Effective Record Keeping

by Blakely Fetridge Bundy

How often do we as teachers begin to prepare a conference on one of the children in our class and suddenly realize that we don't have much specific information? We have a general impression about the child and may remember some specifics — how she loves to spend time in the housekeeping corner or at the easel — but when we start to fill out our conference form, we have only scanty information to share with her parents. Often the children who cause us to scratch our heads at conference time are those easy, average children. They are the ones who most often escape the teacher's attention while we are coping with those children with more pressing needs — the aggressive or demanding child, the painfully shy child, or the ones having most trouble with separation. But even though we might have focused a good deal of attention on an acting-out child, we still may have forgotten to notice if that child is right- or left-handed, if he can hold a pencil correctly, or if he pedals a trike.

It is impossible for teachers of young children to rely upon their memories to recall the abilities, needs, and progress of the children in their class. Sooner or later, early childhood teachers need to work out a system of observation and record keeping.

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Having thorough records kept throughout the year are, of course, a bonus at conference time. The teacher is able to share with the parents their child's progress (or lack of it) during the year. When a teacher is able to relay several stories or anecdotes about the child, she can then paint a vivid picture of their child in the classroom. Having such stories to tell lets the parents know that the teacher knows and cares for their child. But having thorough records is also invaluable when there is a need for an outside consultant. It is most helpful to speech therapists, social workers, and other special help personnel to have documented the child's behavior in the classroom from the beginning of the year. The same is true for placement purposes when the child moves on to next year's class.
Having careful records gives the teacher a better understanding of the children over a period of time. They allow her to look for patterns of behavior, for growth, or even for regression over a period of several months. In a busy preschool classroom, it is important that these vital observations not be left to the teacher’s memory.

Finally, thorough records help the teacher plan appropriate programs for individual children. She may notice one child avoiding all messy art projects, while another adores all cognitive games and can take steps to meet these individual needs.

There are two basic kinds of information which teachers can record. One is factual observations and the other is anecdotal.

Factual information records specific abilities or behaviors, such as: handedness, ability with scissors, pencil grip, self-help skills such as ability to put on jacket or button, language skills such as vocabulary or articulation, gross motor skills, attention span, social interactions, and play materials most often chosen.

Factual information may be recorded through the use of tally sheets or checklists. The simplest is the tally chart. This yields useful information if a teacher is interested in counting the number of times a child behaves or reacts in a certain manner. For example, the teacher might be interested in charting the number of times a child sucks his thumb, hits other children, or participates in an art project. The teacher can place a simple hatch mark on her card. If she is interested in charting the time of day these incidents happen, she could make a grid with blocks of time and make her check in the appropriate grid. Charting such behavior over a period of days or weeks will yield valuable information. Needless to say, the teacher would use this type of record keeping for only a few children. She’d have time for nothing else if she were counting various behaviors for each child in the class.

Another way to record factual information is by using checklists. Most common of these are inventories of gross motor, fine motor, and self-help skills. When the teacher notices that a child has mastered a skill such as pedaling a trike, holding a pencil correctly, or pouring juice from a pitcher, she checks it off, noting the date. The teacher can have a checklist for each child which she fills in throughout the year as the various skills are mastered.

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The two kinds of records mentioned above are fairly arbitrary, recording factual information. A child either sucks his thumb or not. He can ride a trike or he can’t. Another type of record keeping is more subjective, but it is also more descriptive. This is the anecdotal account in which the teacher records a “word picture” of an event or incident as it occurred. In recording what happened, the teacher should try to include facts, such as the names of the children involved, where the incident occurred, at what time of day. The exact words of the children are most helpful in understanding the incident. But she should also note nuances. What was the child’s facial expression, body posture, tone of voice? The teacher should try to paint a vivid picture of the incident. Once the anecdote is recorded, the teacher can go back and add her interpretation of the event, but she should be certain to label it as such.

Below are a few examples of anecdotal records:

“Paul relaxed against me for a moment as we sat on the rug carving the pumpkin. He looked up into my face with real affection. Then his body became tense and he quickly returned to his wariness and tension.” (Later interpretation: Paul is just beginning to feel relaxed and to trust me, but he still is not entirely comfortable with me.)

“Joan and Dougy dressed in nurse’s capes and doctor’s masks in the block area. They went over to Brad, who was busily building with blocks, and stood in front of him. They