

# Designing environments to facilitate observation and documentation

by Johnna Darragh Ernst

The importance of daily child observation and documentation in early childhood programs has been well established. Observing and documenting children's ongoing learning and development provides rich information about how they view, process, and interact with their world. This information, in turn, guides curricular planning, implementation, and assessment. Observation and documentation are important components of designing developmentally appropriate experiences, as knowledge of the individual child — used in conjunction with general expectations for children's development and learning and knowledge of each child's family and culture — lays a foundation for practices that support the development and learning of each and every child.

## Challenges of effective observation

Daily observation and documentation can present many challenges. One challenge lies with finding appropriate techniques that capture learning

and development in a holistic way. For example, time sampling might be a great way to determine a child's patterns of play in different areas of the classroom, and a running record effective in terms of capturing interactions. However, it takes these and many other techniques to provide a whole picture of the child's interactions within the physical and social environment. Another related challenge is time. So many techniques, so many different ways to document development and learning, and — the age-old problem — so little time. . . .

Knowledge, skills, and appropriate dispositions can go a long way toward developing effective observation and documentation strategies. Extensive abilities in each of these areas, however, won't put more hours in the day, or give you the ability to freeze time while you write a reflective anecdote documenting what you just observed. Environmental design that supports observation and documentation, however, is a tool that can help maximize the time you have.

## Environmental design: Observation and documentation

How can the design of the ECE environment assist you in observation and documentation? Typically, the term *environmental design* brings up images

of room layout, learning center design, and the placement of materials. Some of the principles considered important for environmental design include:

- Developing zones based on activity levels and related learning experiences
- Creating engaging opportunities that support children's anticipated and unanticipated interactions
- Providing materials that are accessible and organized.

These same principles can be applied to setting up environments favorable to observation and documentation.

**Creating zones for observation and documentation.** Zones for observation and documentation can be thought of as 'hot spots' — areas of the classroom where you anticipate that rich observational data can be gathered. Hot spots are based on your assessment of children's use of the environment, taking into account both where they tend to work and play and the kinds of interactions that occur in these areas. To create an observation zone, place materials in the environment that will support your observational needs. Things to consider include:



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- What kinds of interactions are likely to occur in these areas?
- How do the anticipated interactions shape the kind of documentation you are likely to conduct?
- What materials should be placed in these areas based on your anticipated documentation needs?

Zones for observation and documentation are created based on careful reflection. For example, the dramatic play area might be an area of the ECE environment where you tend to document language interactions, the manipulative area documentation of fine motor skills, and the lunch area documentation of peer interactions. For the dramatic play and lunch area, notepads that allow for more extensive note-taking can be an important hot spot addition. For the manipulative area, having sticky notes on hand to jot down brief notes might suit your needs. Of course, children are interacting in each of these areas of the environment holistically — each area of their development fuels their interactions. Hot spots are based on the kinds of observation and documentation you tend to do in particular areas, and not wholly reflective of all the data one could possibly collect.

**Creating opportunities for observation and documentation.** The observation and documentation that occurs within ECE environments is shaped by opportunities. For example, within my own home, I do not watch TV in the family room or kitchen, as the TV is in the basement. Because of the placement of the TV, there is no opportunity to watch it in any other area of the house. Similarly, without supported opportunities to observe and document, these behaviors are not likely to take place. You may be interacting with children at the sand and water table, for example, and notice one of the children using negotiation skills reflective of one of his targeted develop-

mental goals. How easy it would be to reach behind you, pull a notepad off its hook on the wall, and jot down the interaction as it is occurring. Of course, one could use an anecdotal record to capture the interaction later, but over the course of the day, stored thoughts such as “I have to remember to write that down later” can be overwhelming.

**Creating opportunities means providing options.** In some cases, writing an anecdotal note later might be the most effective way to document the event. However, if you have constructed the environment with documentation materials nearby, you have given yourself a choice to document now or choose to write it down later. Closely related to creating opportunities for observation and assessment is ensuring materials are both accessible and organized.

