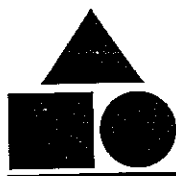


# The Art of Awareness

**How Observation Can  
Transform Your Teaching**

by Deb Curtis and Margie Carter

*2000*



Redleaf Press

# A New Way of Being with Children: An Overview of the Study Sessions



*It takes practice for us to recover our ability to see, or before that, the gift of wanting to see. For so many years we have been learning to judge and dismiss, "I know what that thing is, I've seen it a hundred times." And we've lost the complex realities, laws, and details that surround us. Try looking the way the child looks, as if always for the first time.*

Corita Kent

## Observation Inspires Good Teaching

As you read the following story about Rhonda's classroom, consider the role that observation plays in her teaching. How does her close attention to the children's knowledge and interests influence what happens in her classroom?

As Rhonda sets up the room for her day with children, she brings the notes and photos she's collected from the past few days. She's been intrigued with the children's recent interest in arranging and sorting the basket of buttons she's had on the table. Her notes and photos show how they have been grouping them by color, shape, and size. Some have even put them in order from light to dark shades, and others balanced them in piles from biggest to smallest.

Rhonda decides to add something new today to deepen the children's explorations. She creates an enticing activity, using a mirrored tray that has compartments for sorting a collection of beautiful shells that she places in a basket next to the tray. As she puts out the photos of the recent button activity and arranges a few of the shells by size and shape, she thinks to herself, "The children have been doing such amazing things with the buttons. These shells should add something new. I'm excited to see what they'll do." As the children arrive, indeed two of the button sorters, four year olds Karen and Leslie, are drawn to the beautiful shell display.

Initially the girls work side by side looking closely at the shells, turning them over and touching each one with intent and careful study. Karen notices the spiral-shaped shells and comments, "Look, this one is pointy."

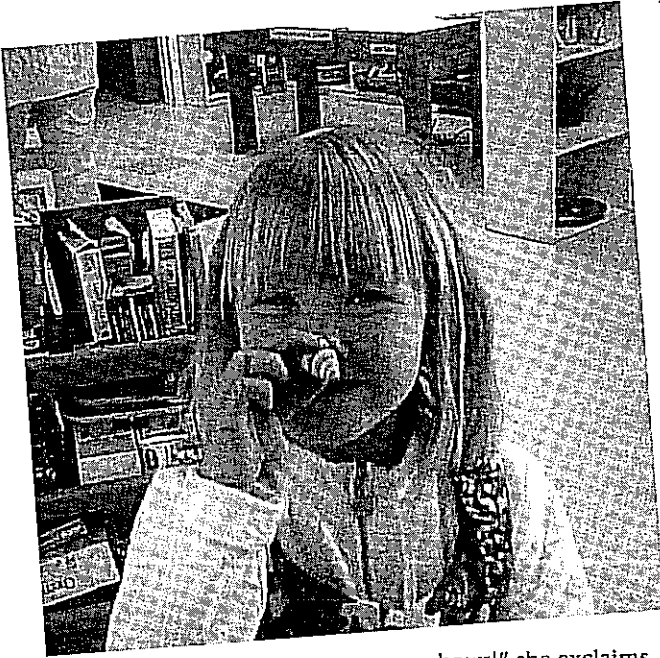
She holds it up to her face, laughing, "It's my pointy nose." Leslie begins searching for the other spiral shells. "Look, I found some more. Here's a really littlest one. They have rainbows on them." She has noticed the small rings of color that circle around the spiral part of the shell. Karen chimes in, "Yeah, look this one has a rainbow too. Let's find all of the rainbows." As the girls find the "rainbows" they place them carefully in a long row across the table.

Rhonda has been watching and now joins in. "You made a really long row of rainbow shells. The rainbows on the shells look a little like the rainbow pictures you make all of the time, the ones with all those colors." Karen's eyes light up with recognition. She eagerly gets a piece of paper and colored markers. "I'm going to make a rainbow picture." She begins to draw her familiar representation of a rainbow. After she finishes her colorful arched drawing she places the "rainbow" shells on the arch, fitting them from end to end. "Rainbows on rain-

bows!" she exclaims. This begins a new series of rainbow drawings that both girls cover with the "rainbow shells."

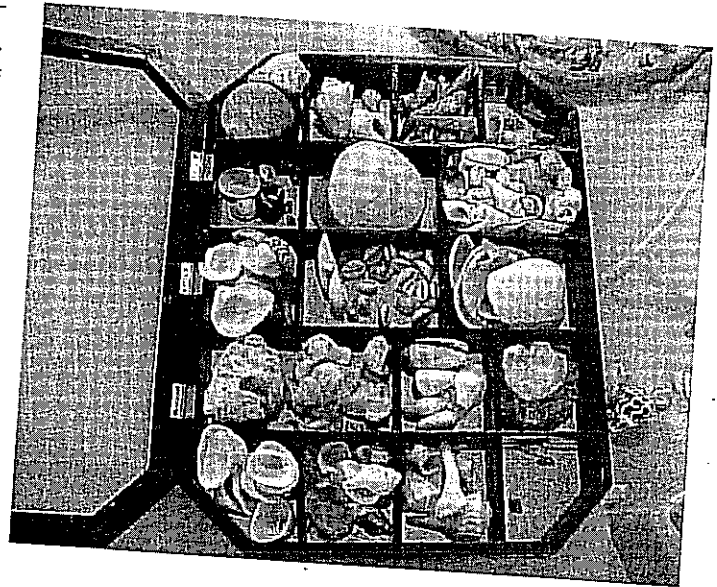
As they work Rhonda takes photographs and writes notes of these new discoveries and creations. Thinking to herself, she marvels, "These children have an amazing capacity to make connections. I never would have thought their classification work would connect to the rainbows they make all of the time. What a great moment; I'm so glad I noticed and offered my observation."

