Assignment 4a
Interpreting and Using Observation Results

A recorded observation that is accurate and objective is valid, in other words, it represents what actually occurred. If observations are performed consistently over time, they are considered reliable. Observations that are both valid and reliable allow child care providers to use these data in meaningful ways. What do we do with the information collected? We use it to plan for the individual needs of the child, but before we can do that, we need to know the following items in order to interpret observational information:

**STEP 1 Reviewing Observations**
Look at the observations as a whole. Because one running record or checklist or time sample does not give a complete picture of a child, look at all the collected observations together before interpreting the data. Think of the single observation as a snapshot of the child; an entire album of snapshots is needed before you can use the observations.

**STEP 2 Determining Patterns**
Once the data are collected, the next step is to reflect on the observations and look for patterns. How do the different observations relate to one another? Are there trends in the behavior? For example, does Sharon consistently cry at the end of the day, right before her grandmother comes to pick her up? Is LaDerrick always the most aggressive just before lunch time? Is Ming Lu the most cooperative after naptime?

**STEP 3 Drawing Inferences**
Establishing patterns and trends in recorded observations leads naturally to the next step, which is making an inference. An inference can be defined as a statement considered to be true because it is founded upon a previous statement considered to be true. For this reason, logical inferences will be objective in nature.

**STEP 4 Drawing Conclusions**
The next step in interpreting the data for use in decision-making is to draw a conclusion. Conclusions are educated guesses. For this reason, they are subjective. To draw a conclusion, look for the underlying meaning of what was observed. Draw on knowledge and experience.

- Is there a theory that can explain what was observed?
- Has similar behavior been observed in the past?
- Is this behavior typical of a child this age and at these stages of development?
- Is there a cultural explanation for the child's behavior?

The more objectively the behavior is recorded and inferences made, the more valid the conclusions.

**STEP 5 Interpreting Observations**
In those instances in which interpretations are not straightforward, consider consulting parents, colleagues, supervisors, or specialists for advice. Their ideas can add insight into what is going on with a child. It is important that every attempt be made to interpret the data validly. Since, by
definition, interpretation has objective and subjective components, one must be sure to make interpretations that support what is observed.

When interpretations are not straightforward, child care providers should consult parents, other staff members, their directors, or specialists for advice because their ideas add insight into what is going on with the child. Child care providers must be able to support their interpretations with what they observe. That is why consistent documentation is vital.

**STEP 6 Using Observations in Decision Making**

Once the observations are interpreted, the final step is to use them in decision making. The purpose of observation is, after all, to get to know each child better and to be able to respond to each child as a unique individual. What you have learned about each child can be used in several ways including:

- To have a clear picture of the specific needs of individual children. This includes screening and assessing children to see if special services and/or referrals are required.

- To have authentic or real information on children's skills and capabilities as part of the ongoing assessment process. This information base helps child care providers see how the combination of individual skills and capabilities help a child become a competent, functioning person. Carefully recorded observations show how skills and capabilities are used in the child's world. This information can then be translated into sound decisions for individualizing the curriculum and creating child-centered environments.

- To gain insight into more effective ways to relate to each child. By observing children's reactions to their world and their interactions with providers, you can evaluate the effectiveness of your actions and can provide information on how you influence each child.

- To make better decisions about activities that will interest and challenge children, causing them to stretch their intellectual, physical, and social powers. When child care providers are aware of what children are like and what they can do, they have a solid basis for deciding which activities will challenge the children and which ones will frustrate them.

- To enhance staff's abilities to attend to details and listen carefully and effectively. These skills are required for improving communication with children and adults, including parents, co-workers, spouse, and friends.

- To demonstrate interest in each child. Paying close attention to a child communicates caring, concern, and interest.

- To demonstrate to families staff's interest in, concern for, and attention to their child. Parents learn to trust staff and view them as competent professionals when they view them as observers. Also, staff can answer parents' questions about their children with interpreted observational data.

Observing is a skill that goes beyond one's job. It is a life skill with many applications. By learning to observe accurately and objectively, staff can gain insight into broader social issues and problems. Staff can learn to discern their biases and those of others. They can rationally confront these biases and celebrate what is good in their communities and world. Being skilled in observing and recording enlightens everyone as an individual.