

# The Power of Observation

by Amy Dombro, Judy Jablon, and Margo Dichtelmiller

Young children need their families and caregivers to work together. It doesn't mean you have to be best friends, or even like one another — though it certainly makes life easier. What it does mean is that you have to see yourself as partners with the child's best interests as your shared concern. This partnership provides the continuity and support that children need to feel safe and secure enough to explore, play, enjoy, and learn in child care.

You and families each bring different sets of information to your relationship. You have worked with many children of similar ages over the years. You know about general patterns of child development and have developed a collection of strategies to support children's learning.

Parents and other family members focus on "their" child. They know the specific information about that one special child in their life. For example, they know about their child's culture, preferences, fears, and how a child responds in certain situations at home.

For caregivers to know a child well, they need both sets of information. You will never know what a family knows unless you create a relationship in which you can exchange information, ask questions, and listen to one another.

## Appreciating and Liking a Child: A Starting Point to Building Relationships with Families

An experienced teacher and trainer, Elizabeth Servidio, once said, "It is very hard for parents not to like a teacher

who really appreciates and likes their child." Appreciating and liking a child is a good starting place for your relationship with families. Observing can help you get there.

We define observing as watching to learn. Observing creates an attitude of openness and wonder that allows you to know and understand the children you work with each day. When you observe, you slow down, listen to a child more carefully, and pause to reflect before leaping in to offer some direction or a helping hand. You see and respond to who a child is and what a child needs. Observing helps you build relationships by revealing the uniqueness of every child — including the child's temperament, strengths, personality, work style, and preferred mode of expression.

For example, when you observe that Shawna is an infant who gets intensely upset when things change, you may respond by keeping her daily routine as consistent as possible. Knowing that

Amy Dombro (right), Judy Jablon (bottom left), and Margo Dichtelmiller (bottom right) are the authors of *The Power of Observation*, (Washington, DC: Teaching Strategies, Inc., 1999). A sample chapter of the book can be viewed at [www.TeachingStrategies.com](http://www.TeachingStrategies.com).



Tommy naturally moves toward the painting table at choice time, you might observe that he paints lots of animals and then, later on, offer to read some animal stories with him.

But what about those children — and there are always some — whom you find unappealing or annoying and, to be honest, shy away from? The first step is looking beyond a child's drooling, crying, constant activity, shyness, or whatever other aspect of behavior you find off-putting. The next step is finding a point of connection.

Observing can help you find a point of entry into a relationship with this child as it helps answer questions such as:

- What are the current issues the child is dealing with?
- In what situations does the child seem most comfortable?
- What causes the child's eyes to brighten, what brings a smile?
- What things does the child do well?
- What does the child talk, read, or write about?
- What does the child paint or build or draw?
- What are the main themes of a child's dramatic play?
- Is there an adult, child or activity that seems to draw the child?

Sometimes the answers are evident — once you take the time to stop and look. When Korene's primary caregiver observes that Korene, age seven months, smiles and bounces up and down whenever she hears music, he decides to ask her parents what kind of music they listen to at home. When they volunteer to bring in some jazz tapes,

he enthusiastically accepts and explains that with this music they will be creating a bridge between Korene's worlds of home and child care. After the tapes arrive, he makes a point of listening to and enjoying Korene's family's favorite music not only with her but also with the other children.

A preschool teacher shares this experience: Leticia, age three, whose home language is Russian, rarely speaks in school. One day we were talking about pets and Leticia didn't say a word. But the next day, she and her mom came to school with Leticia's guinea pig from home. The teacher explains: "I found out Leticia understands more English than I thought she did. I knew I had to build on this. So I welcomed her mother and, with Leticia, showed her around the room. Then we wrote a story about Tiger, the guinea pig. Leticia worked on an illustration of what Tiger eats. I always have a camera on hand for moments like this so I took some photos of Leticia, her mom, and Tiger.

I gave one photo to Leticia and her mother to take home and kept some in our class photo album to remind Leticia and the other children of the special day Leticia's mother and Tiger came to school."

Other times discovering a point of contact with a child may require some flexibility and openness on your part. Getting to know the child who delights in the frogs she discovers during a class trip to a nearby pond may mean you have to reverse your somewhat negative attitude towards amphibians.

### **Building Trusting Relationships With Families Across Cultures**

Each of us has a set of beliefs about ourselves, as well as attitudes, assump-

tions, and expectations about people and events around us — some that we may not even be aware of. This is culture. It is what makes each of us who we are. Anthropologist Ward Goodenough defines culture as "a set of standards or rules for perceiving, believing, acting, and evaluating others."

Our culture is reflected in our communication, expectations, and therefore our observations of others. How close you stand when you talk with someone, when you pause for the other person to respond, or if you meet someone's gaze when they look at you are examples of behaviors determined by culture. Culture can be so subtle that it influences how we expect people to behave and the ways in which we interpret their behavior. When people behave differently than we expect or when we misinterpret their behavior, we may feel confused, frightened, or even look upon them negatively. These feelings get in the way of seeing, getting to know, and relating to a family member for whom he or she is and being able to work together in the best interests of a child you both care deeply about.