This small glimpse of Rhonda's work with children is rich with the elements of the teaching approach you will find in this book. Working with children in this way is quite different from focusing on the preplanned goals and objectives of most curriculum books. It also goes beyond traditional observation practices in early childhood settings, in which teachers collect data primarily for the purpose of assessment and measuring outcomes. While this is a valid use for observing, it is more limited than what we are suggesting in these pages. In fact, what you see in Rhonda is a teacher practicing mindfulness, flexible thinking, a willingness to take risks and work with an unknown outcome. She demonstrates the ability to move in and out of analysis and draw on a shared history with the children, even as she stays in the present moment with them. This ability helps her use their explorations as a source of planning, not to mention inspiration.



When approaching observation in this open-ended way, teachers must have a view of children as competent creators of their own understandings, deserving of the time and attention needed for experiences to unfold with deeper meaning. Teachers like Rhonda see the richness of these childhood moments and value children's perspectives and pursuits. Rather than spending time planning lessons and filling out developmental checklists, teachers with this approach spend their time observing children, working to uncover their point of view and understandings. They use their observations to guide their plans and actions. Notice how Rhonda does this:

- Rhonda arranges and rearranges the environment to ensure order and beauty.
- Rhonda provides open-ended materials for children to explore. She understands the kinds of materials that engage children—those with texture, beauty, complexity, and possibility.
- Rhonda observes closely and documents the details of the ordinary moments of children's explorations and actions. She uses her observations of children to help her expand on their thinking by providing new materials that invite them to pursue a line of investigation.
- Rhonda offers new perspectives, tools, and activities to support and challenge children's thinking. She makes suggestions and connects present activities to past interests, accomplishments, and experiences to help children go deeper in their work.
- Rhonda sees herself as a story collector and storyteller, gathering and sharing the unfolding events of their time together.



### Why Study Sessions?

Because of the many demands and distractions for teachers, learning to pay close attention to children requires a commitment to systematic study and ongoing practice. This book offers you that opportunity. The study sessions were originally designed as a college course to counteract the experience of observing children as a cumbersome task. They offer you an organized system that will help you become aware of children in a new way. As you begin to practice observing, you will discover that developing the art of awareness is one of the most stimulating and nourishing things you can do for yourself and for children. It will make your job easier.

You will find that these study sessions are not designed as checklists to use or facts to learn. Rather, they offer new ideas, activities, and experiences to help you invent a different way of being with children. Each session will take you through a thoughtfully planned set of activities to help you slow down, become self-aware, pay attention, and think flexibly, critically, and in depth. Teachers who have participated in these sessions have found them useful for their work with

children and in other parts of their lives. Here are some of their comments as they've undertaken the study sessions:

Today I watched a toddler walk by my house holding his grandmother's hand. I watched from my window as he took tiny steps and stopped a number of times to step on a leaf, kick the grass, and point out some berries that had fallen on the ground. Since taking this class I now wonder what it's like to be entertained by stepping on leaves and grass and pointing to bright objects that I notice. I realize how much I pass by things and do not even notice them. I am quick to judge things that I've seen before. Now I have become more curious about things, and I am learning more and noticing more about the little things around me. It is so refreshing. —Lindsey

I feel myself being stretched and growing. As I observe the children play now, I find myself examining their play in greater detail. I realize how I never really watched them before. I feel bad about it, but now I know so much more is going on than I thought. —Judi

I feel challenged but also I'm really going through a learning process. I see now that observing is a process. The quotes have really made me think. The art of awareness activities allow me to visualize what I see differently and give me a different perspective. And the observation practice has helped me become really skilled at noticing details. I see the world around me so differently than I did a few months ago. I see it clearer and with more delight. It's a new beginning! —Gail

This class has taught me a new way to observe, not only children but everything. It is different from anything I have ever taken. I never had to look at things before. I'm still trying to figure it out. It's hard sometimes, but I'm learning so much. —Becky

## Components of the Study Sessions

The first two study sessions, chapters 2 and 3, provide foundational skills that will help you begin paying close attention to the children you work with. The next seven study sessions, chapters 4 through 10, are all organized similarly, and each focuses on observing a particular aspect of childhood. Finally, chapters 11 through 13 will help you communicate the story of your observations to other people in your program, including the children themselves.

Chapter 2, the first study session, is called "Learning to See." In it you will learn to examine how your own experiences influence your perceptions. There will be opportunities to practice noticing the difference between your interpretations and the details of what you are looking at.

Chapter 3 is called "Observing for the Child's Perspective" and offers strategies on how to shift from your teacher agenda toward finding children's points

of view and the importance of their present life. This session will be the beginning of a number of activities calling you back to your own favorite childhood experiences to help you put yourself in children's shoes more easily. As you make the shift to seeing children's actions from their perspective, you will be reminded of how capable they really are. This view of children and the respect and trust it generates will transform your teaching.

The sessions in chapters 4 to 10 are all organized in the same way to help you practice skills and revisit the focus of each chapter through a variety of activities. The consistent methodology of the sessions will help you develop the left-brain skills of noticing the details of children's experiences and the right-brain awareness associated with an artist or naturalist. Detailed observation stories of children are included in each chapter, each highlighting the aspect of childhood focused on in that chapter.

As you go through each study session you will find the following components.

## Quotes about Seeing

*We walk around believing that what we see with our eyes is real, when, in truth, each of us constructs our own understandings of what we are seeing.* —Donald Hoffman

In *Visual Literacy: How We Create What We See*, Donald Hoffman tells the story of a man who regained his sight after being blind since infancy. He describes the great difficulty this man had in making sense of anything he saw. Everything was unrecognizable and confusing, because he had no experience with the world of sight. He needed to shut his eyes to function because all of his understandings came through his other senses. This story is a powerful illustration of how we each see the world through our own experiences, bias, and filters. Having this awareness in our work with children helps us observe with more self-understanding and thoughtfulness.

