

Voices from the Field: Jennifer Kaufman



Q1: What are some of the subtle observations that practitioners can make in assessment?

We, as early childhood professionals, should always be assessing while engaged in our work with families and young children. Assessment is not always a formal process that requires pen and paper, a checklist, or a scoring mechanism. It should be happening even at not-so-obvious times other than while engaged in an activity or intervention with a child. It will be beneficial to you to pay attention to the subtleties of observing and asking questions as it will have an impact on decision making, program planning, and interventions. Not only for these reasons, but having a mindset of “always assessing” may provide an explanation for things that may be going on with a child or family, such as a change in behavior or lack of family participation. Finally, being keen to constant assessment will help you see even the smallest progress in a child’s skills or towards a family’s goal.

Q2: How might these subtle observations inform practice?

Here is one example. If you are working in a center-based program, think about all of the opportunities for assessment even in the short 5 minutes that occurs as a child arrives for the day. What are the interactions between caregiver and child? What is the child’s mood? What does the parent tell you about the child’s evening or morning? Maybe one morning, Jonny’s Mom tells you that he did not get enough sleep because he was frightened of the incredible thunderstorm during the night and it was difficult to get him back to sleep. Knowing this information will allow you to adjust and adapt for Jonny’s day. Maybe you help Jonny get a little rest at the beginning of the day rather than waiting for nap time. Maybe you provide the opportunity during circle time to talk about the thunderstorm so that Jonny (and the other children) have a chance to talk about the experience. When Jonny seems to not want to engage in active play today, you understand why and give him some other options. Now think about if you did not take the time to talk with Jonny’s Mom in the morning. How different would your day be not knowing this information?

Here is another example. If you are a home visitor in an Early Intervention program, think about each of the steps you go through when meeting a family for the first time. As soon as you walk up to the door, take note of all the surroundings. Is there a safe place to play outdoors? Do the windows look like they have screens in them? The door opens, and the family greets you. Who is in the home? How many people? What is on the walls? How is the home set up? Is there room for the child to play? Is the environment safe for the child to play? How does the family greet you? Are they happy to see you, sad, or indifferent? Note the nonverbal cues from the caregiver. Are they welcoming, avoiding, or maybe guarded? If you pay attention, ask yourself these questions, and closely observe, you will provide yourself with a wealth of information that will help guide your interactions with a family. The first few minutes of assessment will help you adjust your interaction style, understand a family’s readiness for services, and even help you to change the day’s agenda if needed. Without doing this,

you may miss an opportunity to build a trusting relationship with this family. Don't forget, the family is assessing you as well!

So remember, as a professional working in partnership with families with young children, you should always be assessing and thinking about how the information you have gathered, as subtle as it may be, can help you guide your work, build strong partnerships, and help children and families make progress toward their goals.