

## Ideas for training staff



*Nobody sees a flower,  
really — it is so small —  
we haven't time, and to  
see takes time, like to  
have a friend takes time.*

— Georgia O'Keeffe

I was thrilled to see this quote from Georgia O'Keeffe included in the packaging of a stamp issued in her honor by the US Postal System. It's one I've come to use often in my workshops, urging early childhood programs to not overlook the children as they focus on the regulations, checklists, and other paperwork aimed at ensuring quality experiences for children. I've also begun to routinely ask how many of my workshop participants have had any formal training or course work in learning to be an observer. It astounds me how few people — teachers or directors — raise their hands.

We know that most of our current workforce in child care has less than adequate in-service, let alone pre-service training in child development and early childhood education. To provide quality care and

# Observations That Make a Difference

by Margie Carter

education, teachers need a great deal of coaching and support from their already overburdened supervisors. In my experience, time spent cultivating observation skills offers one of the most immediate, far reaching payoffs available to us.

Regular staff observations and discussions to interpret what we are seeing serve as a form of participatory research — a way to learn about such things as child development, cultural awareness, and environments that enhance the acquisition of a range of skills in children. Discussing observations often motivates teachers to read otherwise neglected professional literature in our staff rooms. As they become good observers, teachers grow confident in their ability to have meaningful conversations and conferences with parents.

Analyzing our observations can be intellectually stimulating and emotionally satisfying. When several caregivers begin to share child observations with each other, they often create an excitement about children's development that becomes contagious in the organizational climate. There is a genuine boost to everyone's engagement in their work. Even those headed toward burnout have their spirits lifted.

The caveat for us in the above words of Georgia O'Keeffe, of course, is the issue of time — “. . . we haven't time, and to see takes time . . .,” she reminds us. Is it really true that we don't have the time to observe, or “to have a friend”? Yes, working in child care can easily take over our lives to the point of neglecting our friends and personal needs. Remembering to literally stop and smell the flowers, really see the children, and have significant interactions with the staff and families is yet another benefit of cultivating ourselves as observers. It becomes a disposition we bring to our professional and personal lives, one that nourishes us in return.

Perhaps we have the impression that training our teachers to be good observers would be yet another thing to add to our long to-do list. I'm not suggesting we do more, but rather that we shift how we are spending some of our time. I'm recommending using some of our staff meetings and in-service training hours to focus on the art and skill of observation. There is also an implication here for how you as the director spend the precious few moments you have in classrooms with the children, their teachers, and caregivers.

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## **STRATEGY** **Share what you see**

A critical factor in the observation process is the ability to suspend one's own point of view to objectively see a situation. This is something you as a director can model when you make visits to classrooms, and you can cultivate it in teachers in a variety of ways. To explore how personal filters influence what we see, launch a staff meeting discussion with a simple picture activity. The picture doesn't have to be related to children, but choose one that features a number of things happening. If you have a large staff, it is helpful to make multiple copies of the picture to pass around.

Ask for several volunteers to leave the room, telling them they will each have a turn to practice their observation skills when they return. Assure them there will be no tricks or surprises. While they are gone, pass out a copy of the picture for the others to observe as each volunteer staff member returns. Invite the volunteers back into the room one at a time and ask each to study the photograph for a few minutes before returning it to you. Then ask the staff member to share with the group what they saw in the picture.

After each volunteer has a turn, they join the group. It will be obvious in the debriefing discussion how different people noticed and described different things. This isn't necessarily a matter of right or wrong, but of differences in what interests us, perspectives and influences we bring to the observation process. You might ask such things as, "Why do you think you noticed what color suit the man was wearing?" and "Is there a reason you might have overlooked the big tree he was standing in front of?"

Discussions like these alert us to how easily our own preferences and cultural frameworks influence what we see and don't see. It lays the basis for the importance of learning to get an objective picture of children and their behavior. It leads to insights on how to see children as individuals and as members of families and cultures.

## **STRATEGY** **Cultivate the skill and art of observation**

Observation is both a skill and an art. Observation skills involve an objective, detailed collection of data and an eye for the meaning and richness of each child's developmental experience. The art of observation lies in the interpretation, the meaning-making of what you are seeing.

To practice noting the difference between descriptive observations and interpretations, offer teachers a magazine photograph of children involved in some kind of activity with each other or an adult. Ask them to quickly write a list of statements about what they see in the photograph. This can be done individually or as a group. Then go over each word on the list. Put a "D" next to the words and statements that are specific descriptions that most people would readily identify and agree upon.

