

28 - Do You See What I See Strategies for Conducting Meaningful Observations

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Audience: Current Active & Enrolled Students

Episode Transcript

Host Dr. Shipley Speaker: Hello everyone and welcome to Early Childhood Chatter with Dr. Shipley and Dr. Heald. We will upload a new episode every other week on Wednesdays.

Host Dr. Heald Speaker: Twice a month, we will come to you with a 10-minute professional development that you can quickly listen to for new ideas to try.

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Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: So, today we have with us two of our very own colleagues. We're super excited.

Dr. Amy Johnson's here, who started her career teaching elementary school before transitioning into higher education. She's been with UAGC for 11 years, and enjoys working with students preparing to work with children. And she's been on the podcast before and talked about some really cool things.

So, you can listen to that episode. And then we have Jenn Zaur, who is an assistant professor in the Early Childhood and Child Development Department, at the University of Arizona Global Campus. She has over 20 years of experience in education, and is very passionate about online education, curriculum development, and supporting students with success through scaffolding.

Ladies, thank you for being here.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Thank you so much for coming to our podcast today. This is our first one after the University of Arizona Global Campus ECE conference.

And these two ladies had a fantastic presentation about strategies for conducting meaningful observations. Ladies, this is a topic that we know from hearing your passion and seeing your passion at the ECE conference. So, tell our listeners why this is so important for all professionals who are working with young children.

Dr. Amy Johnson Speaker: Sure. Observations are one of the most widely used forms of documentation and assessment in early childhood. They're developmentally appropriate, and they're conducted when the children are engaged in natural play, and they're comfortable in their learning environment.

And observations don't place any stress on the children. So, they're amazing in the classroom. And since Jenn and I teach college classes, we train our students to go out and conduct these observations.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: So why is it so important to conduct that meaningful observation?

Jenn Zaur Speaker: Yeah, well, there's lots of reasons why we want to conduct meaningful observations. And, you know, to kind of piggyback on what Amy shared, one of the reasons that it's so important to conduct these observations, is because they happen in the natural setting, right? We're watching what kids are doing when they're engaged in play, when they're engaged in conversations with their peers.

And because of this, and if we really focus our attention on what we see our kids doing, what we hear them saying, then we're able to walk away with information about what do our students know? How are they progressing towards their milestones? Where might they need some support? Where might I need to bring in some other opportunities to challenge them and really help them because they might already be meeting a lot of their milestones.

And when we have this information from these meaningful observations, then we as teachers can plan more meaningful instruction and opportunities for the kids that we're working with.

We want to make sure that everything we're doing is developmentally appropriate, that it's meeting the needs of the kids that we're working with. And so, these observations give us the opportunity to do that.

And they also give us the chance to see what type of growth and what type of progress the kids we're working with are making, so that we can make informed decisions not only about the types of experiences we provide for the kids we're working with, but also so that we can decide what's working and what's not working, and use that to inform future instruction, too.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Data-driven instruction is crucial today, so that we can really kind of devise those developmentally appropriate practices and programs, like you said, and just really kind of devise that curriculum for our students. I have worn that hat of being an observer and conducting observations.

And I'll tell you, it does take a little bit of experience. So, and I will tell you, there have been times that I've made errors. So, can you just talk about maybe one or so are the common areas that you see with observations?

Dr. Amy Johnson Speaker: Well, one error we see frequently is subjective versus objective information.

Subjective means that you're reading into the situation, and you're bringing your own opinions into the observation. And subjective language also evokes emotion in the reader, which is something you don't want in an observation. So objective is what you do want.

It's simply stating what you saw or what you heard. You don't read into the situation. For instance, if I say the child enjoyed the snack, that's subjective because I can't see what's going on in his head.

I don't know if he's enjoying it or not. And have you ever pretended to enjoy a food that you honestly didn't like? I have. So instead, I should say he smiled when he ate the snack.

He ate everything on his plate. In that way, I'm only reporting what I see and what I hear. And another way we see this is called interpretive or descriptive phrasing.

So interpretive phrasing, I'm interpreting what I see, and I put my own spin on it. And you will read it how I have interpreted it. So, if I say Sam refused to eat his breakfast, that puts a little negative spin on Sam's behavior because refused has a negative meaning.

It leads you to believe that he was being defiant. Instead, if I use descriptive phrasing, I just describe what happened. Sam didn't want to eat breakfast this morning.

He said his stomach was hurting. He drank some milk, said it felt better, and I offered him some applesauce and he ate that. So now I've described exactly what happened.

And you can see Sam wasn't being defiant. He had an upset stomach. So only report what you can see and hear.

Don't read into anything.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Wow, I think that we're all guilty of doing these errors, and it's not even something that we're meaning to do. It just comes naturally.

So, thank you for telling us how we could do it better and make sure that we're not putting our own spin on it. So, what do you do once the observation is actually complete?

Jenn Zaur Speaker: Yeah, so this is something that I reinforce with my students here at UAGC all the time, is that observations or assessments are designed to inform your instruction. And I think that's something that's so important for us to keep at the forefront of what we do, once we finish our observations.

We're not just doing our observations because maybe we've been told by our director, our administration that that's something that we need to do, but we're doing it because we're wanting to inform our instruction and make decisions that are database and driven based on what we know about our kiddos. So, once I have those observations, then I sit down, and I analyze them. I look for patterns.

A lot of times you'll hear teachers talk about that they'll code their data, which really is just a term for saying, okay, I'm looking for patterns. Everything that I noticed that was maybe related to a physical development milestone; I'm going to mark in blue. If I notice that it's related to language, I might highlight it in yellow.

And so, I'm looking for patterns to see where my kid's strengths are, where there is an opportunity that I need to help provide them some support with. And then I can make informed decisions about the types of learning opportunities I want to provide. And a part of that too, and not only when we have our data is looking at, you know, how do I want to inform my instruction, but then is collaborating with that data, whether it's collaborating with colleagues to say, here's what I noticed about some of the kids that I'm working with, you know, how can I help them to be successful, but also collaborating and sharing that observation information with families so that they are a part of the process too.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Jenn, that's so powerful. We really want to make sure we are kind of taking that shift from just using data to meet those, you know, benchmarks and milestones to using it to drive that instruction, as you said. So, as we wrap up today, can you just give us three takeaways for our listeners?

Dr. Amy Johnson Speaker: Sure.

We'd say that observations are one of the most widely used forms of documentation and assessment in early childhood education. Effective observations focus on what you see and hear, not what you feel or interpret. And observations can guide further learning and curriculum.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Perfect. And I think that if we have teachers who are just starting out, this is something great for them to follow. But if we have veteran teachers and leaders and administrators on here, it's something to remember.

So, what is one challenge that you want to leave our audience with?

Jenn Zaur Speaker: Yeah, so I think we just want to challenge you to really keep this information in mind and at the forefront of your work with young kiddos, so that when you conduct intentional and purposeful---or even spontaneous--observations, it might increase your effectiveness with your kiddos. It also allows children to grow by leaps and bounds in your classroom because you know what they know, and you can help support them.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Ladies, this has been amazing. Something that every single one of us can take and begin using now, no matter who we're teaching or what we are doing with our young children.

So, thank you so much for being here and I hope you have a great day.