As a reminder that we all see things differently, each of the study sessions begins with a quote and then a reflection like this one. These quotes come from artists, naturalists, poets, and others who spend time carefully reflecting on what they see. Use these quotes to spark, provoke, or challenge you to see how your own experiences may affect how you see the world, children, and yourself as a teacher. With each quote you will be asked to write about your reactions, thoughts, and the implications the quote has for your work with children. You are encouraged to share your responses and ideas with others. You also might want to continue to gather a collection of these quotes, post them, or keep them with you to help you stay alert to the limits of your own perspectives and to inspire you to see more.

## Art of Awareness Activities

To give children and childhood the attention they deserve, we must bring a different mindset to our work. We need to “recover our ability to see, rather than judge and dismiss,” as Corita Kent suggests in the quote that begins the chapter. The art of awareness activities in each study session will challenge your immediate responses and judgments and move you beyond first impressions and quick labels. Many of these activities are not directly related to children, but come instead from the work of artists, psychologists, and naturalists.

The learning activities offered here do not take the traditional approach to teacher education. They are intended to sharpen the overall awareness you bring to your work with children. Some of the activities will help you practice flexible thinking and shift your perspective. Others will ask you to tap your own creativity and express unique ideas. Don't be surprised if you find your head spinning or if you experience disequilibrium. Getting unsettled is part of the learning process that will make you a more aware teacher.

If you approach the art of awareness activities in earnest, they will help you reclaim your own sense of wonder and curiosity. Children approach the world with clear eyes and a refreshing perspective. They always raise their heads to marvel at an airplane when they hear its engines roar; they let ice cream linger on their tongue and drip down their chin; they stop to investigate the cracks in the sidewalk. Learning the art of awareness will help you approach the world as children do, with openness and the use of all of your senses. Your work will be the richer for it.

## Remembering Your Childhood

Each study session is organized around a particular theme in the experience of childhood. These are themes teachers see every day in our work. To learn more about the significance of this childhood theme, you will be asked to recall the details and feelings of your own experiences. Your own experiences will set the stage for the observation stories that follow.

## Observation Practice

Samples of observation stories are included in each session for you to study the details that hold the meaning and significance of the experience for the children. As you study the details in each story, you will learn how to collect and describe similar details as you observe. These stories offer you a snapshot of the ordinary moments of childhood. Consider them as invitations to be treasured and rich information to help you learn more about children.

Following each observation story you will be offered some questions to look closely at the details of the story to find the meaning and significance of them for the children. This will give you practice in looking deeper, beyond your own filters and teaching agendas. You can do this reflection on your own or with others.

After you've done your own thinking about the observation story, you'll find some additional considerations and questions to explore. We hope this will take your thinking further as you consider this observation in the larger context of childhood.

## Take Another Look

After studying the observation stories, you are invited to apply the ideas in your own setting. These questions and activities will enhance your own practice and study about this particular aspect of childhood. You will find areas to examine, materials or activities to add to your environment, and suggestions for additional focused observations. As you continue to practice using these ideas and skills with children, they will become second nature to you. You will begin to readily value children's pursuits and become more creative in providing for them.

## More Things to Do

Each study session comes to a close with ideas for more self-awareness and development activities. These will help you learn more about yourself, develop your awareness, and alter your attitudes toward children.

## Recommended Resources

There is a list of relevant resources at the end of each study session, with short annotations for each resource. These books can help you study further the ideas from the sessions that spark your interest.

## How to Use the Observation Study Sessions

The guidelines in each of the study sessions suggest ways you can work on your own, with a partner, or as part of a group. Whenever possible, find another person to work with. This collaborative study can be arranged in any number of settings, depending on your use of this book—in staff meetings, college classes, seminars, mentor programs, or informally among colleagues. Working with others will give you a variety of perspectives, more lively discussions, and more in-depth understandings of the usefulness of the activities in each session. You will always find more details, insights, and possibilities when there are more eyes, ears, and points of view focused on an observation.

The time frame for each session can be adjusted, depending upon your individual or group needs and schedule. The activities can easily take three or four hours, with additional time devoted to follow-up suggestions. You will need to find a system that works for you, one that helps you discipline yourself for the practice required.



## Slow Down and Study

With this preview you are now ready to start your journey into *The Art of Awareness*. Give yourself time, practice mindfulness, and enjoy what you discover. At times you may find yourself in disequilibrium because your brain and body have been set in their ways for so long. Wherever you are in your own development, take this opportunity to expand the vision you have for yourself and the children in your life.



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## STUDY SESSION

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2

# Learning to See



*We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment.*

Lisa Delpit

### Learning Goals for This Study Session

In this study session you will

- Reflect on your own mental filters and how they influence your perceptions
- Distinguish the difference between descriptions and interpretations
- Recognize the components of observation skills
- Practice seeing the details of an observation
- Explore flexible thinking with perception exercises

## Reflect on the Quote

When learning to observe, we have to begin by examining our own experiences and perspectives. As you read the Lisa Delpit quote above think about these questions:

- What does it mean to you?
- What experiences does it remind you of?
- How do you think it relates to your work with children?

You can write about this on your own or discuss this with a partner or small group. You might want to use the responses below from other teachers to spark or extend your thinking.

I think this quote means we all like to be right and in control, and that it is really hard to let go of our way of seeing and doing things. Sometimes my co-teacher and I really disagree about the different ways we handle children's conflicts. When we try to talk about it we are very defensive. I think we have to find a way to talk together with the understanding that we all have our own point of view and experience. We shouldn't start out thinking one of us is right and one is wrong. We need to find ways to have more open conversations. —Jill, toddler teacher

It makes me see why people find it so hard to see another person's point of view. The quote implies we have to let go of not only our ideas but also our identity and who we are. I think people probably find that really scary. Wow! It means to me we have a lot of work to do to understand each other and ourselves. —Dee, preschool teacher

## Art of Awareness Activity

**Practice Exploring the Influences on Your Perceptions:** Before we can observe children with a new set of eyes, we have to recognize our own filters, what influences the way we see things. This is the first step in developing the utmost sensitivity in our perception. The following activity will explore examples of these differences in perception. It requires that you work with at least one other person to compare your responses. A group of people will offer you a more lively discussion and more differences to reflect upon.

