

Peer Observation

Many pre-school settings use peer observation as a valuable means of professional development.

What does it mean?

In peer observation, staff take turns to observe each other. Constructive feedback from a colleague can help practitioners to identify the strengths of their interactions with children and develop targets, enabling them to help each other to improve their practice.

Sometimes peer observation takes the form of a more experienced practitioner observing, mentoring and supporting a less experienced practitioner, but this does not have to be the case. Peer observation is of equal value between experienced colleagues.

Things to remember

- Peer observation works best when you are working with someone you respect and trust.
- Remember to discuss beforehand what will be observed and what the focus of the observation will be. (Some ideas are listed below.)
- It is important that the feedback following the observation is given honestly but sensitively. Good practice would be for the observer to identify two strengths and one target for improvement.
- The feedback must be given in a quiet place. It is a private conversation between colleagues.
- The observer should be able to give examples to support the feedback, so it is helpful for the observer to write brief notes as they observe.
- When giving feedback, do not be judgemental about the person you have observed: describe what happened ('Jane asked you three questions but you did not answer') rather than give a personal judgement ('You don't bother to listen to the children').
- Skill and empathy are needed to give helpful feedback.
- There is also an art in receiving feedback. Do not take it personally or become defensive. Be aware that the purpose is to help you develop your professional practice. Listen carefully and ask for clarification is necessary. Control any unhelpful emotional reactions. Celebrate your strengths.
- Peer observation works best in settings where there is an ethos of shared problem-solving and mutual appreciation.
- Observers could be described as 'critical friends'.
- Peer observation should aim to build both expertise and confidence.
- Peer observations should last between 5 and 15 minutes.

Possible areas to focus on during peer observations

- How carefully do I listen to children?
- How well do I encourage children to develop their language skills during (for example) role-play?
- How good are my questioning skills?
- How well do I manage children's behaviour?
- How good am I at telling/reading stories?
- How well do I encourage children to be creative and imaginative during (for example) music time?
- How well do I support learning during (for example) child-initiated play?

Be in control

As a reflective and effective early years practitioner, you can make decisions about the aspects of your practice that you would like to improve. You are then in a good position to invite peer observation from someone you trust.

If you are a manager of less experienced staff, peer observations are an excellent quality assurance tool. Be prepared to be observed yourself. Less experienced staff can learn from watching you and you will learn from their feedback.