1.3: Observations can be Spontaneous or Planned

Spontaneous observations occur all the time. Whether teachers are actively engaged with their children during an activity or in the background cleaning up after an activity, teachers have numerous opportunities to see and hear some wonderful developments as they randomly occur. According to Piaget, children require long uninterrupted periods of play and exploration so that they can discover things for themselves. If we truly believe that children are capable of socializing, problem solving, and creating complex systems with rules, then we can successfully use spontaneous observations to capture a child’s development as it unfolds naturally.

As intentional teachers, we can also appreciate when teachable moments arise unexpectedly. These golden moments are noteworthy as well. For example, as we witness a child attempting to master a milestone, we may provide some verbal support or guidance to scaffold the child’s learning. For example, when Abraham is becoming frustrated with not being able to get a piece of his puzzle to fit, a teacher might ask, “What happens when you turn the piece around?” During spontaneous situations, we must remember to simultaneously make mental notes so that we can later write down and reflect on a more formal plan of action that can be later used to help the child achieve their developmental goals.

Let’s review the advantages and disadvantages associated with spontaneous observations.

- **Advantages:** Being in the moment allows you to enjoy your children, and children appreciate your presence. When you are present, you can celebrate a child’s success or provide positive reinforcements to help them master major milestones. While being spontaneous, you can focus on the child’s interests and pose thoughtful questions to extend and enrich their learning experience. When a teacher keeps a low profile, a child is less likely to be self-conscious or nervous.

- **Disadvantages:** The longer you wait to document your spontaneous observation evidence, the harder it will be to remain objective and recall the vital details which is important when tracking behaviors or assessing development. Also, the more time that passes, the more difficult it will be to access accurate data. For example, by not documenting the children’s dialogue or capturing their key quotes in a timely manner, you may find it difficult to...
remember their actual word choices and use of vocabulary which is essential for assessing a child’s expressive language development.

Let’s now discuss focused or **planned observations**. Becoming a skilled observer takes practice. At first you may be slightly overwhelmed with trying to incorporate an official observation time into your already busy schedule. You may struggle with finding that delicate balance between knowing when to interact with your children and realizing when to step back and observe. Once you do observe, you might be surprised by the amount of evidence you have collected on each child. What’s more, you will have to sift through all the evidence, and that can be both time consuming and exhausting. Since your time is limited and you cannot possibly observe everything, incorporating a planned observation will help you navigate through your busy day and you will be able to gather more specific evidence (Grouland & James, 2013).