



Mealtime Observation

by Betty Piedra

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For many of us, mealtime is the busiest time of the day. By nature, lunchtime is a whirlwind of activity: from hand-washing to serving to clean-up, there are usually several things happening at once. Staff members have their hands full helping children transition into lunch from circle time or outside, keeping children focused and seated during the meal, and cleaning up after the meal, while simultaneously guiding children away from the table and into the next activity. Often, one or more teachers are out of the room, either on break or otherwise occupied, putting additional strain on the remaining teachers during an already hectic time. With so much going on, it's often all we can do to get through it in an orderly fashion.

But what if lunchtime could be more than a meal? Lost amidst the chaos and confusion of a typical preschool classroom at lunchtime are important moments of observable growth and

development. Because lunch is both an independent task and a social event, it offers a unique chance to study children in action, if we can only make the time to watch. As children move through this daily routine, their interactions with the environment and their peers are opportunities for educators to notice changes in motor and social-emotional development. We can take advantage of this observation-rich time by planning ahead, recognizing opportunities for observation across developmental areas, and using our observations for individual assessment.

Planning and Preparing for Mealtime Observation

It's one thing to say that mealtime is chock full of observation-ready moments, but it's another thing altogether to figure out how, during such a busy part of our day, we can find the time to observe. Successful mealtime observation will need to be planned well in advance and may even require tweaks in routine or scheduling. To ensure that things go smoothly, we must consider several variables, such as:

Scheduling: Like so many other things in early childhood care, timing is everything. Plan for success by choosing a

day and time that work (e.g., there are no special events, visitors, or new additions to the classroom). Arrange for all staff members to be present for the entirety of the meal, including the transitions. Be aware that this particular meal will probably last longer than most. Ask administration for support with staff lunches and breaks, if necessary.

Logistics: Who will be conducting the observations? From where will they be observing? Assign one staff member the sole responsibility for observing; this, and nothing else, will be her task at the designated time. Other team members should also have pre-defined responsibilities, such as hand-washing, serving, or cleaning up. As much as possible, teachers should stick to their assigned task or area. Doing so will help to prevent the commotion and confusion often associated with lunch hour, allowing the observing teacher the chance to make observations amidst relative order and calm.

Other Considerations: For best results, identify goals and narrow your focus by asking the following questions:

- Are all children familiar and comfortable with the classroom and the mealtime routine?



Betty Piedra is an early childhood educator and freelance writer from Honolulu, Hawaii. She earned her Bachelor's degree in Portland, Oregon and recently returned to the U.S. after teaching elementary school in

South Korea. Betty views her role as a teacher as both an opportunity and a responsibility to affect social change. Her passions include reading, traveling, and spending time with her family.

- Are the observing teachers familiar with each child's personality and history in the program?
- What child or children will be observed?
- What specific areas of development or types of behavior will be observed?

The final consideration is what specific opportunities for observation are available during mealtime. These opportunities can be best organized in terms of areas of development.

Identifying Opportunities for Observation

Motor Development

When young children sit down to a meal, they are involved in several physical tasks that require them to put their motor skills to use. We can watch carefully as children navigate these challenges, taking note of roadblocks and milestones alike and using them to inform our overall assessment of a particular child's development. For example:

When I observed two-year-old Miles using his spoon to scoop peaches from his plate into his mouth, I realized that his fine motor skills had progressed considerably from the beginning of the year when he had used his fingers to pick up and eat the peaches. This observation was reinforced at the end of the meal, when Miles used his spoon again, this time to scrape all the leftover food off of his plate and into the compost container. Other tasks, such as pouring milk, cutting food, or carrying a plate offer more chances to observe his motor control.

In the name of cleanliness, teachers sometimes complete a potentially messy task instead of allowing a child to do it

himself. Cup-holding is a perfect example. While very young toddlers may be developmentally unable to bring their cup to their mouths, we often continue to hold their cups for them far into toddlerhood, until we are positive that they will not drop them. But dropping the cup is part of their development, and unless we allow children the chance to do so, we might miss an opportunity to observe their attempts, struggles, and, eventual successes.

