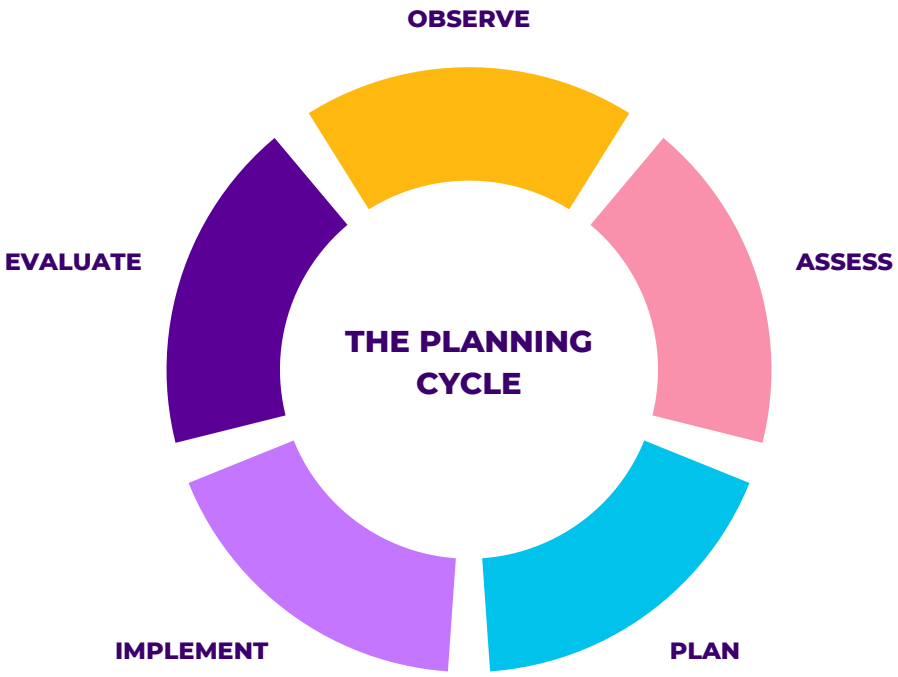
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The Nursery Observation Toolkit 2026

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Observation, Assessment, Planning

The three terms this session is built on, and the cycle that connects them.



Observation

the intentional act of watching, listening, and documenting children's behaviour, development, interactions, and learning, in order to understand them and make informed decisions about how best to support their growth.

Assessment

the systematic, purposeful process of collecting, interpreting, and using information about a child's development and learning to make educational decisions, guide teaching, identify support needs, and monitor progress over time.

Planning

the intentional, systematic process of designing learning experiences, environments, and interactions that respond to children's developmental needs, interests, and next steps. It ensures that teaching is purposeful, developmentally appropriate, and aligned with the curriculum.

Observation, assessment and planning, connected in one place.

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What We Really Want to Achieve

What observations need to help practitioners understand, and the habits that get in the way.

What we really want to achieve?

Observations need to help practitioners understand:

- What children know
- What children can do
- How they approach learning
- Their interests
- Their schemas
- Their dispositions
- Their interactions
- Their communication
- Their emerging needs
- Their next steps

Observations: What to Avoid

- X Writing too much
- X Writing too little
- X Describing rather than interpreting
- X Ticking objectives
- X Observing only adult-led activities
- X Observing the same children repeatedly
- X Ignoring children's interests
- X Recording after the event with limited accuracy
- X Writing observations that don't influence practice
- X Creating observations primarily for inspection evidence

Capture what matters in the moment, without stepping away from the children.

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The 5 C's

A simple framework for observations. Use the boxes to write up one observation from your own setting.

Context

What was happening?

Child

What did the child do/say?

Clarity

What does this tell us?

Connection

How does it link to previous learning?

Consideration

What might we do next?

Write it once, then link it to milestones.

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Observation Types

Eight observation types, and when a practitioner should use each.

OBSERVATION TYPE	WHEN A PRACTITIONER SHOULD USE IT?
Spontaneous	When a child shows a new skill, unexpected behaviour, or natural learning moment.
Planned	When assessing a specific developmental area or curriculum goal.
Focused	When gathering detailed information about one child or a specific skill.
Narrative	When documenting complex behaviour, social interaction, or learning sequences.
Snapshot	When capturing quick evidence of learning or behaviour.
Photo	When visual evidence strengthens understanding or shows process-based learning.
Video	When movement, language, or interaction is key (speech, social play, multi-step tasks).
Child's Voice	Whenever a child communicates their thoughts, feelings, or intentions so their perspective becomes part of the observation.