1. Find an interesting photo in a book or magazine that shows a group of people involved in an activity or interaction together or use one of the photos on the next page. Make enough copies for each person doing this activity together to have one.
2. If you are working in a pair, each person should look over the photo for a few minutes and, without talking or writing, make some mental notes about what



you see. Notice your emotional reactions to the photo as well as the details of what you see. Then, put the photo away, and take turns describing to each other what you saw in the photograph. Each person should describe what she saw without comments or discussion from the other person.

3. If you are working with a group, ask two or three people to volunteer to leave the room. (Volunteers should not be concerned that there will be tricks or judging of people.) Then, ask the volunteers to come back into the room one at a time. Each time, give the volunteer a copy of the photo to look over for a minute or two. Ask the volunteer to mentally note the details of what she sees as well as her emotional reactions to the picture. Take the picture away from the volunteer and ask for a verbal description of what she observed.
4. After everyone has shared their perceptions, discuss the differences between your observations. Use the following questions to guide the discussion.
  - What were the differences in what each person noticed about the photo?
  - Why do you think each of you reacted in this way?
  - What from your background, experiences, or values may have influenced what you saw in the photo?

## Understanding Influences on Perception

Each of us walks around in the world making meaning of what we see, hear, and experience. We have an amazing capacity to take in information and instantly make sense of it. In fact, when we can't make sense of something, we feel uncomfortable and out of balance. When we are in this state of disequilibrium, we work hard to find an explanation that gets us back to our normal, comfortable way of seeing the world.

From infancy we have learned how to make sense of what happens around us. We've discovered that facial expressions and body language give us reams of information about a situation. The tone of someone's voice creates a further

impression. These are some of the strongest influences in how we see the world today. We instantly size up a situation without even realizing what factors are influencing us. And each of us does this in a different way, with the different filters of our childhood, temperament, and experiences.

If we become more aware of our interpretations, we can analyze the influences that come into play. Past experiences play a big part in how we make sense of things. Often we scan a scene to find what we recognize as familiar and then assign meaning from our past experiences. Our expectations about what we'll see also come into play. Consciously or not, we often see exactly what we expect to see. How we feel in the moment strongly influences what we see. If we are tired or cold or just had a fight with a friend, these experiences color our perceptions. And, as Lisa Delpit so clearly says above, our values and beliefs rush in as we interpret and judge a situation.

This photo activity offers a reminder of the differences we each bring in making sense of any given situation. Some people describe the concrete physical aspects of a scene, while others notice the relationships between the people and objects in the scene. Some people describe the details, while others describe the feelings they get from the photo.

The notion that we all see things differently is obvious. Yet, as we go about our lives, we usually assume that what we see is "true" and that others must be seeing the same things we do. When differing views are acknowledged, there is often conflict. We assume that if one of us is "right," then the other must be "wrong." Many of us are uncomfortable with conflict and try to avoid it. However, even if we are uncomfortable, we can recognize the opportunity to expand our thinking and our humanity that hearing different experiences and new points of view gives us.

This book challenges you to develop an active, conscious approach to seeing and interpreting your observations of children. The task at hand is to keep alert and self-reflective when looking at your own reactions to events and situations. Try to uncover the possible influences on your perceptions. Remind yourself that others are likely to have different, yet valid, points of view. Once you understand that you bring a set of mental filters to any observation, you can use this awareness to examine more carefully what you are seeing. The habit of immediately interpreting what we see limits our vision. We forget that what we are seeing is our own point of view, rather than something outside of ourselves. Changing this habit takes ongoing practice and self-reflection, because it is so easy to stay in our own "comfort zone."

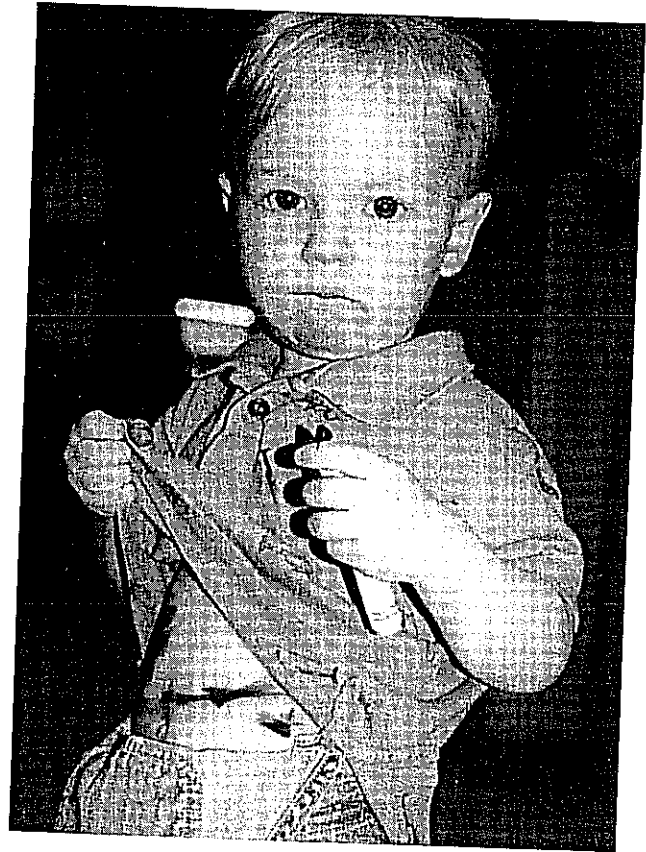
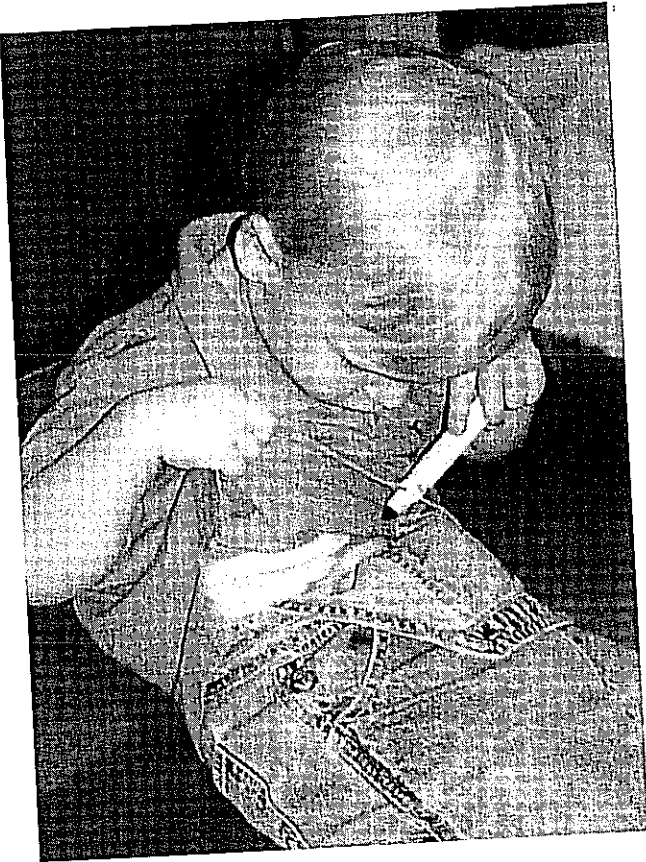
## Observation Practice

