

OBSERVING

Every Child Every Day

BY LYNN COHEN

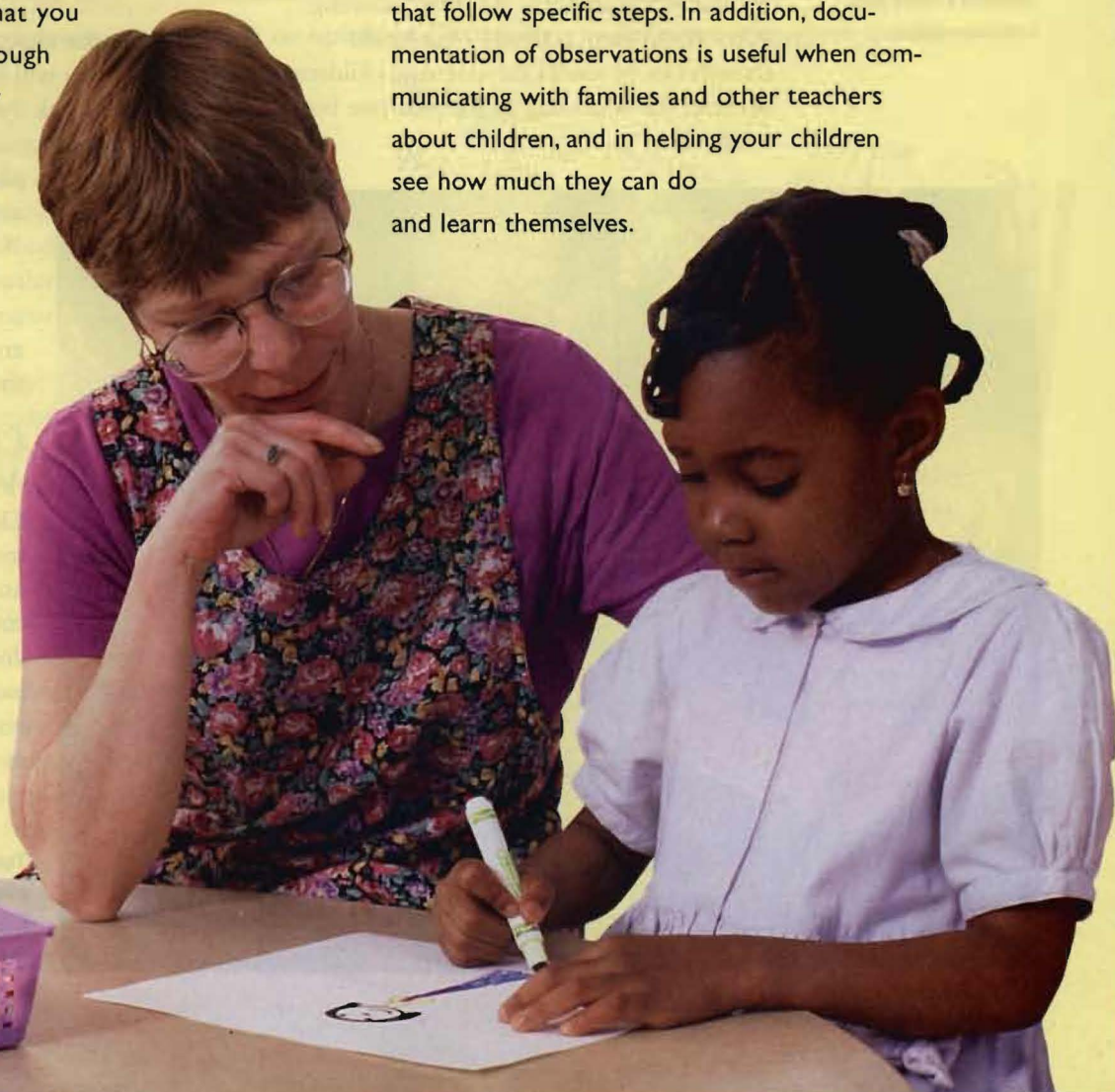
Through careful observation, you can learn a great deal about the children entering your classroom.

The process of observing your children starts with the casual watching you already do, but takes it an important step further. When you observe, you can really study your children and document what you see and hear. Through ongoing, everyday observations, you can begin to construct a well-

rounded and authentic picture of each child.

