

Meeting Individual Needs

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It is the responsibility of all practitioners working with young children to tune into each child in their key group, get to know each one well and try to understand their individual learning and development needs in order to work out what can be done to support them, in partnership with parents/principal carers. The importance of observing cannot be underestimated in this process. As one experienced nursery teacher put it: 'It's about seeing something happen with a child. You need to think about what is happening then suddenly you start to understand what is going on and you begin to work out how you can intervene appropriately to support the child.'

The following observations of H (approx. 3 years 8 months) were written by her key person, an experienced nursery teacher in a nursery school. Sometimes deciding what to plan from an observation can be a quite straightforward process as in the following short observation.

16 September: H brought a photo from home to nursery today and proudly showed it to staff. She talked about who was in the photo but did not describe the event (H is at an early stage of learning English).

Next steps: make a photobook about her and her family with agreed sentences she can tell everyone.

At other times, particularly when staff and parents (either or both) are concerned or worried about the child, deciding what to do to help the child may require a great deal of thought and discussion, being open to new ideas or ways of working. In the following example, some the observations showed the difficulties H was having in building relationships with her peers. As mentioned above, H was new to learning English when she had first started at nursery a few months earlier.

Observation: H hurt her friend but agreed to bring her inside and see that she was looked after. She brought her some ice to hold on her hurt hand. She then agreed to get a story and tell it to her friend.

Analysis: H is beginning to understand that there are consequences to her actions. She is becoming aware that she needs to make her friends feel better if she has caused their hurt. (PSED: managing conflict, feelings and emotions)

A month later a second observation shows how an event resulted in the teacher feeling more confident in developing an approach which would really help support H deal with conflict and develop her ability to form relationships.

Observation: H really wanted to ride the red bike this morning but another child got it first. She shouted, stamped and cried, then came to me the nearest adult for support. I tried a comforting approach rather than a stern 'matter of fact' one and it worked well. It let her get to grips emotionally with what had happened.

The teacher then went on to describe the approach:

1. Comfort her – open arms to cuddle, concerned expression, bring onto lap.
2. Explore her concerns – what is wrong?
3. Give her the words for her feelings – 'you are disappointed, you are sad and cross because ...'
4. Involve others to consolidate the words used – 'Hey, look, come and see, H is really disappointed/sad/cross. Do you know what happened? ...'
5. Sometimes this will be enough, but we may need to help her get involved in something else afterwards.

A great deal of thought, teasing out the best responses, went into this example of planning to meet individual needs.

Reflective questions

- How do you ensure that the learning diaries or records of the individual children in your setting truly reflect their all-round development at points in time and show the strategies which have supported development?
- How do you make time for reflection and discussion of individual children's learning?
- How do you share your records with parents/carers and the children themselves?