

# Connecting Play and Learning

As early educators, we observe play often and see children making connections to a variety of learning skills and concepts. What we truly see is that play and learning are interwoven. To support and discover children’s learning through play, we need to “unweave” the threads of play and become familiar with what to look for.

## Unweaving play and learning

We can unweave the threads of play and learning by observing and questioning. When we watch children’s play closely, we see what at first appears to be “just play” is actually intense, focused work: work similar to that of scientists, researchers, athletes, artists, writers, mathematicians, and educators. We see studying, analysis, evaluation, manipulations, dissections, constructions, creations, problem solving, sharing of information, expressions, communications, relationships, and the list goes on! Play is the way children connect to vast amounts of learning.

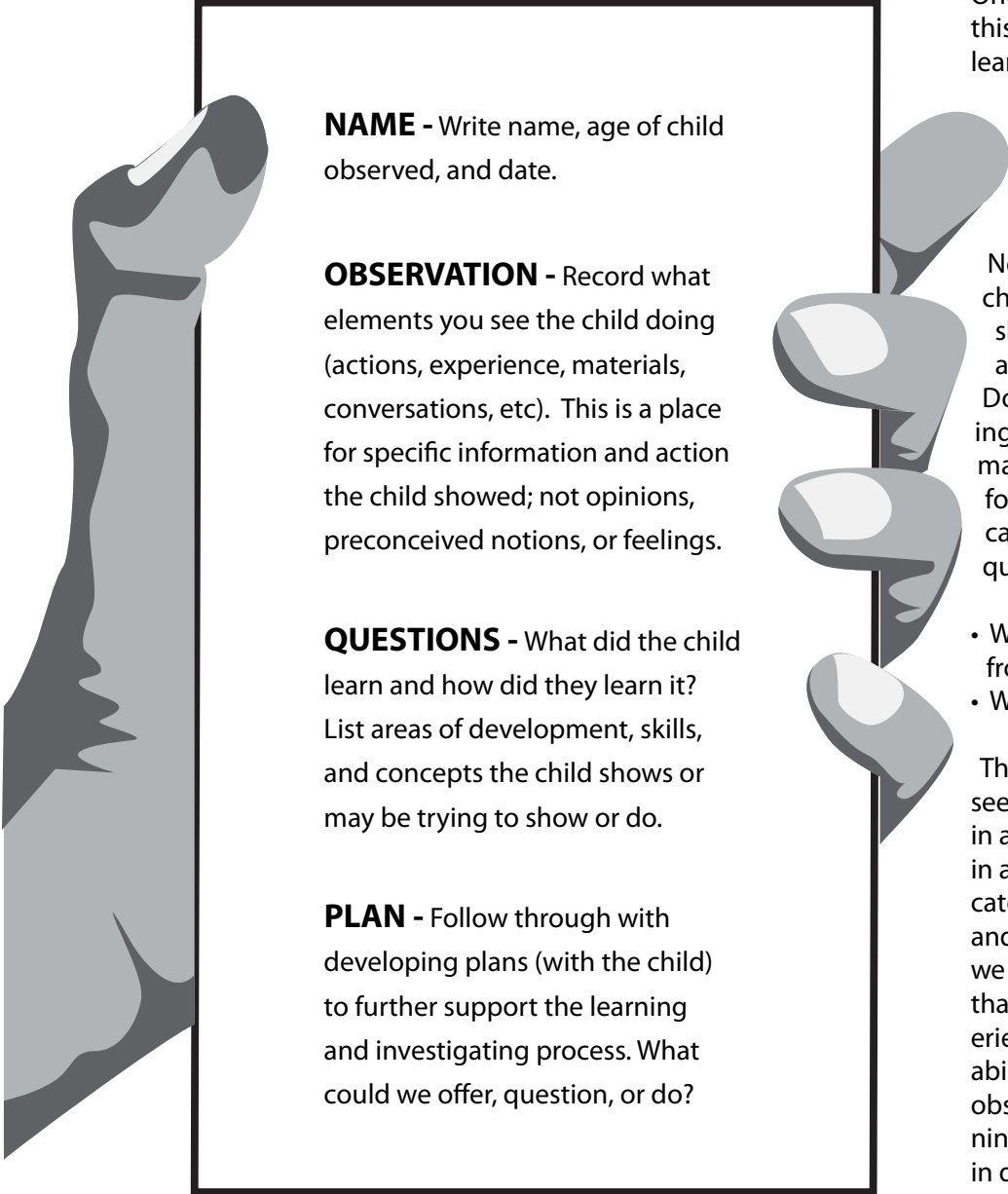
Basic child development falls under general areas:	
<b>Cognitive</b>	The way a child thinks and learns over time; memory, science, math, problem solving.
<b>Social and emotional</b>	How a child learns to get along with others and express feelings.
<b>Physical</b>	How a child’s body grows over time and uses small muscles and large muscles.
<b>Language</b>	How a child learns to speak, listen, write, and read.



**Tip:** As well as tapping into basic child development to understand how a child learns, we must also tap into each child’s personal development. Consider the child’s personal overall background: culture, family, learning style, temperament, socio-economic background, and age (general milestones in development for the child’s age).

## More unweaving

Practice the unweaving of play by recording the actions you see during play. It may help to create an observation form or to take notes on paper that show areas such as the following:



**NAME** - Write name, age of child observed, and date.

**OBSERVATION** - Record what elements you see the child doing (actions, experience, materials, conversations, etc). This is a place for specific information and action the child showed; not opinions, preconceived notions, or feelings.

**QUESTIONS** - What did the child learn and how did they learn it? List areas of development, skills, and concepts the child shows or may be trying to show or do.

**PLAN** - Follow through with developing plans (with the child) to further support the learning and investigating process. What could we offer, question, or do?

## Threads to learning

Weaving and unweaving the connections of learning and play brings us vital information to support each child and the learning process itself. Once we become used to thinking this way, the process of connecting learning and play becomes familiar.

Through this process, we develop methods to better understanding each child and what he may need.

Not only should we consider what children learn through play, but we should also question the materials, areas, and experiences we offer. Doing so allows us to offer meaningful experiences and quality play materials for the children we care for. Try walking around your child care environment and asking these questions:

- What might children learn from these?
- Why are we offering these?

Through the learning process we see what and how children learn, in areas of development, and also in areas that may be difficult to categorize, such as self-regulation and compassion. We see changes we may need to make and directions that may lead to wonderful discoveries. We see growth in the child's abilities and in our own. Through observing, questioning, and planning, we gain immense experience in discovering the connections in learning and play.

PENNSSTATE



College of Agricultural Sciences  
Cooperative Extension

Dr. James E. Van Horn, CFLE, Better Kid Care Program Director

Developed by Christine Belinda, Penn State Better Kid Care Program  
253 Easterly Parkway, State College, PA 16801 • Phone: 1-800-452-9108 • Website: [betterkidcare.psu.edu](http://betterkidcare.psu.edu)

Supported by funds from the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare, Office of Child Development and Early Learning.

This publication is available in alternative media on request.

Penn State is committed to affirmative action, equal opportunity, and the diversity of its work force.

Source: "Early Drop-Off and Late Pick-Up," by Tom Copleand of Red Leaf National Institute, [www.redleafinstitute.org](http://www.redleafinstitute.org)