Keep in mind that the purpose of observation is to learn enough about your children so that you can individualize your curriculum for them. Based on observations, for example, you may discover that John seems more confident when solving problems with blocks, or that Joanna is most successful with activities that follow specific steps. In addition, documentation of observations is useful when communicating with families and other teachers about children, and in helping your children see how much they can do and learn themselves.

Observing children at work gives insight into the process as well as the product.



Ways to Observe



Work samples tell a story of children's skills and self-expression.

Observation works best as part of the natural, everyday routine of your classroom. How do children react the first week when their parents leave? Who do they seek out as playmates? What materials do they select at the art area? Which of their conflicts might the entire class be able to learn from?

Before you begin observing a particular child or group of children, decide on your purpose. You might be most interested in finding out how children get to know one another, or how a particular child learns. Keep your focus positive. As you observe, ask yourself questions such as: *What's right with this child? What can she do? What excites and motivates her?* Then try some of the following techniques to help you further focus and record your observations.

Writing Anecdotes

As you watch children, jot down running notes about their activities. Anecdotal records can be useful for assessing children's needs at the beginning of the year (see box for tips).

Back-to-School Activity:

Ask children to tell stories about things that have happened at school, using questions that elicit as much detail as possible. At the end of the day, ask children to try to remember details of incidents you recorded, then read back your "anecdotal records" to them.

Together, compare memories with original anecdotes, pointing out how the notes make it easier to remember. Explain to the children that you'll watch them often and write down what you see so you can remember later on.

Having Conversations

Simply conversing with children is one of the best ways to get to know them. Make time to talk with your children in different settings throughout the day. Jot down what they say or tape-record your conversations to transcribe later.

Back-to-School Activity:

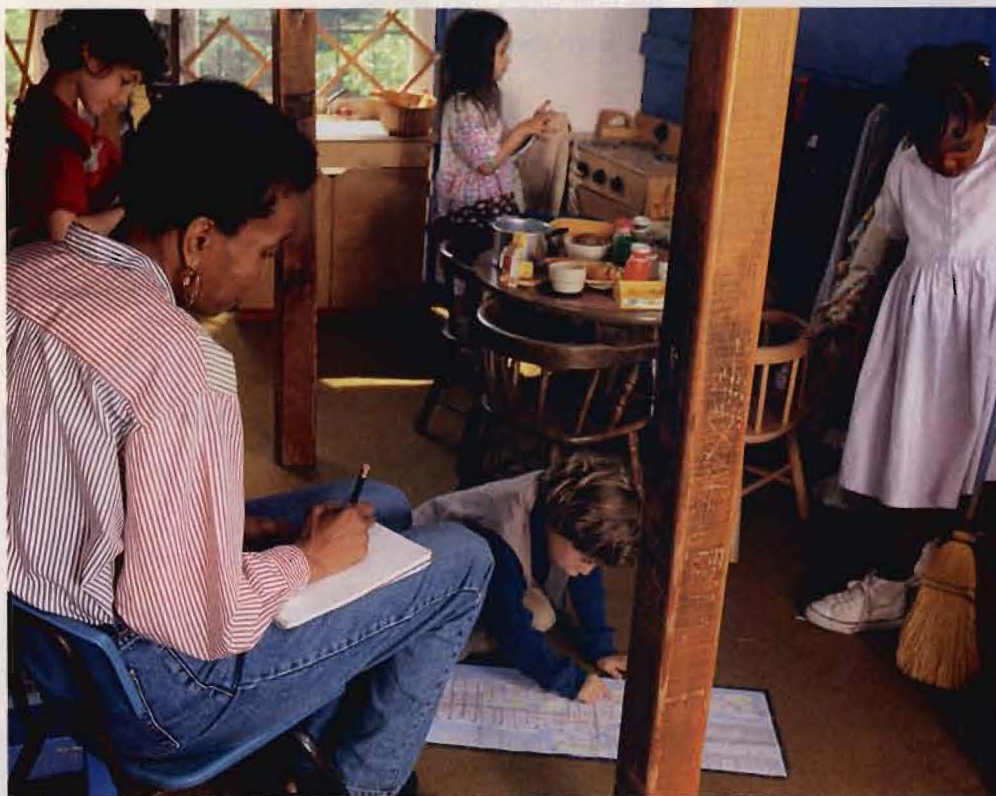
To familiarize children with the types of questions you will be asking them throughout the year, ask them to interview one another using questions like *Who did you*

play with today? What activity did you like best? What do you want to try tomorrow? Help partners write down each other's answers or tape-record their conversations.