It's also worth noting that as a sensory experience in its own right, lunchtime also offers many opportunities to observe children as they explore their five senses. When allowed, children will smell, touch, and taste their food in order to learn more about it.

Lily, a child I knew several years ago, refused to eat broccoli no matter how I or her other teachers pleaded or cajoled. When finally left to her own devices, however, Lily quietly squished florets between her fingers and then brought her fingers to her mouth for a taste.

Social-Emotional Development

Eating Patterns and Habits: We can learn a great deal about children by noticing the choices they make during a meal. This can be as simple as observing a child's willingness to try unfamiliar foods or as complex as scrutinizing a child's eating patterns.

Max, a self-professed fruit lover, would nonetheless always eat everything else on his plate first before finally relishing his pears or watermelon. Another child, Maren, methodically ate one bite of each item until she had finished everything.

Some children display a preference or distaste for a particular texture, while others will only eat from one food group. Identifying eating patterns helps us get to know a child as an individual,

enriching our overall understanding of their personality and development.

Language and interaction: Mealtime can be a great time for socializing and conversation. Teachers can encourage conversation by asking questions about the day's events, or by asking about the meal itself. I try to go beyond the typical "Do you like . . . ?" questions, eliciting more than just yes or no answers, by asking questions such as "How do the lentils feel in your mouth?" or "What do you eat at home that tastes like this?" Another great way to get children talking during lunch is to ask them what they are doing. For example, "Mario, what are you doing with your fork?" To which the response might be: "I'm poking my carrots." This gives us a chance to listen to children talk at length, noting developments in their expressive language. Displays of receptive language, though trickier to spot, are also readily available during lunchtime to the caregiver who is observing closely. We can also observe an individual child's level of engagement and interactions with others. Is he participating in the conversation around him, or is his focus mainly on the task of eating? Who is the child primarily conversing with? Social behavior, such as helping or listening, can also be observed at the lunch table.

I was taken aback and a little touched when I observed Sally, an older child, helping a younger child serve a second helping of rice onto his plate.

Making Use of Mealtime Observations

The food has been put away, the dishes stacked, and the floor swept. The children are napping and the room is temporarily peaceful. Now what?

Like all observations, mealtime observations are excellent tools for assessment

and planning. This can apply to an individual child or the curriculum in general.

After observing Miles use his spoon to scoop and scrape, for example, I noted in his file that his fine-motor skills had advanced. For Sally, the child who helped a friend during the meal, I recorded an instance of empathetic behavior and realized that it was the first such instance I had noticed.

At the curriculum planning level, observations help us select activities that will interest and engage the children we care for.

For Miles, that might have meant offering additional fine-motor activities, such as puzzles with smaller pieces or more complicated shape sorters, to reinforce and further challenge his development. For Sally, I resolved to assign her additional ‘helper’ roles, to continue fostering empathy and also to boost her own sense of independence.

Using observations to select appropriate materials and projects ensures that children will be challenged but not discouraged by an activity, and will remain engaged in it longer. This will, of course, only give us more opportunity to observe and assess behavior and development. With a little planning and preparation, mealtime can be a great source of material for observation and assessment.



Mealtime Observation Form

Observer's Name: _____

Date of Observation: _____

Child's Name: _____

Child's Age (in months): _____

Use the following table to record observed behaviors and interactions in the appropriate section.

<p>Setting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where • When • What 	<p><i>Examples:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What time is it? • Where is the child sitting? • Who is the child sitting near? • What is being served?
<p>Motor Development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent eating • Object manipulation • Sensory experience 	<p><i>Examples:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses spoon to scoop peaches off of plate. • Attempts to pick up peas using fork. • Pours milk into cup/drinks from cup without spilling. • Smells/touches/tastes broccoli before eating it.
<p>Social-Emotional Development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eating habits • Food preference • Language • Interactions 	<p><i>Examples:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eats fruit last. • Doesn't eat peas. • Tries broccoli for the first time. • Says peaches are "Yummy." • Asks for more chicken. • Watches teacher cut chicken and then attempts to copy. • Helps another child serve more rice.