

Garden-Based Learning



Resources for educators, volunteers, and parents working with children and youth.

Enhancing Your Observation Skills

What is observation?

The purpose of observational data is to describe the setting that was observed, the activities that took place in that setting, the people who participated in those activities, and the meanings of what was observed from the perspective of those observed.

(Patton, Michael Quinn. 1990. Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods. Sage Publications)

Observational data should be:

- Factual
- Accurate
- Thorough
- Based on direct experience
- Not have bias or interpretation



Why is observation helpful?

- Helps to better understand the context within which a program operates.
- Helps to highlight things that may routinely escape staff and volunteers.
- Helps to discover things that no one has paid attention to before, things people may forget, or things people may not be willing to mention in a survey or interview.
- Helps to move program evaluation beyond the selective perceptions of those involved.

Who should observe?

In a perfect world, you should enlist a trained evaluator! Otherwise, a colleague or volunteer that doesn't have a vested interest in your program would be ideal. Perhaps you can do this for each other – observe each others' programs.

Types of Observation

Group Discussion of Covert vs. Overt Observation...

What should you observe?

- **The program setting:**

The physical environment in which the program takes place.

- **The human and social environment:**

Ways in which people organize themselves into groups and sub-groups;

Patterns of interaction and frequency of interaction between people;

Decision-making patterns;

Social characteristics of group members.

- **Planned program implementation activities and formal interactions:**

What goes on in the program?

What do people do in the program?

What is it like to be a participant?

Look at the sequence of the activity: beginning, middle, end, and consider:

Who is involved?

What is being done and said by staff and participants?

How do they go about what they do?

Where do activities occur?

When do things happen?

What are variations?

What are signals an activity is ending?

How do participants react to the ending of the activity?

- **Informal interactions and unplanned activities:**

Look at what's happening during unstructured or free time -- this is a good time to ask participants:

What did you think of what went on this morning?

Was it clear to you what they were trying to do?

What did you think of the session today?

How do you think what went on today fits into your overall program interests?

*Remember: Everything that goes on in or around the program is data!

- **Nonverbal communication:**

Take note of the ways in which participants dress, express affection, physically space and arrange themselves in the physical setting. These can all offer nonverbal cues about what is happening in the program.

- **Observing what does *not* happen:**

If program goals indicate that certain things are supposed to happen, and they do not happen, it is worth noting that as well.

****You can tailor the list of questions above to suit your specific observational needs. It is always good to have a clear intention about what you are going to observe... For example, will you observe the program as a whole, or a specific program goal (such as promoting youth leadership)?**

You'll find below an example of guiding questions that have been tailored for an observer looking for program evidence of youth leadership:

- How do youth enter the room? Whom do they talk with and what do they do?
- Do the adults use strategies to facilitate/ invite youth initiative and youth voice? If so, what are these strategies?
- Do the adults guide youth and offer direction? Do they instruct or tell them what to do? If so, describe.
- Are the youth speaking up? Do they offer suggestions for alternatives or creative approaches? What is the adult response to these suggestions? Do the youth speak to the program leaders about their ideas and suggestions for the project?
- Are the youth asking questions? How do adults respond to these questions?
- Are youth suggestions incorporated? Is there a plan in place for incorporating youth suggestions? If so, who creates this plan?
- If future efforts are planned, who will do the follow up, the youth, adults, or both?
- Who makes decisions?
- Are there youth who are not actively participating? What does this look like? How do others (youth and adults) respond to those who do not actively participate?
- Is there laughter and conversation? Or is it quiet? Are participants standing, sitting, or moving around? How do they move in relationship to one another?

Examples of Observation

What's different between these two examples?

High quality observation:

A 5th grade girl entered the room a minute late, and took a seat adjacent to three 6th grade girls; all were dressed in t-shirts and blue jeans. All four girls then leaned forward and began to plant seeds, having a conversation about a previous planting activity as they did so. All four were laughing and talking (about equal in the degree to which they were talking/interacting), and two of them had soil on their clothing. One girl asked a question about the earlier activity, and two of them responded at the same time with the answer, laughing as they did so. They completed the planting and cleaned up without being asked by the leader. They ended by asking the leader what next week's activity would be.

The leader set up the planting activity before the girls entered the room. During the activity, the leader periodically asked questions, began to set up for an activity with another group, and conversed with the girls about a community event. She also offered a snack, and left the room for a short while to take a phone call. She closed by asking the girls what they wanted to do next week, when the girls asked her what next week's activity would be. The leader and three of the girls decided to clean up the courtyard during the time they would be meeting next; one girl indicated she would be at softball practice the following week.

Poor quality observation:

The girls were fully engaged. The leader trusted the girls to let them work on their own.