Remember: not every observation needs to become a formal assessment record.

Notes, photos and videos, captured in real time.

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Keep, Improve or Delete?

Ask your staff team to read the following observations and share whether they would keep, improve or delete each one. If they would improve it, what are they looking to improve, and why?

QUALITY CALIBRATION This is an excellent way of discussing expectations around observations with your team and ensuring consistency. It could form a standalone CPD session or part of a staff meeting. As a manager, you could also use some of the observations your team has completed, using initials. Print these two pages for the session; the answers are on pages 8 to 10.

Observation 1

"Maya played in the construction area. She built a tower using blocks and demonstrated good physical development. She showed communication and language skills and achieved the objective of counting to 10!"

☐ Keep ☐ Improve ☐ Delete

Observation 2

"Amelia was sitting in the garden on a beautiful sunny morning. She picked up a green leaf and looked at it carefully. She turned it over in her hands and smiled. She then walked over to her friends and showed them the leaf."

☐ Keep ☐ Improve ☐ Delete

Observation 3

"Leo was playing with the farm animals. He obviously knew the names of all the animals because he confidently picked them up and put them into the correct areas. He was demonstrating excellent knowledge and understanding of the world."

☐ Keep ☐ Improve ☐ Delete

Observation 4

"Zain played with the puzzles and completed a difficult puzzle independently."

☐ Keep ☐ Improve ☐ Delete

Every observation in one place your whole team can see.

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Keep, Improve or Delete? (continued)

Observations 5 to 8. The answers begin on the next page, so vote before you turn it.

Observation 5

"Sara is becoming more confident with her communication and language. She is developing well and is now able to use longer sentences when talking to adults."

☐ Keep ☐ Improve ☐ Delete

Observation 6

"Noah had lots of fun playing with the water today. He enjoyed pouring the water into different containers."

This observation accompanied a photo of water play.

☐ Keep ☐ Improve ☐ Delete

Observation 7

"Today we were learning about shapes. I asked Ethan to find a circle. He correctly identified the circle and then found a triangle and square. He has achieved the learning objective."

☐ Keep ☐ Improve ☐ Delete

Observation 8

"During outdoor play, Layla collected five different-sized sticks. She placed them on the ground and arranged them from shortest to longest. She initially placed the fourth stick in the wrong position, paused and compared it with the others before moving it. She said, 'This one is bigger than this one but smaller than this one.' She then invited another child to look and said, 'Can you find one that's longer than all of these?'"

☐ Keep ☐ Improve ☐ Delete

AI rewrites turn quick notes into professional observations.

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The Answers: Observations 1 to 3

Lara Hudson's verdict on each observation, what is missing, and a stronger version.

Observation 1 *"The Tick-Box Observation"*

IMPROVE

There is some potentially useful information here, but it is heavily focused on the areas of learning being achieved rather than looking at what Maya did.

What is missing:

- Information on how Maya constructed the tower
- Did Maya count independently or did she need support?
- What language did Maya use?
- What problem solving techniques Maya used?
- What decision making was involved?
- What interested Maya?

A STRONGER REWRITE WOULD BE:

"Maya selected a range of wooden blocks and carefully positioned them to make a tall tower. When it became unstable, she removed two blocks and said, 'these are too big'. She then counted the blocks as she rebuilt: 'One, two, three, four...' before adding another block and checking whether it would balance."

Now we have something to interpret.

Observation 2 *"The Beautiful Description"*

KEEP, BUT IMPROVE THE REFLECTION

This is the start of a good observation as it captures what happened without jumping to conclusions. But we don't know:

- What captured Amelia's attention
- Was she investigating?
- What did she notice?
- Did she communicate anything?
- Was this part of an emerging interest?

A POSSIBLE REFLECTION ADDED:

"Amelia appears to be particularly interested in natural objects and is beginning to share her discoveries with peers. We could provide magnifying glasses, collection of natural materials and opportunities for her to investigate and compare objects."

