

# Inclusion Tools for After School Professionals

brought to you by the San Francisco Inclusion/Mental Health Collaborative  
*a project of Support for Families of Children with Disabilities, Instituto Familiar de la Raza & Edgewood Children Centers*

## SNIPPET #1: Becoming a Skilled Observer

As an after school provider, you have some kids in your program who may be such puzzles that you have a hard time reaching them or keeping them engaged and happy in program activities. More information about the child can help you learn how to help her become more comfortable in the after school environment.

There are, of course, several ways to gather information about a particular child: talking with his parents; talking with the school staff; and asking other after school staff what they experience with him. Another way to gather objective information is to take some time to observe the child yourself. **Descriptive, objective observations** can be useful in the following ways:

- **identifying** the source of a problem (not just the individual child but also her environment and the children associated with her).
- **gaining** a better understanding of the child's purposes, feelings, and behavior.
- **providing** information about the kinds of activities children do and how they go about doing them.
- **showing** how a child's development is progressing through repeated observations over a period of time
- **giving** you specific examples when discussing a child's progress with his parents or professionals.

"Observe!" you say. "How? And **when am I going to find the time?**" You barely have time to get through the activities and already scheduled for the after school program – you may not even have time to meet with parents or other staff. How are you going to fit one more thing into your overcrowded day?

**You can do it**, because it's something you already do. Even though you are occupied with organizing, coordinating and providing direction during the afterschool hours, you are already noticing what's going on and taking in information about children and youth as they engage in activities. The key is to take some time to focus and notice with the intent of gathering specific information.

For example, transition times were particularly difficult for one 8 year old in the afterschool program. Staff wondered why she seemed to "melt down" and refused to go along with the other kids to free time. They noted that the melt downs didn't happen every day, and were curious about how to help "Amanda" become more comfortable with the after school schedule. They decided to observe her to gather more information about the context in which the melt downs happened. They followed the steps as described below to learn to be skilled observers.

### **1. Step Back**

Suspend for a brief time (three to five minutes) your normal role in the after school program. Step back from your usual role to put some distance between you and the situation, taking the time to just sit, listen, and watch what is going on. By not intervening where you normally would, you may see the situation in a new light. For example, to understand why Amanda was having a hard time moving on to free time, the staff appointed one person to be the observer; while the others helped the children get ready for homework time.

### **2. Start Fresh**

Perhaps the most difficult skill to learn, but probably

the most important in observing children, is the **skill of objectivity**. In order to see beyond the unhappy face with the runny nose, the skin color that may be different from ours, or the withdrawn, quiet child who never looks you in the eye, we must make a serious effort to be honest about personal prejudices/biases and be aware that personal values do not automatically apply to other people. It is especially important to see the children in relation to their own family life styles and not in terms of your own.

In addition, try to be open to new aspects of behavior you may have overlooked before. Observe behaviors occurring in the present; not based upon what others have told you, or what you may have read in written reports.

### **3. Get Focused**

Decide upon a specific behavior or skill to observe. You can plan your observation to include various factors: *who* will be with interacting with the child, as well as *where* and *when* you will observe her. Concentrate on the one or two aspects you have chosen, ignoring as best you can other things that are going on. The following questions can help you focus your observation:

- What is the child's approach to material and activities?
- How interested is the child in what she is doing?
- How does the child communicate with others--in words or gestures?
- Does he ask for help or seem to need encouragement? Does he try new things on his own or wait for coaxing?
- How does the child interact with other children? Does she initiate or follow along with group ideas?
- What kinds of changes are there between the beginning and the end of an activity?
- How smoothly does the child shift from one activity to another?
- How does the child relate to staff? Is he eager to see you and other staff?

### **4. Go with the Flow**

As you watch the child's activities, record **what you see actually happening, not your interpretations of her actions**. You should become a "candid camera," waiting until later to reflect upon what you see. For example, Amanda's afterschool provider observed that she had a big smile on her face when she was in group time, but started to frown and talk to herself when she noticed the other kids getting ready to leave the circle. Staff wrote down both of these observations, waiting until later to interpret them.

You will find recording "just the facts" is easier if you observe for only a short time--perhaps less than five minutes. Short, frequent observations let you record facts--exactly what happens. You can go back at another time, review your collection of observations, and then interpret the data.

The staff in Amanda's afterschool program observed her several times to try to figure out what was making it hard for her to move from circle time into free time. They noticed when her friend stayed with her and they chose the same activity for free time, Amanda didn't have the melt downs and was able to enjoy the activity. They interpreted these observations as meaning she was uncomfortable by herself and needed more guidance and support to feel safe in the free time environment.

As you have time, you can practice observing the children and youth in your program and really noticing what is happening with them. You can use the form on the next page to record observations of the children in your program.

Your observations can help you see what the kids are doing well, what works for them and what motivates them. You can share these observations with other staff and make the adjustments to your program environment that can help all children engage and thrive.

# OBSERVATION RECORD

Observer

Date

Beginning Time

Ending Time

Name of Child Observed

Where?

When?

What was the focus of the observation?

Why was this focus chosen?

---

What happened during the observation?

My reflections on the observation



The Special Needs Inclusion/Mental Health Collaborative is funded by the San Francisco Department of Children Youth and their Families. [www.snipsf.org](http://www.snipsf.org)  
Contact Dee Hayden, 415-282-7494, [dhayden@snipsf.org](mailto:dhayden@snipsf.org)