The following activities are designed to give you practice with the experience of seeing more intentionally. As you participate, try to let go of your interpretations and the pressures that cloud what you see. Don't think about writing or using the observations in any way. Strip away all of the noise inside your head about a right way to do this and allow yourself to be in the moment for what you can learn.

## Practice Noticing Descriptions and Interpretations

One of the most difficult aspects of learning to observe is recognizing the difference between descriptions and interpretations. Here is an activity you can practice with different photos to develop your skills in separating descriptive data from interpretation.

Look at the following photos on your own, in a small group, or with a partner. Record all of your responses to the question: What do you see in these two photos? Be as specific as possible.



## Practice Creating a Parking Lot

When we observe children, we often have initial responses based on our own mental filters and values. These can get in the way of really seeing children and the importance of what they are doing. It is helpful to acknowledge these first reactions and then set them aside in a “parking lot.” You can write these on a separate page of your observation notes. A sample parking lot for a teacher watching Coe in the photos above might have notes like this:

- He’s making a mess. I better stop him before he gets that black marker all over himself and his clothes.
- Yikes! What will his mom say if she sees I let him write all over himself? I can’t let this happen!

Your first reactions may have merit, and safety issues may require you to jump in quickly to stop a situation. But unless there is immediate danger, it is important to notice those first reactions and wait before you intervene. When you watch closely, momentarily letting go of your first reactions, you can be more thoughtful about whether to intervene, and if so, how.

Looking over your observation notes from the photos above, decide if anything should be moved to a parking lot away from your descriptive observation data.

Examine your notes again and compare them to the list below. Notice that the notes are listed in two columns: one labeled “descriptions” and the other “interpretations.” When learning to write observation notes, drawing a line down the middle of your paper and using these two categories keeps you mindful of when you are describing and when you are interpreting. The goal is to be aware always of the differences between the two.

On a new sheet of paper, draw a line down the middle and label the left “Descriptions” and the right side “Interpretations.” Then use the chart to sort your observation notes from the activity above. Which ones have the details of what actually happened? Which ones have your interpretation of what might have been going on? Don’t worry about keeping the sentences together—you may find that the first half of a sentence was an observation and the second half was a reflection. That’s okay.

DESCRIPTIONS	INTERPRETATIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A child (looks about two) is sitting on the floor holding his shirt up with his right hand exposing his bare belly.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He has a black marker clutched in his left hand and he is making black marks around his belly button.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He is exploring how the marker feels and looks on his body.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• His head is tilted forward as he intently watches himself make the black marks on his body.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He is making some kind of picture or purposeful marks just around his belly button.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In the next photo the child is holding up his shirt and you can see marker streaks across his belly and on his chin. He is sucking his lower lip in.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• He looks like he might be worried that he has done something wrong.</li> </ul>

## Recognize the Components of Observation Skills

To discover the meaning of an observation, you need to have descriptive details to support your interpretations. Detailed information helps you discover possible interpretations and misinterpretations from your own filters and bias. The more details, information, and points of view that you uncover, the more options you can generate for responding to the children.

You can learn to observe for the detail. It requires you to notice when you are interpreting and to look closely for the smaller parts that make up the whole. When you find yourself interpreting, stop and ask, "What do I specifically see that leads me to this interpretation?" For example, while watching Coe use the markers in the photos above, our notes may say, "He is really interested in what he is doing." What do we specifically see that leads us to this interpretation of his interest? What in his actions, facial expressions, body language, or tone of voice are we interpreting as his interest?

Using these observation skills when we watch children reminds us to look conscientiously for the details of what we are seeing. Below is a list of these components, along with a definition of each, and, finally, an example of how to apply them in studying the photos of Coe.

**Objectivity:** Observing without judging. You put on hold your worry about mess and the possible reactions from Coe's mother.

*Coe is holding up his shirt with his right hand, exposing his belly. In his left hand he is clutching a black marker, making black marks around his belly button.*

**Specificity:** Looking for specific details, such as the number of children and adults involved, the kinds and amounts of materials, and the time span of the activity.

*Coe is alone on the floor right next to an easel that has a can of markers sitting in the trough. There are eight other children and two adults playing in the areas around him. He works for two to three minutes making marks around his belly button with a black marker.*

**Directness:** Recording direct quotes as much as possible. Still photos obviously don't offer sound, but observers can hear and record what children say.

*After Coe put marks on his belly, he looked up and around, and quietly said, "No, no."*

**Mood:** Describing the social and emotional details of a situation. These include tones of voice, body language, facial expressions, hand gestures, and other non-verbal information. Mood clues can be difficult to decipher because we have an automatic, unconscious response to them. We have learned to "read" mood clues from infancy, and our memories of those early years don't have language associated with them. It takes considerable practice to learn to use mood cues for descriptive details rather than interpretations.

