

OBSERVING AND RECORDING

by Kathy Faggella

We are often asked to keep records on each child in our care. It is the good way to know, understand, and serve children and their families. We do it to make planning our programs more effective by finding out what children are capable of doing, where they are in their development, and planning what steps we need to take to encourage them to the next stage.

You can gather data on children both informally and formally. Informally, you can use index cards or sticky notes and jot down what you see or hear from a child. Put the date on the observation and later file it in the child's permanent record. Be very specific and keep your opinions out of the observation. For example, "Julianna grabbed the doll away from Rosa. She was angry all morning and took it out on Rosa," is an opinion. "Julianna grabbed the doll away from Rosa. She held it tightly and would not allow anyone to touch it for at least five minutes," tells exactly what happened without an opinion.

You can also use a clipboard with a sheet of paper divided into as many squares as there are children in your program. Each square is labeled with a child's name. This way, you can jot down at least one observation for each child, each day.

You can do more formal observations if you have a special reason to do them. For example,

you can observe a child during a special time of day. You can watch Jeff for 10 minutes during circle time each day for a week or once a week for a month. This process works best if it is done for all the children on a regular basis.

Then, each week, you need to transfer your informal notes or formal observations to a binder. You should have a binder for each child. You should keep observations, children's artwork, any time they try to write, photos of 3-D artwork or block constructions, and other important materials in the binder. Date each entry and add a note explaining why it is important. For example, if you place a three-color painting in the binder, you might need to explain, "Josh knew the names of each color. He pointed out the circles, straight lines and recalled that the circles were beach balls he had seen on our field trip. He tried to write his name and only needed help with the 'h'."

Why make and keep these observations? You will use them to assess the children. Start by learning all you can about what and how children learn during these early years. You can do this in college courses, by reading informative child development books, magazines, and newsletters

(such as *EverydayTLC*); by watching educational videos; and by becoming a member of an early childhood organization which gives you information on current topics.

Gathering observations is an ongoing job. Yet, at each step in your assessments, you need to ask yourself, "What does this mean for the child?" Usually these observations tell you what the child is capable of doing and show what he has achieved. They tell you about the child's interests, strengths, and even some weaknesses. From time to time, you need to look at your observations to decide how each child can be better served by the learning program you present. You can see where each child is in the learning process and move each along, at his own pace. It's an important part of being an early childhood professional.