Now look for statements that are interpretations of the scene, rather than objective descriptions. Put an "I" next to these. These are conclusions based on subjective filters or subconscious cues picked up from the scene. They hopefully will reflect the art of drawing on teachers' experiences with and knowledge of children, their development, and ways of representing their understandings.

As you practice the art of interpretation, remind teachers that it's useful to keep focusing on the child's point of view. Putting oneself in children's shoes is always a renewing and insightful activity for teachers. It increases your sensitivity, understanding, and enjoyment of children and their development. You come away with a new respect for the complexity and importance of most of their self-initiated activities.

## **STRATEGY** **Share observation stories**

We want to awaken teachers to the joys of observing the delightful and complex endeavors of young children. During a staff meeting, do an oral reading of a brief descriptive observation of children done by a master observer in our field, such as found in the books of Vivian Paley, Elizabeth Jones, or Gretchen Reynolds. Ask what staff members find they are most drawn to in the story. What do they find reassuring or troublesome in this scene? What are they most curious about?

Before long, begin to open staff meetings with observations of your own, gathered from spending a few moments in different classrooms. You might try describing observations in the style of Paley, Jones, or Reynolds, or you could try telling the story from the perspective of the children involved, the way Daniel Stern does in *Diary of a Baby*.

Gathering these stories will, of course, require you to regularly step away from the chaos of your desk, interruptions of the telephone, and schedule demands imposed by others such as USDA, your accountant, or board meeting report. You might even think of observing as a weekly schedule demand — an essential ingredient to the development you and your staff need to provide quality care, have meaningful

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communications with families, and avoid the burnout that comes from losing contact with the deeper meaning of your work.

**STRATEGY**  
**See yourselves as researchers and storytellers**

This past spring, my colleague and writing partner, Deb Curtis, and I had the privilege of visiting two of the early childhood programs of the Comune di Pistoia in Italy. We were impressed by how naturally the teachers saw themselves as researchers. Within a given school, the staff identify a child development question they want to learn more about from their own observations. Periodically, they contact someone on the faculty at a local university to work with them on informally gathering and analyzing their data. It was obvious that this practice keeps them lively, growing, and engaged in stimulating dimensions of their work.

Deb has begun to adapt this idea with some of the child care staff with whom she works. Listening to some of the questions and interests from their work, she formulated a question for the teachers to research: "How do children make and use sounds in their play? What do we need to know about child development to understand the meaning of what we find in our observations?" Deb created simple forms for teachers to use to record their observations and set up several meetings for them to discuss their observations.

The results were quite remarkable. Not only did observation skills and child development knowledge get refined but a new level of enthusiasm for their work was generated by this activity. These teachers are now considering writing an article

on their findings. If you don't already have something in your program generating this kind of engagement and pride teachers take in their work, try launching a research project like Deb's.

When observations are shared with colleagues, skill and art come together as teachers take on the role of storyteller. Working together in the meaning-making process, you can coach teachers to paint a picture with words, using as much rich, detailed language as possible. Both marginally literate and closeted writers can find their voice in this process. Their stories can be told to family members, other colleagues, and, in many cases, the children themselves.

Turing observations into storytelling can also take the form of documentation displays, homemade books, and portfolio assessment entries, ideally accompanied by related photographs showing the story characters in action.

**STRATEGY**  
**Identify what's in the way**

What are the barriers that keep you as a director from making and sharing regular observations of children in your program? Is it your schedule, your uncertainty about your own observation skills, your tendency to think of observations only in terms of problem areas?

Observing children will teach you a great deal, not only about children but about yourself. It will help you model and create an organizational climate that genuinely takes delight in who children are and what they do. You and your staff can discover the things you are attracted to or tend to overlook in children. You may identify additional skills or information you might want to learn.

Early childhood staff who regularly plan, collaborate, and respond based on observations tend to become resourceful, imaginative, and more curious about children.

As you begin this practice in your program, you may find yourself more drawn to Georgia O'Keeffe. You may discover a different sense of time and new friends in your life. I'm sure you will remember why you love this work.

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Margie Carter teaches early childhood college classes in Seattle, Washington, and travels widely to speak, offer workshops, and consult with programs. The ideas in this article are extracted from sections of the three books she has co-authored with Deb Curtis — *Training Teachers: A Harvest of Theory and Practice*, *Spreading the News: Sharing the Stories of Early Childhood Programs*, and *Reflecting Children's Lives: A Handbook for Planning Child-Centered Curriculum*, all from Redleaf Press.

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