Observation 3 *"The Adult's Story"*

KEEP, BUT IMPROVE THE LANGUAGE

The problem here is in the language used: 'obviously knew...', 'excellent knowledge...'. These are assumptions and judgements, with no sufficient supporting evidence. The practitioner needs to ask themselves 'what did Leo say or do?'

A STRONGER REWRITE WOULD BE:

"Leo picked up the cow and said 'This is the mummy cow'. He then selected a smaller animal and said, 'this is her baby'. When asked where the cow should go, he replied 'In the field because cows eat grass'."

Now the practitioner has evidence from which they can make an informed interpretation.

The Activities Agent drafts observations from photos, for teachers to review and send.

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The Answers: Observations 4 to 6

Observations 4 to 6: the verdicts and the stronger versions.

Observation 4 *"The One-Line Observation"*

IMPROVE

It's concise, but too vague. The practitioner needs to ask themselves:

- What was difficult about it?
- How did he solve it?
- Did he use trial and error?
- Did he recognise shapes?
- Did he ask for help?
- How long did he persist?

A BETTER OBSERVATION:

"Zain selected the 12-piece puzzle and initially placed two pieces incorrectly. He rotated one piece, tried it in two different positions and then said, 'This one goes here.' He completed the puzzle without adult assistance."

Now we have evidence of problem-solving, persistence and spatial awareness.

Observation 5 *"The Assessment Disguised as an Observation"*

IMPROVE

This is really an assessment statement, rather than an observation. The practitioner needs to ask themselves: what evidence led you to say this?

A STRONGER POSSIBLE REWRITE:

"During role play, Sara said to the practitioner, 'You can be the mummy and I'll make the dinner because the baby is hungry.' She then explained, 'We need to go to the shop because we don't have any apples.'"

Now we can assess the complexity and purpose of her language.

Observation 6 *"The Photo With No Learning"*

IMPROVE

The photo might be valuable, but the written observation tells us very little. Practitioners need to ask themselves:

- What was Noah exploring?
- What did he notice?
- What did he do when something didn't work?
- What language did he use?

AN IMPROVED POSSIBLE OBSERVATION:

"Noah filled the large jug and poured it into three different containers. When the water overflowed from the smallest container, he said, 'It's too full.' He emptied some water into another cup and tried again."

Now we have evidence of capacity, problem-solving, comparison and mathematical language.

Term assessment reports and milestone reports, ready each term.

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The Answers: Observations 7 and 8

Observations 7 and 8: the verdicts, and the one that gets everything right.

Observation 7 *"The Adult-Led Trap"*

IMPROVE, BUT QUESTION THE CONTEXT

The child may have demonstrated the skill, but this tells us primarily what happened during an adult-directed task. What do we know about Ethan's ability to recognise shapes independently in his play?

A MORE MEANINGFUL OBSERVATION MIGHT BE:

"While choosing construction materials, Ethan selected two circular pieces and said, 'These are wheels.' He then searched through the basket and found two more, explaining, 'I need four because my car needs four wheels.'"

Now the mathematical understanding is emerging naturally within meaningful play.

Observation 8 *"The Gold Standard"*

KEEP

Ask your team what they feel makes this a strong observation. They should identify:

- Specific evidence
- Child's own words
- Context
- Independent learning
- Problem-solving
- Mathematical thinking
- Comparison
- Vocabulary
- Interaction with another child
- Higher-order thinking
- No unnecessary developmental claims
- Provides multiple possibilities for future planning

POSSIBLE ASSESSMENT OF THIS OBSERVATION:

"Layla is developing increasingly complex comparative reasoning and is beginning to use mathematical language to explain her thinking. She is also beginning to challenge others and create her own learning opportunities."

POSSIBLE PLANNING AND NEXT STEPS:

Providing:

- measuring materials
- objects to order and compare
- opportunities to estimate
- vocabulary such as longer, shorter, taller, wider, heavier
- opportunities for Layla to create challenges for peers

Next steps, progress and Learning Journals, shared with families in their language.

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"When we slow down to observe a child, we don't just see what they can do, we discover who they are becoming."

LARA HUDSON

Early Years Leader & Education Strategist

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