Options are also created through the kinds of documentation materials available. While a common form of documentation is the written word, one cannot ignore the old adage that “a picture is worth 1,000 words.” Often, budgets preclude classrooms from having more than one camera. Getting into the habit of using the camera regularly as a tool for documenting children’s work and interactions is important. Of course, the pictures are only useful if they are printed and actually used. Photos can be a great documentation tool supporting daily communication with families, or for adding pictorial examples to a portfolio.

Documenting with photos is an important part of Carissa and Linda’s daily routines with the eight infants and toddlers in their classroom. The teachers try to capture varied moments:

- a picture reflecting a developmental goal for a documentation panel
- one that shows a child’s attention engrossed by a worm in the play garden

- another documenting a child’s growing ability to cruise around the room.

The pictures are printed off on a daily basis, and used in a variety of ways. Some are used in the children’s portfolios, others in documentation panels highlighting development in the class-room, and still others to document project experiences. The photos are an excellent tool supporting daily communication with families. The entryway to the classroom has a “What We Did Today” binder that provides an overview of the day, complete with pictures that illustrate the children’s various activities. Having the photos available for families to view is a culturally and linguistically sensitive communication strategy and an effective way to keep families informed and engaged.

**Placing materials so they are accessible and organized.** How frustrating it is to want to document something, only to find yourself on an epic hunt for a pen! Or, to have captured a moment in a child’s day that you feel would be a wonderful addition to a portfolio, then finding yourself wildly searching for what you had written down at the end of the day. Environmental design supporting observation and documentation needs to be both accessible and organized.

Supporting access through environmental design requires anticipating what you need and making sure you can get it in short order. Staples of documentation include appropriate writing instruments and materials. As well, access requires considering where these objects are located in the ECE environment. Although you might have similar materials out for children to access and use as they wish, your documentation materials should be located in a place that is accessible to you, but out of the children’s reach.

A great tool for creating access is shelving for documentation materials placed throughout the room. Shelving can be

expensive and therefore might not be considered a viable option. Another inexpensive option supporting access are hooks placed midway on the walls throughout the classroom. These hooks can hold clipboards with notepads and pens or pencils attached with tape and a short string. The notes you take can be compiled and collected over time or at the end of the day.

Organization requires developing a system for the collection and compilation of your data. Shelves or clipboards might provide a temporary resting place, but need to be collected and organized at the end of the day. This task can be particularly daunting when you are responsible for collecting and compiling data on a group of children.

One of the first steps to organizing for observation and documentation is to determine where you will put the data you collect. This collection area should include data collected on the entire class, with separate data compartments for each child. A cubby under a shelf with folders for each child's data is one example of a collection area; a shelf within a cabinet another. The spot you select should be out of the way of children's curious minds and hands, and safe from materials that would be hazardous to the data collected (water, paint, food, etc.). Linda and Carissa, for example, have found that the teacher's workspace in a small alcove of the classroom is the best place for storing their documentation materials.

Once you determine where you will place the data you collect, you need a system that gives meaning to your individual documentation entries. A pile of random notes and jottings is hardly more meaningful than the absence of such data. Meaning is created when these data are used to inform goals for each individual child and the ECE curriculum, communicate with families, and/or provide a develop-

mental snapshot. Setting aside time each week to organize and reflect on the data collected ensures that your 'pile' becomes information that can be used to support each child's strengths and challenges.

### From observation and documentation to application

Compiled data should be looked at through the lens of developmentally appropriate practice:

- What have you learned about this child?
- How does this knowledge complement what is known about children's development and learning?
- What does this mean for the early childhood curriculum and environment?
- How does my knowledge of the child's family and culture complement or contribute to my assessment of strengths, challenges, and curricular and environmental needs?

As a field, the 'why' and 'what' of observation and documentation has been well established. Attention to environmental design provides useful information on 'how' these data can be obtained.