*Coe works quietly with his head tilted forward as he intently watches himself make the black marks around his belly button.*

**Completeness:** Describing incidents as having a beginning, middle, and end. A complete recording describes the setting, who was involved, the action in the order it occurred, the responses, interactions, and the ending.



*Coe, a two-year-old boy, sits alone on the floor of a toddler classroom while eight children and two adults work and play in various areas around him. He holds up his shirt with his right hand, exposing his bare belly. He has a black marker clutched in his left hand as he makes marks around his belly button. He finishes making the marks, then gets up, looks around, and says quietly, "No, no."*

Saying, "Coe was really interested in exploring the markers," is not a story worth telling. In fact, if his mother is upset about the black marker all over his belly, then Coe deserves your advocacy on his behalf. If you told his mother the depth of this experience for Coe, with all of the details you noticed, you might be able to marvel together at this remarkable childhood moment. It might be easier for her to understand why you didn't stop him. Using observation skills to assemble the details of Coe's story reveals the richness of his activity. As more and more details come to light, you will notice that these seemingly ordinary and sometimes annoying childhood moments offer important opportunities for children to wonder and learn about themselves and the world they live in.

### Practice Describing the Details

You can also practice noticing details in experiences unrelated to children. This activity can serve as a self-assessment of your skills in describing details. For this activity you will need another person and two identical sets of small building blocks or toys.

1. Sit back to back with a partner. Each person should have one of the sets of blocks or toys.
2. Build a structure or arrange a design with your blocks.
3. Describe to your partner the building or design you have made. Your partner must try to duplicate the building or design by listening to your directions without looking at what you have done. Neither of you should ask questions.
4. When you have finished, look together at the outcome. Discuss what worked and what didn't work about the direction giving.
5. Switch roles and have the other person take the lead. Follow the same procedures, but see if what you learned from the first round can help you in this round.
6. When you are finished, consider the differences between the two rounds of building.

Discuss the following questions.

- What happened? What did you discover?
- What success did you have? What did each of you do that helped you succeed?
- What hindered your ability to accomplish this task?
- What else would have helped?

Did you discover that this was a difficult or easy task for you? The task is meant to help you notice the importance of sharing similar understandings and agreed-upon meanings when communicating. Also, the more specific the descriptive details you used, the more likely you were to communicate the directions successfully. You probably found that your interpretations, especially without interaction and feedback, led to misunderstandings. When you collect observations and discuss the details together, rather than operating from individual opinions and interpretations, you have a better chance of understanding the complexity of what you're seeing, which makes you more effective.

### Take Another Look

Once you become aware of the influences on what you see and how easy or hard it is for you to notice and describe details, you are on the road to improving your observation skills. The last activity of sitting back to back and trying to build what is being described also helps you assess your listening skills. Your ability to hear and see clearly will improve with each step you take to identify what shapes your perceptions. Notice how mood cues may impact your ability to be objective. Identify what you need to overcome as well as what you need to sharpen. Here are some further activities to move you along in this process.

### More Exploration of Mental Filters and Their Influences on Perception

Go to an airport, park, or mall with a friend or colleague and sit on a bench together to people-watch. Talk together about what you see, challenging each other to give specific details rather than interpretations. Discuss the differences in what you notice as well as how and why you interpret what you see the same or differently. Write a reflection paper on what you discovered.

### More Observation Practice—Putting It All Together

Try this activity either alone or with a partner or small group to get more practice collecting details, describing what you see, and interpreting your observations.

1. Gather more still photos. The black-and-white photography book, *The Family of Children*, is an excellent resource of photos of children with lots of action and emotions portrayed. Still photos are an easier starting place for practice than live-action videos.
2. To help you make the distinction between descriptions and interpretations, put a line down the center of some paper, labeling one side "descriptions" and the other "interpretations." You might also want to make a separate area for your "parking lot" to jot down your quick reactions and labels.

3. Write down what you see in the pictures and put your words and phrases under the category they belong to.
4. Review the Components of Observation Skills above to practice describing more details from your photos.

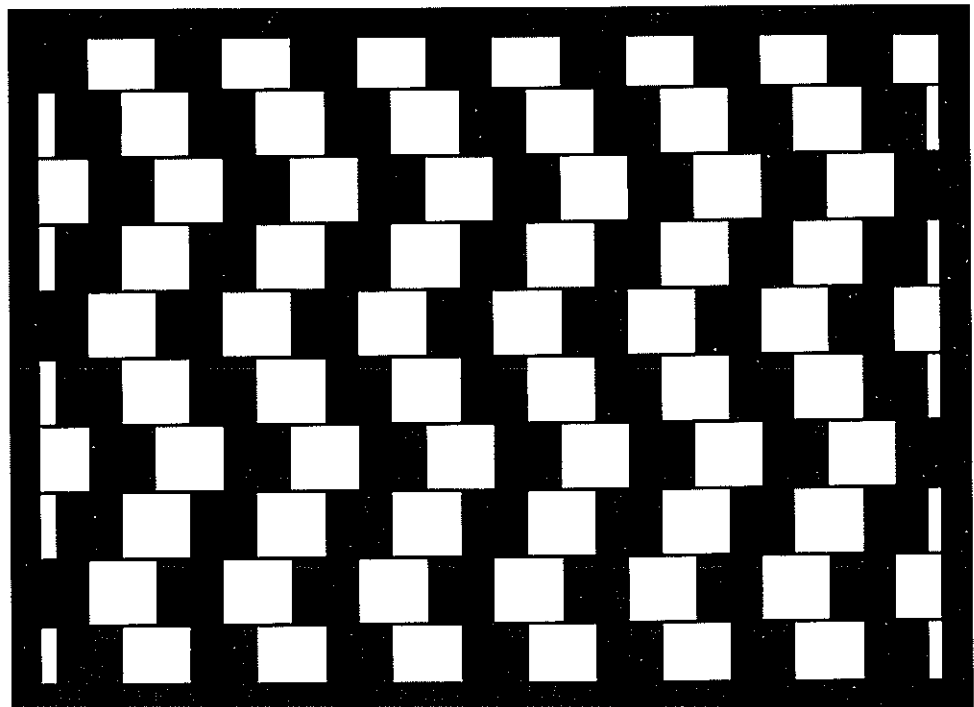
The more you practice these skills, the better you will get at observing. Once you have ample practice with the still photos, follow the same process with short video clips of children. Then practice with children in real life. Remember to take your time to really see children. Don't worry about a right answer or perfect writing skills.