Here are some examples of how cultural differences got in the way of teachers as they worked to build relationships with children and families:

### **Beliefs About Child Rearing**

Chloe's toddler son, Georges, sleeps with his parents just as Chloe did when she was a child. Rebecca, Georges' favorite teacher at child care, knows this and cannot accept it. She is constantly hinting that Georges' should be sleeping in his own crib. Chloe no longer feels comfortable talking with her. As a result, Rebecca, who spends eight hours a day, five days a week with Georges is

missing out on the opportunity to learn more about Georges' life at home and cannot offer Georges the degree of continuity between home and child care that she could if she and Chloe were working together as partners.

## Beliefs About Appropriate Ways to Communicate

At home, dinner time was filled with busy, interactive conversation during which Isabella's grandmother, mother, father, and sisters all talked continuously, adding to each other's stories as if they were weaving a quilt together. Often several family members talked at once — no one ever thinking that adding on to someone's story was an interruption.

Isabella came to her preschool classroom eager to share her ideas and experiences and add to the stories of others, just as she does every day at home. However, each time Isabella spoke, her teacher hushed her, saying that she had to raise her hand to talk. At first, Isabella would speak up while simultaneously raising her hand, but this led to more hushing. After a while, Isabella stopped talking. In this case of cultural differences, everyone ended up losing. Isabella's enthusiasm about school and her sense of self as a joyful contributor was diminished. Her teacher's need for order prevented her from connecting with Isabella and teaching her how to be an effective group member at school.

Like the teachers in these stories, it is easy to assume that your way is the right way. We all do this sometimes. The danger is that it closes you off to seeing and understanding that there are other possibilities. When it comes to culture, there are many right ways.

Understanding culture and cultural

differences is not easy even when you have the best intentions and you and families are each invested in their child's well-being and learning. Here are some strategies that can help you get beyond barriers of cultural differences and build trusting relationships:

- Be aware of how your culture — your attitudes, beliefs, and expectations — shapes you as a person and teacher. This will give you some insight into the deep influence culture has on others, including the children and families with whom you work.
- Observe to discover similarities as well as the differences between your culture and those of children and families. Like most of us, you may find similarities easier to deal with than differences. But remember, differences exist, and recognizing them is necessary before we can bridge them. Be open to and try to accept and acknowledge both.
- Seek more information to understand what culture means to each family and the ways in which it is reflected in their behavior. Continue to observe and listen; as trust grows, share some of your questions and your own experiences and beliefs.

Cultural collisions and tensions between teachers and family members are part of life. If parents of the same child disagree, for example, about the right way to respond to a child's challenging behavior based on how they were raised, it is no surprise that caregivers and parents are caught short by differences not only between their own cultures but between the cultures of home and child care or school. The challenge is to get beyond asking what is right and wrong to being able to see another person's point of view and to

communicate openly, always keeping in mind your common goal of supporting the child.

## Sharing Information With Families

When you and families share observations together, each of you can sharpen your picture of a child by validating, expanding, or calling into question something you have seen. Think about Georges and Chloe above and how their child care experiences might have been different if their parents and caregivers had been able to communicate.

Observations you record can provide you with rich examples to share with parents as questions or issues arise and, of course, during conferences which give you uninterrupted time to reflect about a child together. We recommend that you also consider observing regularly with parents so you can pool your information, insights, and questions about a child in an ongoing dialog.

Be aware, however, that sometimes it sounds easier to review and use information from observation notes than it actually is. Notes have an amazing ability to end up in "black holes" — pockets, filing cabinets, desk drawers — never to be seen again. And when they are sighted, they often tend to be in a state of confusion. During a recent workshop, a brave teacher held up a large jumble of post-it notes all stuck together in a clump. "I can find time to write my observations down," she said. "But I never get back to them." Laughter and a collective sigh of relief swept through the group. Clearly she's not alone.

Here are some examples of systems shared with us by caregivers that have allowed them to gather information for

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and from families:

- “I’ve made a folder for each child. In each child’s folder I keep my observations and notes from other teachers and parents.”
- “I use index cards that I store in a small file box. I create a section for each child. I keep the cards and a pen on the top of the bookshelf so they are handy. I stick the cards in my pocket as I write on them; at the end of the day, I file them under the correct name.”
- “I keep a notebook for each baby in my room. Parents are welcome to take their child’s book home and add observations from home. It is working very well.”
- “We have portfolios for each child that I made out of an accordion folder. In each portfolio, we keep observations and samples of that child’s work that are shared with the child and his or her family. The child helps us choose which pieces of work to include. I keep my scribbled observations in a folder labeled with that child’s name and stored in my filing cabinet.”

Like all relationships, those with families take time to develop and require work to maintain — but they are well worth it. Observation can help.

## Reference

Goodenough, W. (1981). *Culture, language, society*. Menlo Park, CA: Benjamin Cummings Publishing.

**Editors’ Note:** The stories we gathered for *The Power of Observation* came from teachers and caregivers. We use the word caregiver and teacher interchangeably.