



Cymru
National Day Nurseries Association

Factsheet



Observation, assessment and planning in wales

Curriculum for Wales



Observation, assessment and planning in wales

A child's early years are both relatively brief and highly significant to their overall development. Development is rapid from birth to age 5 and it is important to value this period of time and to nurture the playfulness and curiosity of children. At every stage of development, enabling adults should remain focused on the present needs of the child. By getting to know the children within the setting as individuals and understanding their uniqueness, developmental needs and their personal interests, practitioners are well-informed to deliver environments and experiences that effectively motivate and engage children.

The cycle of observation, assessment and planning is a vital process that supports high-quality, responsive practice. It ensures that every child's learning and development is recognised, valued and nurtured in a meaningful way.



Introducing the cycle of observation, assessment and planning:

Observation – Seeing the child in context

Observation is the starting point. It is the foundation of providing effective play, learning and care. By watching and listening carefully to children as they play, explore and interact, practitioners gain valuable insights into their interests, strengths, needs and how they are developing. Observations can be spontaneous or planned, and they help build a holistic picture of the child's experience and progress.

Assessment – Understanding what the child knows and can do

Assessment involves reflecting on observations to identify what children are learning and how they are progressing. Assessment is ongoing and embedded in everyday practice. It is not about testing or making 'one off' judgements, but about understanding where a child is developmentally, using the developmental pathways and areas of assessment to guide this process.

Planning – Responding with purpose

Planning stems from what we have learned through observation and assessment. Effective planning is child-centred and responsive. It involves creating experiences, environments and interactions that support and extend learning, based on children's interests and developmental needs. It also ensures inclusion, well-being and progression.

Observation

Observation is a powerful tool for understanding young children's learning, development and well-being. It allows practitioners to see how children explore, communicate and make sense of their world. When done thoughtfully and with an open mind, observation reveals the richness of children's play and interactions.

Why observe?

- To deepen our professional understanding of child development
- To help ensure practice is inclusive, responsive and child-centred
- To inform our planning, provision and interactions
- To recognise how children learn best so we can support them effectively
- To understand what children know, can do, and are interested in.

What should you record within your observations?

- What the child is doing - describe the events clearly, including the child's actions and body language
- What the child is saying - record exact words or phrases when possible (include tone of voice)
- How the child interacts with others - are they playing alone, in parallel or cooperatively? Do you notice any social skills, conflicts or collaboration?
- Level of engagement - are they focused and absorbed or easily distracted? Look for signs of repeated actions (schemas)
- Learning and development - identify any skills or learning being used or developed (link to the developmental pathways)
- Context of the observation - Date, time, setting and who was present. Was it child-initiated or adult-led?

Make sure your observations represent the **whole** child, including their thoughts, feelings and perspectives. Using a range of observation techniques from a variety of practitioners can help you capture a broader, more balanced view.





Effective observers should:

- Avoid bias - be aware of personal assumptions or preferences when observing
- Be attentive and open-minded - don't just look for what you expect to see
- Be objective and factual - focus on what the child is doing and saying, rather than trying to confirm what you think you already know or make assumptions
- Focus on the whole child - Include their emotions, relationships, language and behaviour
- Keep it focused and purposeful – observe with a clear intention
- Use a variety of methods over time to build a rounded view
- Value all play - recognise the learning in all types of play.

Schemas

Schemas are repeated patterns in children's behaviour and thinking. Identifying them helps you understand a child's learning preferences and cognitive development. For example, a child who loves lining up objects might be exploring order or movement.

It is important to consider children's schemas when carrying out observation, assessment and planning. Find further support and guidance around schematic learning at the end of this factsheet.

Methods of observation

Use a variety of methods depending on what you want to learn:

- Choice tracking – following a child's movements and choices
- Documentation – combining observations and children's work in a portfolio
- Learning stories – narrative accounts over time
- Sociograms - observations of the social groups that children play in
- Target child – focused observation on one child in context
- Time sampling – snapshots at intervals.

Notice, Analyse and Respond Approach

The "notice, analyse, and respond" approach helps us make thoughtful, everyday decisions that support each child's unique journey.

- Notice what captures a child's interest, how they engage and what influences their involvement and well-being
- Analyse what this tells us about their development, needs and experiences
- Respond by adapting our interactions, environments and experiences to best support their growth.

By using this approach, we ensure our observations lead to responsive, child-centred practice that nurtures curiosity, confidence and well-being.

Assessment of learning and progress

Understanding each child's unique development is central to nurturing their early experiences. Assessment plays a key role in this process, helping enabling adults to develop a deep understanding of each child's interests, needs and development. Assessment supports a comprehensive picture of each child's development and progress. Assessment should be child centred and focused on what happens next to support the child's learning and development.