## More to Do

You've completed the first observation study session! You probably will agree that developing this approach and the required skills will take time and more practice. Some of your practice should focus on activities that will sharpen your ability to change perspectives, let go of your filters and "comfort zone," and feel more at ease with the disequilibrium that comes in letting go of your usual ways of looking at things. Included here are a few Art of Awareness activities to try as well as references for finding more. These suggestions are not directly related to observing children, but rather fun experiments that can help you develop flexible thinking—which, of course, has everything to do with your work with children.

### Optical Illusions

Which of the horizontal lines in the image below are parallel? How do you know?



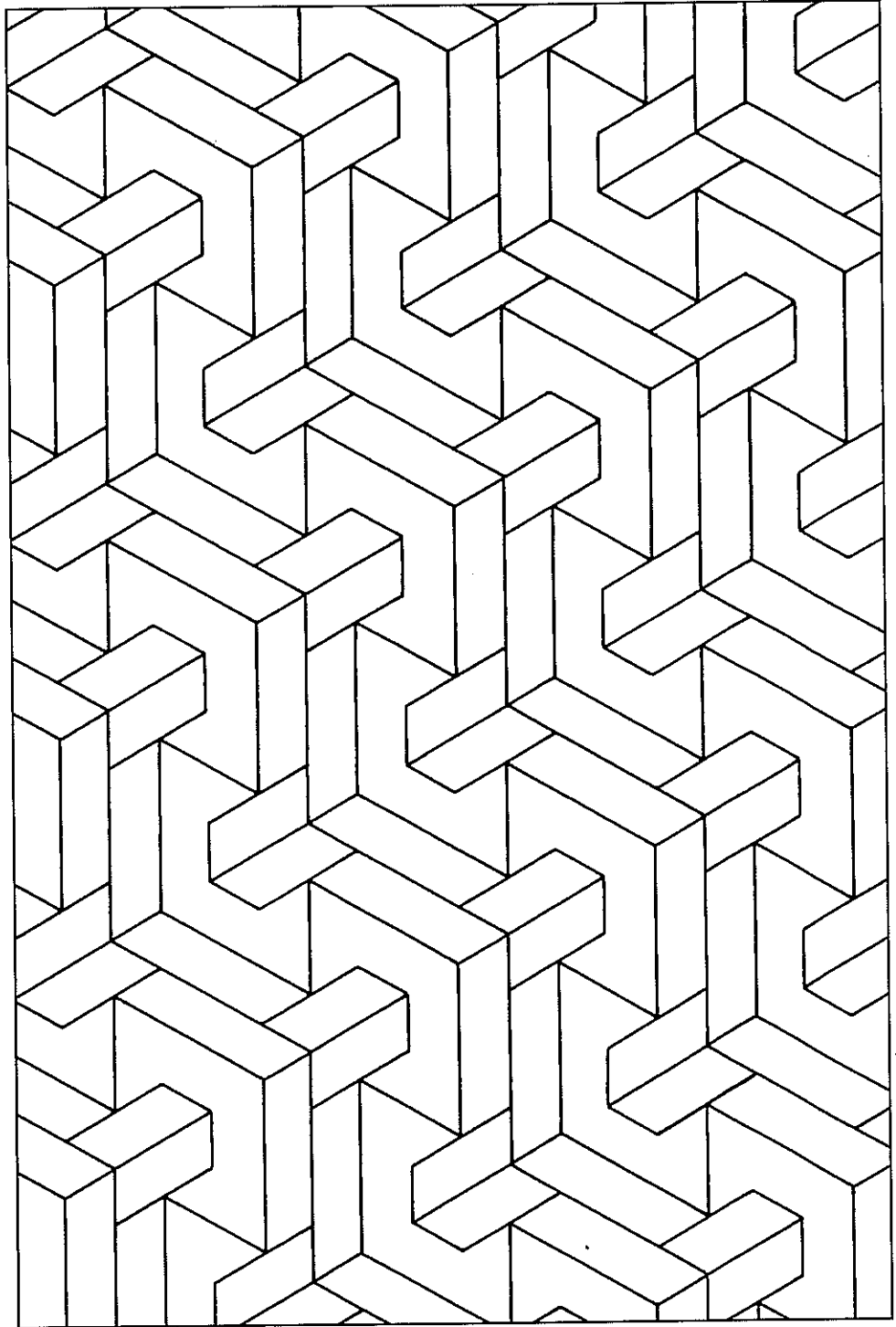


Source: *Great Book of Optical Illusions*, by Gyles Brandreth (New York: Sterling Publishing Company, Inc., 1985). Reproduced with permission. © Exploratorium® [www.exploratorium.com](http://www.exploratorium.com)

Do you see an old woman or a young one in this picture? Both images are present if you look closely. With effort you can switch back and forth from one image to another. Notice the disequilibrium that happens as you make the switch. Practice switching rapidly back and forth between each of the opposing images until you can do it comfortably.

## Isometric Perspective Designs

Spend some time using colored pencils or markers to color in this design. Notice the changes in perspective you have to make as you work. Study your completed work to continue to practice shifting your perspective.



Source: *Isometric Perspective Designs and How to Create Them*, by John Locke (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1981). Used by permission.

