What do we mean by ‘observing, monitoring and assessing’ in the early years?
Assessment is an integral part of the learning cycle. Observing and monitoring are the ways we assess learning. In early years settings we observe the way in which children engage – with what, with whom, in which settings, at what time and to what extent. Observation enables educators to monitor progress and assess learning outcomes. Or, in the words of the Early Years Learning Framework ‘Assessment for children’s learning refers to the process of gathering and analysing information as evidence about what children know, can do and understand. It is part of an ongoing cycle that includes planning, documenting and evaluating children’s learning.’ (p. 17)

Why is observing, monitoring and assessing in the early years important?
As the Early Years Learning Framework puts it:
'[Assessment] is important because it enables educators in partnership with families, children and other professionals to:
• plan effectively for children’s current and future learning
• communicate about children’s learning and progress
• determine the extent to which all children are progressing toward realising learning outcomes and if not, what might be impeding their progress
• identify children who may need additional support in order to achieve particular learning outcomes, providing that support or assisting families to access specialist help
• evaluate the effectiveness of learning opportunities, environments and experiences offered and the approaches taken to enable children’s learning
• reflect on pedagogy that will suit this content and these children.’ (p. 17)

It is the job of the educator to support children’s learning. This requires evidence of learning on which to make professional judgements. Educators need a variety of observations in different contexts and a capacity to integrate these observations into their planning of future learning experiences.

What does observing, monitoring and assessing look like in practice?
Educators will be systematically observing children. Observations will have criteria with which describe the learning in the experience. The educator might focus on 6 children during a week. Alternatively they might focus on specific learning experiences in which several children are involved. Or, the focus might be on specific spaces in the classroom/activity room. The purpose will be to gather detailed observations of children’s learning in a natural rather than a contrived setting. Educators need to carry pen and paper to make anecdotal records, or record interviews with children about their learning. They might capture images of children’s learning with digital photographs or video recordings. They will collect samples of children’s work in progress e.g. a shopping list generated in the home corner. The analysis of the information gathered will be evident in the educator’s program.

What you will not see
• 30 pieces of identical work
• Checklists that simply monitor completion of activities
• Standardised tests
• Paper and pencil tests

Some questions to think about
• What information are you gathering about children’s learning? How? Why?
• How do your observations inform your planning?
• What other strategies are you using to monitor children’s learning? What other strategies could you use?
• Who are you sharing the information with? Why? Who could/should you share it with?

Some things to do
• Talk with other educators about the information they collect and use about children’s learning.
• Use a range of different strategies to monitor a focus child’s learning. Systematically compare and contrast the information you have gathered.

Some more to read


Margaret Carr Learning Stories

The Early Years Learning Framework