

The Characteristics of Effective Learning - observation prompts

Remember you are looking for HOW the child learns - not what the child is learning. The characteristics describe the child's dispositions to learn ... the ways they find out new information ... the processes they go through to learn new things.

You are not required to put yourself under the pressure of trying to make a judgement about a child's learning characteristics in every observation and assessment - that is not what it says in the EYFS 2012. Instead, you should be using the characteristics to learn more about the child by focussing on their interests, learning styles, schemas - their personality and unique set of skills and ways of doing things.

Characteristic 1 - Playing and exploring

This looks at how the child **engages** in their learning and development. Engagement happens when a child is concentrating so you will rarely observe this in very small babies because they are constantly flitting from one activity to the next and very easily distracted.

When making a judgement about whether a child plays and explores you should watch them over an extended period of time throughout the day. You might find, for example, that they learn best in the morning and then need food and a rest, along with some gentle adult led / structured activities before they are ready to play and explore later in the afternoon.

Playing and exploring covers the following 3 areas -

- **Finding out and exploring** - is the child curious? Is he interested? Does he enjoy open ended play - play for its own sake - rather than making an end product? Does he have any particular interests in his play? Does he chat to himself during play? What areas of your provision does he normally use? This information will help you to build on his interests.
- **Playing with what they know** - how does the child use eg your building blocks? Does he put them to his ear like a phone, build them into towers, transport them round the room? How does the child play with the resources he knows? How does he act out his home and community life? How does he react when other children want to join his game? Is he confident about getting resources from your shelves ... the shed ... the garden etc so he can continue his game?
- **Being willing to 'have a go'** - does the child initiate activities or is he a follower? Does he look for challenges or always take the easy option? Does he persist at activities or stop when the going gets tough? Can he talk through what he has tried to do with you? Is he ok left on his own to tackle a task or does he prefer to have someone helping him? How does he deal with risk?

Supporting the child - John is not interested in new toys. He will only play with the trains - you can spend hours encouraging John to play with other resources... or you can build on his interest in trains by helping him build tracks, move the trains through paint to make patterns, sing train and other transport songs, ask parents about favourite trains at home and buy some, put up a display about trains, collect train timetables, learn colours and shapes, compare sizes etc.

Characteristic 2 - Active learning

Active learning describes a child's **motivation** to learn. If a child is not motivated to find out new things and try out new ideas he will not make good progress towards the Early Learning Goals (ELGs) without a significant amount of support, which of course you will be well placed to offer.

Active learning covers these 3 areas -

- **Being involved and concentrating** - this links closely to characteristic 1 because it talks about how a child is involved in and concentrating on their learning. However, it is more focussed on the way the child's concentration develops over a period of time. As a child gets older and develops the ability to concentrate they will be less easily distracted and you will be able to introduce new play ideas to them which they will enjoy trying. Ask yourself - can the child concentrate? Does he concentrate better on self chosen activities or when he is interacting with others - adults or other children? Does he pay attention to details and take care over his work? Is he easily distracted by other children, toys etc? Can he sit and listen when others are talking? Does he work quietly or chat to himself and think aloud?
- **Keeping on trying** - this is again linked to a child's concentration. As he develops the ability to focus for longer on activities he will be able to tackle challenges more effectively and try things in different ways before giving up and moving on. This ability improves over time as the child gains more experience in different settings - at home, with you, at nursery etc. Is the child persistent? Does he try again if he fails to do something the first time? Does he ask for support - or does it have to be offered?
- **Enjoying achieving what they set out to do** - is the child proud of his achievements? Does he want his work displayed? Does he enjoy showing his work to parents / you / other children during group sessions? Does he recognise that the process is important and can be valued - not just the end result? Does he try to make things better? Does he embrace challenges and think through how to do things in different ways?

Supporting the child - Jane does not concentrate during her play - she is very slap dash and is always the first to finish a painting or to tell you she is bored when you take her to the park. This might be because of Jane's age - younger children are less able to concentrate than older ones; she might be highly intelligent and need more stimulation than you are currently offering; your activities might not be meeting her needs because she is genuinely bored; she might have parents who will stop everything to play with her and be struggling because you cannot offer a 1-1 environment...

By observing this characteristic you can reflect on how to ensure her day is planned so she is stimulated and excited during her learning, especially during times when you are unable to work directly with her.

Children who are learning actively need lots of time during the day when they can play self chosen games. Look at your daily routines and make sure you build lengthy, uninterrupted play times into them.

Characteristic 3 - Creating and thinking critically

Creating and thinking critically describes how the child **thinks**. When you know how a child thinks you will be better able to support their learning because you can focus on their individual strengths and weaknesses.

Creating and thinking critically covers 3 areas -

- **Having their own ideas** - does the child think up things for himself or always need someone else to suggest games? Can he solve problems by himself or need someone to help him? Will he try something he has made up for himself rather than always copying his friends / adults? Is he independent during his play or always asking for support?
- **Making links** - does the child notice links between his learning in different settings - at home, with you, at nursery etc? Can he transfer learning from one setting to the other? Is he confident enough to test out his ideas - even if he might not succeed? Does he show you, during his play, that he understands about cause and effect? Does he understand about the predictability and sequence of, for example, his daily routine - and can he cope with changes to routine?
- **Choosing ways to do things** - does the child plan how to tackle things - in his head or verbally - so that he is more likely to succeed or does he go rushing into things and think about how to do them later? Can he tell you how well something is going during as well as after the activity? Is he able to adapt his thinking if something is not working? Will he try something - even if it is unlikely to work - or does he get upset by failure? How does he react during child led activities - can he cope managing his own play?

Supporting the child - Janet looks at every new activity as if it is the first time she has seen it - she does not make links in her learning. To support Janet you might look at ways of helping her to make connections; loan toys to her parents so she can show them what she enjoys playing with; work closely with her nursery and link your activities with ones she is doing there etc. These strategies will help Janet to find links in her learning.

When you know how the child learns, you are better placed to ensure the child's future learning needs are met because you can tailor your activities and teaching - what the EYFS 2012 refers to as your 'educational programme' - to their individual needs.

Remember, a child cannot 'pass' or 'fail' the characteristics - he is not a better or worse learner because he does not exhibit one or other characteristic - his personality traits are there to be built on, not shaped and enhanced like his learning and development.