

What is the purpose of classroom observations? What defines a high-quality observation? And if observations are so important, why don't most people like being observed? This tip sheet will explore the answers to these questions. It will describe the benefits of teacher observations—after we delve into the very real reasons why it is hard to be observed.

What is a **classroom observation**?

In a classroom observation, an observer watches the teacher work and takes notes on their practices. They pay attention to the teacher's interactions with children. Teachers do the same thing in many early childhood classrooms! They observe a child to understand the child's current developmental level. They use this information to adjust their teaching activities to meet the child's individual needs.

Classroom observations are similar. The observer uses the information they get to provide the teacher with feedback. The goal is to help the teacher improve their interactions with children and teaching practices. And better teaching leads to better outcomes for children!

What is a **high-quality observation**?

A high-quality observation depends on three things: a research-based observation tool, an observer who has been trained and is consistent in their scoring on the tool over time, and an observer who understands what feedback is useful to the teacher.



Research-based observation tools

It is crucial that the observer use a research- or evidence-based tool.¹ There are a variety of research-based tools that look at many different aspects of program quality, from teacher-child interactions to the number of books or blocks in the classroom. A research-based tool should carefully describe the aspects of program quality that it focuses on. It should also clearly explain the difference between more effective and less effective practices.²

Importantly, a research-based tool has been thoroughly tested to confirm that

1. it measures what it is intended to measure (**meaning it's "valid"**).
2. it produces consistent results (**meaning it's "reliable"**).

Research-based tools increase objectivity and reduce bias,³ because these tools have been tested to make sure they work in classrooms with different racial, ethnic or cultural groups. Some examples of research-based observation tools are:

- The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS®), used to measure the quality of teacher-child interactions
- The Comprehensive Scoring Instrument (CSI) used during child development associate (CDA) verification visits
- The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Accreditation Observation Tool



Trained observers

Observers must go through training to use a specific research-based tool. That training makes observers more reliable. Observers are tested to make sure that their use of the tool is consistent, accurate, and objective. They must prove that they strictly follow the scoring criteria that were set by the people who developed the tool.

Useful feedback

A well-trained observer understands what information is valuable to teachers.² During an observation, the observer may take copious notes, but not all observation notes are useful. Observers should provide feedback that aligns with the important points in the observation tool. For example, an observation tool may include a rubric that measures the effectiveness of teacher-child interactions. The observer should give specific examples of what the teacher is doing to foster effective interactions.

High-quality feedback also needs to be timely and specific.¹ Feedback shared several weeks after an observation is not useful to teachers. Neither are general statements, like: “Six children participated in your small group lesson.” Useful feedback could include a new idea that teachers can try right away or information about a practice that has a big impact in the classroom.

Why does it feel **SO hard** to be observed?

Let’s be real: observations can feel very intimidating. Just like eating broccoli, we may know that it is good for us, but that doesn’t mean we like it—or raise our hands for seconds! Just as sensitive educators help children name difficult feelings, let’s take a moment to name several good reasons why it is hard to be observed.

Having another adult in the room can be nerve-wracking and make us feel more self-conscious.

Knowing that we are being watched can make us feel anxious about whether we are doing things “the right way.” This anxiety can even affect our interactions with children. Even if they don’t have words to describe what feels different, children are keen observers of the emotional state of their important adults. They notice when we are acting differently. That can add to our discomfort.

We may worry that directors—or even peers—will judge us.

Sometimes, the purpose for the observation is unclear. A teacher might even be told that an observation is going to happen without other information or a chance to ask questions. In these situations, an observation can feel like a punishment or a test to prove ourselves.

A previous observation experience did not go well or was not useful.

A teacher may remember a past observation where they did not feel supported. Maybe they didn’t feel prepared with enough information about the observation or its purpose. Maybe they did not receive useful feedback. After an experience like that, it can be hard to want to participate in a classroom observation again.

Benefits of observations

Why do programs arrange observations if they are so awkward? Because the benefits of a high-quality observation should outweigh the discomfort.

Affirmation

One of the most important benefits of an observation is to receive affirmations for what an educator does well. Early childhood classrooms are busy and complex, and teachers don't always have time to notice or reflect on what went well. Useful observation feedback will highlight moments of effectiveness as well as areas for growth. It always feels good to hear what we are doing well, especially when the affirmation comes from an objective, outside source.

Growth

A skilled observer will provide specific information on areas for improvement. This may sound obvious, but sometimes we are too "inside" a problem to see what behaviors or classroom conditions may be causing it.⁴ For example, an observer might notice that during group time, a child constantly pokes the back of the child sitting in front of them. Eventually, the child who is getting poked cries out in frustration. The teacher hears the disruption but doesn't see the provocation. The observer's feedback sheds light on the situation, and the teacher then has more information about possible solutions to this problem. For instance, the teacher might decide to seat the two children on the opposite sides of the rug, or lead a song with hand motions during this part of group time.



