Beginnings Workshop

Learning to See . . . Seeing to Learn:
The Role of Observation in Early Childhood Development
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Through a child’s eyes:
From the inside out

Eighteen-month-old Maggie had been pushed all morning. Mom pushed her into clean diapers, clothes, and shoes. Dad pushed her into her highchair and fed her oatmeal. She fussed and pushed at her bowl and spoon. Dad got fed up trying to feed her and put her in her car seat. He had to get moving. She’d had two bites of breakfast.

Maggie arrived at child care hungry just as breakfast was being cleared from the tables. On top of that her teacher, Ms. Hugs & Kisses, wasn’t there yet. Instead, Ms. Substitute was trying to clean up the waffles the other kids had been served as she talked to Maggie’s father. Maggie found some waffles on the floor and reached for them. “Oh no you don’t, Maggie,” her Dad told her as he pushed her into a chair and gave her a puzzle. Maggie cried loudly to convey her frustration. Her Dad told Ms. Substitute that Maggie had been in a bad mood all morning and wished her luck. He kissed a screaming Maggie goodbye and rushed off to work.

Ms. Substitute went back to cleaning. Maggie sat and sniffled and watched breakfast go away. Another child came over to her table, reaching across Maggie to grab her puzzle. Maggie smelled the waffle syrup still stuck on her friend’s arm. She leaned forward and bit down on the sweet smelling forearm of her friend. “No, Maggie! Not nice!” Ms. Substitute yelled in her face. Her crying friend was quickly scooped away and hugged and kissed. Ms. Substitute paged the front desk. “No one told me I had a biter in here. Please call Maggie’s father and let him know that he will have to come and take her out of this class if she continues to bite the other children.”

It happens so often. Miscues compound, and events spiral out of control. All too often we create the misbehaviors we are trying so hard to prevent. We inadvertently condition children to express negative behavior because it seems to be the only way they can get their point across. It is so hard for children to be really heard and understood. We do not ask them what they want or need because they do not speak our language. Or do they? Studies show that non-verbal children have already developed an extensive understanding of their home language. It’s their developmental age that restricts them from conveying effective responses. Early Childhood Development Professionals have a unique opportunity to observe and uncover these behavior patterns. By documenting unbiased, objective observations of children’s actions and reactions, teachers can reveal the clear body language that children use to convey their responses. This information can be used to create family partnerships which guide and support children as they learn to communicate, and we learn to understand their needs.

The parents’ view:
From the outside in

Here’s how the problems started: Both Mom and Dad had a rough night. Maggie was up three times. To top off a tough night, the morning alarm didn’t go off and it was Maggie’s crying that finally woke them up again, 20 minutes late. It was Dad’s turn to get Maggie to child care and Mom rushed out the door, after rushing Maggie into her clean diapers and clothes.

Maggie hadn’t eaten well the night before, and Dad chose a hearty oatmeal breakfast for Maggie in an
effort to get something substantial into her before sending her off to the center. Maggie’s refusal to cooperate and eat really frustrated him. Dad checked his watch and realized he needed to get going. He had a staff meeting to attend and budget cuts to defend. Maggie obviously wasn’t hungry again. He cleaned his daughter up and put her into her car seat. Maggie’s class was just finishing breakfast when they arrived, and a substitute teacher was working to clean up quickly when Maggie arrived. Dad put Maggie at the puzzle table in an effort to distract her from the mess under the table. Her screams just topped off a beautiful morning; he apologized to Ms. Substitute and left as quickly as possible.

Miscommunication happens all the time. There is no one at fault here. We do the best we can. The question is how can we, in the course of our busy lives, take the time to translate our children’s needs to others? Just when we think we have figured out their cues, their needs change. Our children develop so quickly, it’s hard to keep up. Where do we begin?

**Figuring out what went wrong:**

**Systematic observation and patterning**

Systematic observation and patterning is a strategy for identifying patterns in children’s responses that can prevent further miscues and resulting negative and uncontrollable behavior. Regular documentation of objective observations and behavior pattern reviews offer opportunities for promoting positive change and healthy development in young children.

When partnered with parent feedback, systematic observation and patterning provides invaluable insight into the unique expressive patterns of each child. In addition, documented observations throughout a child’s day and over the years assist with assessment.

This is a complicated way of describing something that most of us do naturally. Unfortunately, our observations are often tainted with our own bias and personal experience. In addition, we often fail to take the time necessary to document what we see. Documented unbiased observations of children’s actions and reactions over time serve as a priceless tool of discovery into the communicative attempts and motives of childhood expression. The following guidelines are helpful in documenting unbiased observations.

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**Guidelines for objective observation:**

**See through the eyes of the child**

Get down on the child’s level and look at life from his or her eyes. Most of the time children see adults from the knees down, or, from the shoulders up. Which view would you prefer? Infants can be over-stimulated by the visual, auditory, and tactile information that they encounter in their environments. Their sense of smell is highly sensitive in infancy. Children’s digestive tracts are learning to move in sync, and all too often there are a few kickbacks in the system. This causes a lot of physical pain. Pre-toddlers can understand their home language more fluently than they can express it. This sets the stage for frustration and misinterpretation of intent.

