



Voices from the Field: Patricia Maris

Q1: Why aren't standardized tools alone a sufficient source of evaluation and assessment information?

Observation is an essential component when completing a quality evaluation and assessment of a young child. As early childhood educators, we strive to have a complete picture of the child we are getting to know or who we are working with. When an observation is done objectively, it helps to gather essential information. A standardized tool yields helpful information in terms of how the child is functioning in relation to same aged peers. Sometimes, observation can be used to determine if a child has a particular developmental skill on a standardized tool. Using this alone, however, will not result in a rich understanding of the child and his or her interests, strengths and areas of need.

Q2: What are the benefits of observing a child in her natural environment?

Observing children in their natural environment playing with a peer or with materials reveals important skills and interests. Some standardized tool items allow for observation to be used for scoring. This allows for less interruption of the flow of the child in demonstrating his or her skills. The child is naturally comfortable in this setting and we could observe all developmental domains during a brief period of time. Observing a child building with blocks with a parent or with another child gives us information about motor skills in terms of how the child is using his or her hands and how he or she is maintaining their body in a sitting position or while moving around the play area. We learn about intricate details of cognition and language if we hear an imaginative play scheme associated with the block play or perhaps it is single words or no language at all. We see how responsive the child is to the language of others. We learn about social emotional strengths or areas of need as we observe joint attention with a peer/caregiver or we may observe incidents of turn taking. We learn about frustration tolerance and attention capacities as the child contends with blocks that may collapse or just not work out as intended.

Q3: How can observations inform the work we do with children and families?

Observation also allows us as early childhood educators to have valuable information to share with families. Sharing observation information helps families see what we see. Parents are naturally curious about how their child is functioning in play environments and routines and sharing this is particularly meaningful for families. Reporting a standard score to a parent and explaining standard deviations will not be anywhere near as meaningful as a story about how their child interacted at the block center taking turns with a peer or building a pretend farm for his or her animals.

Observation helps us to have more meaningful and functional outcomes for young children which leads to better developmental progress. It is also an excellent way to document progress for outcomes developed for the child. It helps us to know if the child has really met their goals. Observation allows us to see if it is perhaps time to try a different approach with a child because the outcomes are not being met. Through careful, objective observation we learn about all the developmental and environmental pieces that make up this child's picture and what is the best way to support the child to succeed. Observation is an essential component to practicing the art of early childhood education.