Collecting Work Samples

Children's own work is the most authentic form of assessment. It can provide concrete information about development in areas including literacy, creativity, problem-solving, and fine-motor skills. You can use

Taking notes on children's play is a good way to capture their unique activities, styles, and interests.



TIPS

for Anecdotal Records

Recording your observations as anecdotes is a natural way to keep track of them. Here are a few tips for making your record-keeping more effective:

• **Create a system.** Try writing your anecdotes on index cards or on adhesive labels that you affix to notebook pages, and be sure to keep these materials handy. Later, organize your anecdotes in file boxes, folders, or notebooks that you keep for each child.

• **Record the date, time, and setting.** While watching, jot down enough information to get the basic story and most important details.

You can elaborate on the anecdote when you have more time.

• **Keep the information factual rather than subjective.**

Describe only what children do or say: *This is Sara's first time in our dramatic-play area. On the toy phone, she said: "You can get some rice on your way home from work. See you later. Bye." Then she joined Olivia at the stove.*

You can also include information about the length of time Sara played in this area and how she interacted with other children.

• **Separate your interpretations or opinions.** Distinguish

them from other observations by writing them on the back of the page or putting them in parentheses. (*Sara seemed hesitant about interacting with Olivia, as she often is with our more verbal children.*)

• **Set clear goals.** Consider how you'll observe children and set goals that are practical. For example, during the first week, you might decide to document one observation for each child. Over time, be sure that you observe every child in different kinds of interactions around your room and throughout the day.

originals or photocopies of writing and artwork; or photographs of three-dimensional work like block buildings, wood sculptures, or sand creations. Be sure to date every piece and save them in a folder or portfolio for each child.

Back-to-School Activity:

Invite children to draw portraits of themselves and talk about their pictures. Use this activity to gain insight into their concepts about themselves, and to learn a little about their fine-motor skills.

Using Checklists

Checklists are quick, efficient tools that enable you to record information and observations easily. You can use them to keep track of children's choices over time, or to assess certain skills. For example, criteria for rating skills might include: area of strength, age-appropriateness, or area of concern.

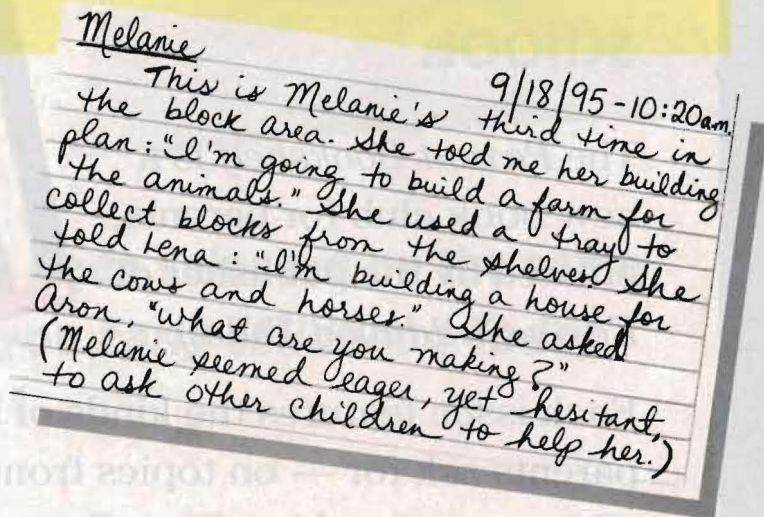
Back-to-School Activity:

For each child, make a weekly or monthly checklist of learning centers. Record which

centers children choose each day. You can also make lists showing which classmates children play with. Older children can have fun keeping track of their own activities.

You know that children develop at different rates. Through observation you can plan for, support, and encourage all children along the way — and embrace them when they reach new milestones.

Lynn Cohen is a kindergarten teacher in Great Neck, New York, and an early childhood curriculum consultant.



Anecdotal records can be useful in preparing for conferences.