HOME ECONOMICS GUIDE

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Some Ideas For Observing Young Children

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Observing is an important skill for those who work with children, whether their role is parent, teacher, therapist, researcher, or student. Using careful observations, one can increase the understanding of children's behavior and the causes of human behavior. One also can receive clues to effectively guide children's behavior. There is an important interrelationship between the ability to observe and understanding children; the greater one's understanding, the better his abilities to observe.

Tasks of the Observer

Observing can be a full-time task. Often, the observer's only responsibility is to observe and record behavior. The observer quietly watches the activities of others without directly participating in them. However, there are many times when observing is combined with other responsibilities.

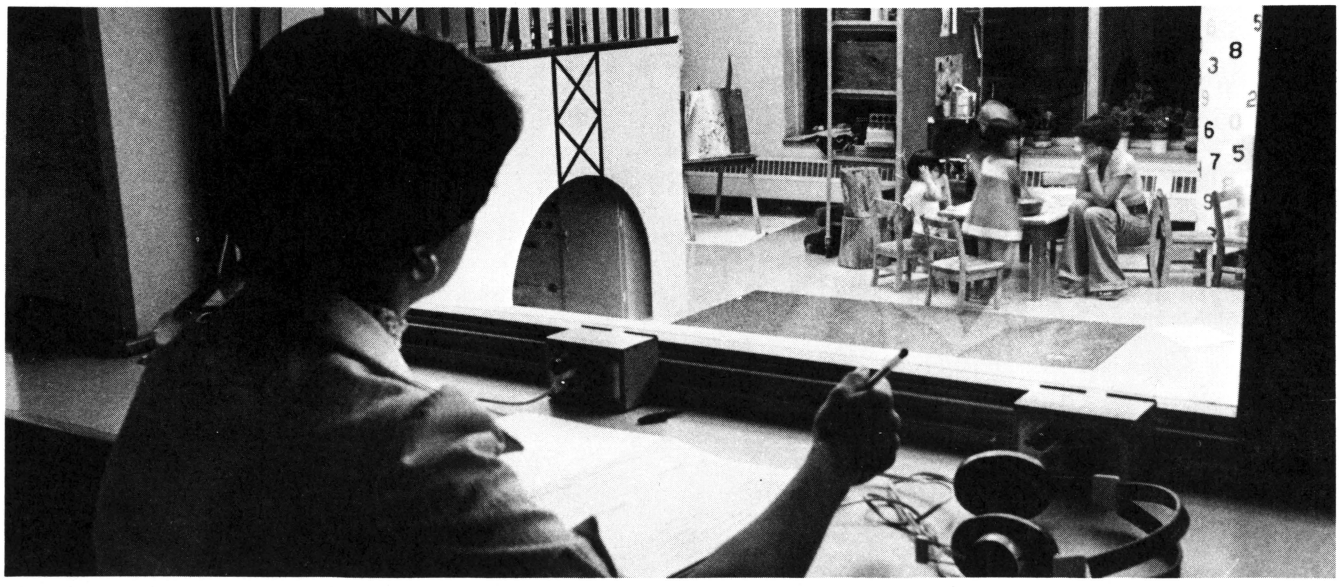
In either type of situation, the observer must be alert to what is happening. He must see not only the general activity, but also the quality of the movements involved, the facial expressions, and other subtle behavioral cues. He must hear not only what is said, but try to understand what is being said. It is also important to note the pitch and tone of voice used. He must feel not only his own reactions, but also what and how the person or persons being observed must feel. There are times when the observer may want to anticipate what is going to happen. There will be many occasions when the observer must do all of these things for more than one "subject" at a time.

Objectives of the Observer

The objectives of the observer is basically twofold: one must attempt to see, in a clear, unbiased manner, what is happening and record what was seen as fully and vividly as possible.

Personal Reactions

No one can look on without personally reacting to what they have seen. The observer will find his feelings and attitudes becoming apparent as he watches. For example, a child rubs his face and arms with layers of paste. The observer who finds this activity objectionable may interpret the child's behavior as naughty and not see



the child's delight in discovering the texture and the sensory pleasure of the paste and the understanding glances exchanged between the teacher and the child.

While the observer can not and should not attempt to disregard personal feelings, the observer should try to keep them from hiding what really happened. Focusing on what the experience means to the child or trying to see it from the child's point of view will help to keep personal attitudes from coloring what happened. It is important to look at the child and his behavior with an open mind that is interested and accepting, rather than judgmental or condemnatory.

Value Judgments

The observer must also avoid making value judgments about the children. Critical judgments or oversimplified classification of children can strongly distort what the observer sees. If the observer permits himself to make the judgment that Johnny is a "bad boy" or that Susie is a "sweet thing who always minds the teacher" then he will tend to see only those aspects of the children's behavior that appeal to the observer.

Recording Observations

Recording what happened is the second task of the observer. The record should tell what happened through descriptions rather than opinions or conclusions. For example, the statements, "Johnny was angry" or "Johnny showed aggressive behavior," are interpretations and fail to reveal what really happened. The description, "Johnny, with fists clenched and body rigid, knocks over a tall stack of blocks by repeated kicking, continues to kick the blocks with force as he plowed through the resulting pile," descriptively tells what happened.

In addition to telling what happened, the written record should reveal **how** it happened. The use of descriptive words and phrases will help to catch the more distinctive aspects of the situation. For example, the statement, "Jane walked across the room," tells **what** she did, but does not reveal **how** she did it. She could have walked quickly or slowly or she could have marched, clomped, sauntered, or ambled. Any child might cry but when one adds how he cried the following words may give a clearer picture: wail, howl, sob, fuss, bawl, or whimper.

A careful and complete record of a child's behavior is an important tool for the parent, the student, the teacher, the researcher, and the therapist. It allows them to return to an event after it has passed, to review it and to re-think it in relation to other events or to new insights.

In order to capture all that the observer has seen and heard during an observation, the written record should be made as the events are occuring. This record must be made as quickly and simply as possible. Some suggestions which can be helpful in recording the observation are:

- Do not try to compose sentences. Instead, record the key words which will tell you what and how things happened. For example, "Johnny slowly walked over to the ball and then gave it a hard kick toward Terry" could be written as "Johnny slowly walked to ball - gave it a hard kick to Terry."
- Abbreviations can be helpful in speeding up the recording. Some common ones might include t. for teacher, st. for student teacher, chn. for children, wlk. for walk, etc. Using abbreviations, the previous statement could now be written as "J. wlkd slw to bal - gav hard kck twd T."
- Arrows can be used to indicate movement such as toward, up, down, to, etc. Now, the above statement could be recorded as "J wlkd slw → bal - gav hrd kck → T.
- Underlining a word can indicate an action made with force. For example; J wlkd slw → bal - gav *kck* → T.
- Putting exact statements in quotes can eliminate the need for such words as said, stated, or answered. However, the use of descriptive words to indicate *how* the statement was made should not be eliminated. For example, "Susie said happily, 'See my new shoes' " could be recorded as "S. hapily, 'see my new shoes.' "
- Before starting to observe, record some of the background information. This might include the exact location, other children in the area or activity, location of adult, atmosphere (may even be climate or time of year) or condition of the area.
- Finally, put the rough observation notes into written form as soon as possible. This helps to recall the situation and fills-in the gaps accurately.

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