

EYFS · RECEPTION / PRE-K / K

Observation Prompts

Notice well, record briefly

Why most EYFS observations fail

EYFS practitioners are often told to 'observe' children, with the implication that this means recording everything they see. The result: hundreds of post-it notes that go in a folder, never get read, and don't change anything in the classroom. Good observation isn't about volume. It's about NOTICING things that matter, briefly recording the ones worth keeping, and using what you've noticed to plan what's next. Three good observations a week beat thirty mediocre ones.

What to look for

First time something happens First time a child writes their name. First time they count past 10. First time they include a previously-isolated peer. First times signal new development.	Sustained engagement When a child is deeply absorbed in something — that's the optimal learning state. What captured them? What were they doing cognitively? Worth noting.
Independent application When a child uses a skill or concept without being prompted. They CHOSE to count. They CHOSE to write. They CHOSE to use that vocabulary. That's mastery.	Surprising thinking When a child says or does something that reveals more sophisticated thinking than you expected. Often happens in role play and conversation.
Patterns over time If you've noticed something twice, watch for it a third time. Patterns reveal what a child is working on, what they're avoiding, what they need.	

Observation prompts to use



Domain	Prompt
Communication	What language are they using? Vocabulary? Sentence structure? Asking questions?
Listening	Are they responding to what others say? Building on it?
Curiosity	What captures their attention? What do they investigate?
Persistence	How do they handle difficulty? Do they keep going? Walk away? Adapt?
Creativity	Are they generating ideas? Combining things in new ways?
Self-regulation	Can they wait? Take turns? Recover from frustration?
Social	Are they playing alongside, with, or independent of others?
Physical	Coordination? Balance? Pencil grip? Cutting?
Number	Are they noticing numbers? Counting? Subitising?
Letters	Recognising letters? Sounds? In their name? In other words?

What to write down

When you observe something worth keeping, write briefly: • WHO (child's name) • WHAT (what specifically happened — quote what they said, describe what they did) • WHERE/WHEN (which area, which time of day) • WHY IT MATTERS (so what? what does this tell you?) • WHAT'S NEXT (what would you do tomorrow because of this?) Five lines. Sometimes three. The 'what's next' is the most important and most often skipped. An observation that doesn't change next week's planning was just paperwork.



Quick observation template

Date: _____ Child: _____ What I noticed: _____

Where/when: _____
Why it matters: _____
What I'll do next: _____

What NOT to observe

Many EYFS observations record things that don't reveal anything new — 'Sam played in the sand,' 'Sofia drew a picture.' These don't change anything you'll do tomorrow. If you can't answer 'so what?' — the observation isn't worth recording. Just enjoy that the child played in the sand. Move on.

Less is more

Aim for 3-5 SUBSTANTIAL observations per child per term — ones that genuinely capture development and inform planning. Not 30 trivia. Quality, not volume. If your school requires a certain number, that's a system problem, not a child problem. Push back if you can. Volume of observations does not equal quality of teaching.