**Record only what you see, feel, hear, and smell**

You cannot see “angry”; you can see frowning and hear screaming. You cannot see “loves,” you can see smiling and hear giggling. When you record the specific body language and sounds the child expresses you maintain objectivity. This provides a more accurate view of what is happening with that child; it is a more accurate translation of the child’s intent for multiple caregivers. For example, stating that “Reggie (15 months) picked up the sensory tube and angrily threw it at the caregiver” invites a whole set of misinterpretations depending on how the reader views what “anger” looks like. Does it look like screaming and throwing with force and intent? Does it look like frowning and crying? The actual observation of this incident, written with objectivity, provided a completely different scenario. “Reggie (15 months) picked up the sensory tube, made eye contact with the caregiver, and waved the tube back and forth. The caregiver held out her hand, palm up, toward Reggie. Reggie looked back down at the tube and released his hand. The tube flew past the caregiver and rolled across the floor. Reggie frowned and crawled away. He began banging on a piano with the palm of his hand.” This observation provides a non-judgmental documentation of a set of events free of subjective and often inaccurate conclusions.

**Look at the big picture**

Documenting observations on a regular basis is critical to piecing the “syllables” of the child’s body language together.
language together. From these observations you will be able to better understand intentions. Accurately translating a child’s intent to communicate his or her need provides opportunities for positive interactions between caregiver and child and the development of trustworthy relationships, which is our goal.

**Analyze behavior patterns**

Look for patterns to environmental triggers. Is the infant’s crying response regularly triggered by his inability to move in the direction intended, or do you see a regular crying response that is triggered after eating a meal? Having a number of documented observations can bring to light the triggers behind some often confusing behaviors. Understanding the intensions behind these non-verbal response patterns allows the caregiver to enter into a “teachable moment” with that child, providing support through the development process.

Lack of response to environmental triggers should also be noted. An infant normally goes through a period of insecurity and frustration before moving forward developmentally. Becoming aware of these patterns of insecurity and frustration and matching them to their environmental triggers can better alert caregivers toward developmental readiness. When we analyze these behavior patterns, we are better prepared to respond appropriately to the child’s intent and foster a rich and rewarding relationship with both parent and child.

**Trade, share, and combine your observations**

We all view things from different perspectives. When we share our observations, our insights can be used to highlight critical developmental milestones and challenges for young children in our care. As the child grows, his or her needs change. Regular, informal conferences with parents regarding your observations of their child during the day, partnered with the parents’ insight into their own observations, routines, and cultural patterns at home can greatly enrich the child’s developmental experience. Consistent support and guidance is crucial to healthy development. Sudden changes in behavior patterns can alert adults to possible health and developmental concerns. Documented observations can be submitted to appropriate professionals for more effective and timely intervention opportunities.

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**A view from all angles**

Ms. Hugs & Kisses arrived in her classroom at 11:00, just in time for lunch. She and Ms. Substitute sat down to a family-style lunch with the children. Maggie was tired and hungry. She grabbed her chicken nugget and bit down hard and yelped, throwing it back down on the plate. She fussed and picked up her milk, sucking the cool liquid down quickly. “Maggie, are you alright? You love chicken nuggets.” Ms. Hugs & Kisses asked Maggie.

“I’m not surprised,” interrupted Ms. Substitute. “Maggie has been trouble all morning. She started out by biting Andrew on the arm and has been fussy and angry with everyone all morning. She just doesn’t want to be here.”

“That’s not usual for Maggie. What exactly happened this morning?” asked Ms. Hugs & Kisses. Ms. Hugs & Kisses wrote down Maggie’s actions from the time she grabbed the waffle pieces, to the bite on Andrew’s arm after breakfast, and then documented the fussy and pushy behavior of the last three hours.

Maggie had wandered from center to center until Ms. Substitute had filled the water table. There, Maggie splashed around in the water and did not want to give up her turn. She kept putting the washcloth and sponge they were using to wash the babies with into her mouth and sucking the water. Ms. Substitute finally lost patience trying to control Maggie’s behavior and closed the activity center.

After settling Maggie and the other children down for nap, Ms. Hugs and Kisses excused herself to make a phone call to Maggie’s father. She asked about Maggie’s evening and sleep patterns the night before. She tracked Maggie’s eating pattern and found attempts to eat but resistance to the specific foods offered. Ms. Hugs & Kisses reviewed her notes and the pattern appeared.

**Putting it all together**

Maggie had a desire to eat, but wouldn’t. She went to bed hungry; this could have caused the broken sleep pattern she experienced the night before. Both Maggie and her parents woke up without having much sleep and were rushed and cranky.
Meeting children’s needs

Ms. Hugs & Kisses called up to the kitchen to see if they had any chicken nuggets left. She had a plate put aside, asked that they be stored in the freezer, and went back to class. As she suspected, Maggie woke early from her nap fussing and crying. Ms. Hugs & Kisses scooped Maggie up and hugged and held her as she paged the front desk for the chilled nuggets to be brought down. She sat with Maggie and offered her a cold spongy nugget, and Maggie sucked and chewed one down. As Maggie reached for another, Ms. Hugs & Kisses asked her to open wide and Maggie showed her swollen gums and an erupting tooth.

That afternoon at pick-up time Maggie was sucking away at a frozen washcloth and playing in the kitchen. Ms. Hugs & Kisses explained to Dad about Maggie’s sore mouth and suggested soft and cool foods for her, combined with a little extra TLC. Dad was relieved to have an explanation for his daughter’s behavior and thanked her teacher for her suggestions. He hoped they would all get a good night’s sleep.

This simple scenario illustrates investigative observation in action. Documenting patterns of child behavior for caregivers promotes consistency in responsiveness. Individualized observation portfolios, like those described in The Creative Curriculum® for Infants and Toddlers, travel with the children as they develop, and provide behavior pattern summaries which teachers can refer to in an effort to support the changing needs of the children in their care. Use of observation and assessment tools such as these are built on the belief that relationships are central.

References