The purpose of observation based assessment is to establish what children know and can do and to identify their needs so that enabling adults can deliver interactions, environments and experiences that effectively motivate and engage children and support their ongoing development.

Types of assessment

Assessment is a cycle of careful observations that supports practitioner understanding of children's play, behaviour, care and development. Assessment falls under two categories:

- Formative (Assessment for Learning): Used day-to-day to adapt provision and support progress
- Summative (Assessment of Learning): Captures a child's development at a specific point in time.



"Assessment is the way in which in our everyday practice, we observe children's learning, strive to understand it and then put our understanding to good use." (Drummond, 1993)





Reflecting on our observations - what can we learn?

Assessment should take a responsive approach, ensuring that each child's current needs and experiences are reflected. Assessment requires a good understanding of child development and the developmental pathways - belonging, communication, exploration, physical development, and well-being - to ensure a focus on what is most important for each child at their current stage. This knowledge supports practitioners in their analysis and interpretation of what they have seen and heard.

Some examples of what you may find out about a child from observation are:

- Friendships and social interactions
- Likes and dislikes
- Opportunities to build, challenge and extend
- Possible schemas that are developing
- Preferences in relation to play, learning and care
- Well-being and emotional state
- What they know and can do. Capabilities within a particular area of assessment
- Where additional support may be needed.

What do we do with this information?

The insights and information gathered during assessment should be used to plan to support children's progress. Using knowledge of each child and how they develop, enabling adults can plan fun and meaningful experiences and create effective environments and spaces that support children's play, learning and development.

Observation and assessment should guide planning of:

- **Effective environments** - linked to children's needs and interests
- **Enabling adults** - how practitioners support and interact with children
- **Engaging experiences** - mixture of child-led and adult-led experiences that are authentic and purposeful
- **Professional development** - Areas of practice where practitioners may need further guidance and support.

While development is often defined in stages, real-life learning and development is more complex. Children grow and learn at different rates - some may progress quickly, others more slowly and some may plateau. Development is influenced by a mix of genetics, life experiences and each child's unique character. We cannot assume children are at a certain developmental stage just because of their age. That's why observing and assessing what children can actually do is essential for planning appropriate provision. Matching provision to children's real developmental needs supports learning more effectively.

When provision matches a child's development:

- They engage more deeply
- They build confidence
- They are more motivated to learn - even when tasks are challenging.



Involve parents/carers in the process:

Through sharing observations with the child's home, practitioners can engage in ongoing conversations that provide valuable insights into the child's uniqueness and provide parents/carers with valuable opportunities to learn and adopt best practices from the setting. Through these ongoing conversations, practitioners build a deeper understanding of the child, ensuring that both practitioners and families are working together to support the child's development in a holistic and collaborative way.

Ongoing process

This ongoing cycle isn't a one-off process - it's a continuous loop that ensures each child's journey is supported, celebrated and extended. By engaging with the cycle of **observation, assessment and planning**, practitioners support developmentally appropriate, inclusive and individualised play, learning and care. This process not only promotes children's cognitive, emotional and physical development but also empowers practitioners to be reflective and intentional in their work.

Reflective questions

- How do I ensure my interactions do not interrupt children's learning?
- How do I ensure parental contributions are valued in the process of getting to know the child?
- How well do I use a variety of observation methods?
- How well do I use analysis of observation to inform daily planning?

Further resources and support:

- Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care: Assessment Arrangements for 0 to 3 year olds in Wales, Welsh Government: www.rebrand.ly/WalesECPLC
- Assessment arrangements for funded non-maintained nursery settings, Welsh Government: www.rebrand.ly/HWBNon-MaintainedSettings
- Professional learning module: Observation, Welsh Government: www.rebrand.ly/PLMObservation
- Professional learning module: Schematic development, Welsh Government: www.rebrand.ly/PLMSchematicDevelopment
- Early childhood play, learning and care in Wales resources and guidance, Welsh Government: www.rebrand.ly/WalesECPLC
- Additional resources and factsheets from NDNA Cymru: www.ndna.org.uk/ECPLCResources





National Day Nurseries Association

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Factsheet

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NDNA is the national charity and membership association representing children's nurseries across the UK. We are a charity that believes in quality and sustainability, so we put our members' businesses at the very heart of ours.

We are the voice of the 21,000-strong nursery sector, an integral part of the lives of more than a million young children and their families. We provide information, training and advice to support nurseries and the 250,000 people who work in them to deliver world-class early learning and childcare.

See the full range of NDNA factsheets at www.ndna.org.uk/factsheets

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