Specific ideas for improvement can help us make incremental changes. Over time, those small changes can add up. They can lead to big improvements in our teaching practice.² For example, let's say an observer suggests that a teacher try to ask more open-ended questions. The teacher puts that suggestion into practice, and over time, the number of words children use increases exponentially!

A wise professional development investment

A well-trained observer will pinpoint specific areas for improvement. Leadership can use this information when deciding what kind of professional development would be the most impactful for teachers. In most child care programs and schools, professional development dollars are scarce.² Observations can help leadership spend that money wisely.

The Dunning-Kruger effect

Have you ever met someone who overestimated their own skill level—or underestimated it? Researchers call that the Dunning-Kruger effect.⁵ For example, pretend you're a student with a test coming up. You're not worried about your grade, because you believe you know the subject matter very well. When you get the test back, however, you see that you had some major gaps in understanding—and now you know what you need to work on.

On the other hand, the Dunning-Kruger effect also explains why we're sometimes unaware of our unique strengths. For example, pretend you're a classroom teacher who has just been observed. You feel that during the observation, your read-aloud didn't go as well as usual. But when you receive your feedback, the observer notes that five children raised their hands to comment, resulting in a back-and-forth dialogue where they used new vocabulary words.

To really judge our skills (as teachers or as anything else), we need an established standard to compare ourselves to. That is why observation tools are based on a set of preferred practices that are backed up

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by research. Observers compare our work in the classroom to those preferred practices. Ideally, their feedback gives us an objective look at what we're doing well. It also opens up possibilities for improvement.

Two tips for educators and one for leadership staff

As an educator, you may wonder how you can prepare for an observation and get the most out of it. Here are two things to think about.

- 1. Give the children a heads-up. Let them know who the observer is and what they can expect from this new person in their classroom. This can be a simple introduction: "This is Miss Emily. She is here to watch us play, and she's going to write in her notebook."**
- 2. Don't "perform" for the observer. The observer wants to see what an average day looks like in your classroom. Don't change your plans or how you teach.**

If you are an administrator or the director of a program, here's our advice for helping classroom observations go smoothly. Research suggests that it's helpful for teachers to have a general familiarity with the observation tool.¹ Make sure teachers have a basic understanding of:

- The purpose of the observation
- The specific focus of the observation: it could be teachers' interactions with children, their use of target vocabulary words, the health and safety of the classroom, or another focus
- The observer's process
- The tool that the observer will be using

For example, the purpose of a CLASS® observation is to improve teaching by focusing on teacher-child interactions. The observer watches the interactions between all the children and all the adults in a classroom. The process consists of 20 minutes of observation followed by 10 minutes of scoring. That process is repeated four times, so the whole observation takes two hours.

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS)®, on the other hand, focuses on how the



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physical environment supports children's development. The observer spends three hours taking notes on teachers' interactions with children. The ECERS® also scores classrooms on learning opportunities, safety, the materials that are available to the children, and how the space is organized. After the observational portion is completed, the observer scores the classroom on the ECERS® subscales. This takes about an hour and is done off-site.

Defining It

Valid

A valid observation tool measures what it is intended to measure.

Reliable

A reliable observation tool produces consistent results. A reliable observer has gone through training and assessment to make sure they collect data consistently and objectively.

Conclusion

Even though observations can make us feel nervous, they have many benefits. High-quality observations:

- Are conducted by a trained observer
- Use a research-based tool that has a specific focus
- Include timely, relevant feedback for the teacher

Observations are designed to make teaching more effective, so children are the ultimate beneficiaries. Observations can help us grow as professionals and do our best for the children and families we serve.

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Suggested citation: Center for Early Education and Development (2026). Introducing it: Early childhood classroom observations. Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota.

Diving Into It

To learn additional information on this topic:

Please visit our website: ceed.umn.edu

NAEYC's DAP- Observing, Documenting, and Assessing Children's Development and Learning: <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/assessing-development>

Here is an option for "Best Practices for Conducting Program Observations": https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/program_observation.pdf

Resource from Head Start: <https://headstart.gov/child-screening-assessment/child-observation-heart-individualizing-responsive-care-infants-toddlers/what-observation>

CLASS® Observations Specific:

Resource from Teachstone - 10 Tips to Prepare for Conducting a Live CLASS observation: <https://info.teachstone.com/blog/10-tips-to-prepare-for-conducting-a-live-class-observation>

Resource from Teachstone - How Can I prepare my Staff for CLASS Observations?: <https://info.teachstone.com/blog/how-can-i-prepare-my-staff-for-class-observations>

References

The sources referenced in this tip sheet can be found at: https://z.umn.edu/classroom_observations