvement strategies. Their withdrawal of effort can show in various forms: total lack of

motivation and retreat into dullness and laziness; avoidance strategies (such as distraction, fidgeting, day-dreaming) or resistance to the learning task expressed in actions such as antagonistic and aggressive behaviour. (Lambley, 1993: 86)

At all times, practitioners must be prepared to examine all possible causal factors including their own practices and appropriateness of the tasks offered to the child to support a child experiencing behaviour difficulties. Observation will play a key role in this process.

## **Profiling**

Profiles of young children and their progress are commonplace in early years settings. Each child will have individual records kept including:

- basic information and details
- entry profile
- previous involvement with other professionals
- intervention strategies employed
- stages of Early Years Action or Early Years Action Plus
- parental information gathered
- records of progress review meetings.

In addition, evidence of work undertaken and progress made will generally be kept, linked to the early learning goals, which may include photographic, video or audiotape records.

Many early years settings will undertake a home visit before a child begins attendance, during which the parent will be asked basic information about their child. This should include the child's fears, self-confidence, likes and dislikes and self-help skills which will help the practitioner to prepare for the child's entry, thus making the transition as smooth as possible for the parent(s) as well as the child. For children with special needs the information would extend to cover copies of previous assessments or referrals and details relating to the child's particular areas of difficulty and the specific implications this may have for the setting and the planning of activities. This will be the start of the child's profile of development.

As time progresses, a child's profile will naturally increase considerably in size, but will contain a thorough and detailed catalogue of past, current and future progress made and all plans and strategies that have been implemented. In today's climate of inclusive 'educare', practitioners who have identified a child as experiencing difficulties will have the profile to inform any outside professional who may become involved. This will be a complete and informative record on which to base discussions. When discussing progress or issues with parents, having the child's work as evidence to support points being made should support a clearer understanding. Such profiles are also a method of satisfying the requirements of the Foundation Stage as they log each child's progress in an accessible manner.

## Summary

The purposes and values of effective observations as part of an ongoing assessment process have been highlighted, indicating that all practitioners have a duty and responsibility to monitor the progress of each child in a way that is accessible to parents, children and other professionals. A range of observational methods has been offered for consideration, with clear guidelines as to the practical and ethical issues that must be taken into account before embarking upon any such process. Effective observation will greatly inform practice and ultimately benefit the child, ensuring that the plans and interventions that follow have been informed through an examination of a range of information relating to the child's current levels of performance and considering all factors that may compound or enhance future progress.

Practitioners with a thorough knowledge of child development should undertake child observations and assessments to monitor progress. If children are experiencing difficulties, or additional difficulties, then observations will support early identification and appropriate intervention. If a practitioner needs to refer a child to an outside professional, or discuss progress with parents, then evidence of observations and assessments undertaken will support those discussions.

It should be stressed that observations must be based around the child, within the child's world, and take into account all possible influencing factors on the child's progress and development. The more natural the observational setting, the more natural the responses of the child are likely to be. Effective observations and assessments should continue as an ongoing, cyclical process to ensure the most appropriate provision is made available to our youngest, and perhaps most vulnerable, children. If early identification is viewed as essential, then observations and assessments should be deemed equally as essential.

### ***Key issues***

- ❖ Observations and assessments are a part of everyday working practice.
- ❖ Practitioners will need a thorough knowledge of child development and observational methods to undertake and evaluate observations.
- ❖ Observations should have a clear purpose, be manageable and inform planning.
- ❖ Children and parents should be involved in the process.



## Some suggestions for discussion

### **Item 1**

Reflect on one child within your setting that is causing concern. List the reasons for this concern and try to identify the most appropriate observational method to enable clarification and subsequent interventions.

### **Item 2**

Reflect on the layout of your main activity room and discuss how observations of learning areas may help to develop an improved learning environment for the children in your setting. Identify one area of the activity room that you would consider would benefit from change. Identify how you would observe and what outcomes you might expect. Implement the observation and compare the outcomes with your anticipated outcomes.

### **Item 3**

Are the parents aware of ongoing observations and assessments that take place? If not, how could this situation be improved, to ensure all parents are included in the process?

### **Item 4**

Discuss this question as a staff: Does your assessment process have a clear purpose or is it undertaken to satisfy government requirements?



## Suggested further reading

- Hobart, C., and Frankel, J. (1994) *A Practical Guide to Child Observation and Assessment*, 2nd edn. Cheltenham: Stanley Thornes.
- Mortimer, H. (2001) *Special Needs and Early Years Provision*. London: Continuum. (Chapter 8.)
- Moyles, J. (1989) *Just Playing? The Role and Status of Play in Early Childhood Education*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press. (Chapter 7.)