## Magic Eye 3-D Designs

Locate some Magic Eye postcards, calendar pictures, or books, such as *Magic Eye: A New Way of Looking at the World* (Kansas City, MO: N.E. Thing Enterprises, 1993). You can also check out a Magic Eye Web site at [www.magiceye.com](http://www.magiceye.com). Put the design right up to your nose and very, very slowly pull it away from your face. Look through the image without focusing on it. Try not to blink, and you will discover a hidden image that will magically appear. The key here is to let go of the expectation of seeing something. Only when you do this and really look into the design will an image appear. This is a tricky but useful activity to practice letting go of expectations to see what actually appears.

## Spot the Difference/Find the Details

The ability to see details and distinctions does not come easily, nor without practice. A fun way to develop these skills is through the use of spot-the-difference children's books. You can do them alone or with a partner. There are many of these books available in libraries and bookstores. Here is a list of a few favorites:

- *I SPY* from Scholastic Books. There are several of these books available. They challenge you to find specific objects among a myriad of objects based on a theme or a riddle.
- *Look: The Ultimate Spot-the-Difference Book*, by A. J. Wood, illustrated by April Wilson (New York: Puffin Pied Piper, 1992). At first glance the lush pictures on facing pages seem identical; but take a closer look, and discover fascinating differences.
- *Metamorphosis: The Ultimate Spot-the-Difference Book*, by Mike Wilks (New York: Penguin, 1997). This is a much more complex spot-the-difference book. It has illustrations and text to compare on facing pages. Adding to its complexity, the underlying theme throughout the book is the cycle of life.

## Reflect on Shifting Perspectives

After using any of the resources listed here, do some reflective writing about what you discovered. Here are some examples of teacher reflections.

At first try most of these activities make me feel dizzy and give me a headache. But once I work with them I can feel my brain getting settled, and I am able to have more control of the way I shift back and forth between images. It's so true that we don't like to have our views upset. I can see why we try so hard to stick to our own "truths" even in the face of contradictions.  
—Gail, preschool teacher

These activities really made me look at what I take for granted as truth from my own stereotypes. I realize that looking for details is very important, and I should not just assume that I know what's going on at first glance.  
—Nicole, ECE student

## Recommended Resources

Carroll, Colleen. *How Artists See Animals*. New York: Abbeville Publishing Group, 1996. This is one in a series of books about how artists see in order to create their art. The author takes you through questions to guide your thinking as you look closely at various paintings, photographs, sculptures, and other art forms to see and interpret with the eye of an artist.

Wexler, Jerome. *Everyday Mysteries*. New York: Dutton Children's Books, 1995. This is a collection of photos of surfaces, silhouettes, cross sections, and edges. Viewed in different ways, everyday things become everyday mysteries. Here are photo puzzles vivid with color, pattern, shape, texture, and beauty. The object is to look closely to see if you can figure out what the objects are.

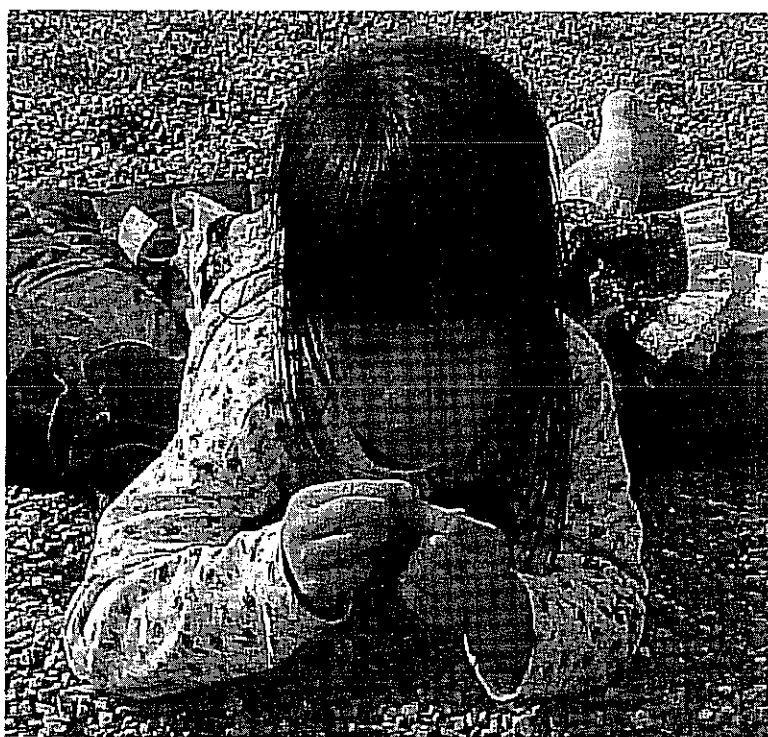
Wood, John Norris. Illustrated by Kevin Dean and John Norris Wood. *Nature Hide and Seek: Jungles or Nature Hide and Seek: Oceans*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987. Test your power of observation. See how many creatures you can find in the lush, detailed drawings of jungle or ocean flora and fauna.

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**STUDY SESSION**

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## Observing for Children's Perspectives



*If you have a child of two or three, let her give you beginning lessons in looking. Ask the child to come from the front of the house to the back and closely observe her small journey. It will be full of pauses, circling, touching, and picking up in order to smell, shake, taste, rub, and scrape. The child's eyes won't leave the ground and every piece of paper, every scrap, every object along the way will be a new discovery. It does not matter if this is familiar territory, the same house, the same rug or chair. To the child, the journey of this particular day, with its special light and sound has never been made before. So the child treats the situation with the open curiosity and attention that it deserves. The child is quite right.*

Corita Kent



## Learning Goals for This Study Session

In this study session you will

- Practice looking closely at the things around you
- Recall and reflect on a favorite childhood memory
- Study the components of childhood
- Practice seeing the children's perspectives and capabilities

## Reflect on the Quote

Corita Kent reminds us that it is valuable for adults to remember the world from a child's point of view. Reread the quote above with these questions in mind:

- What is your reaction to this quote?
- Do you have any recent experiences that you can relate to it?
- What have you learned or been reminded of by a child that you wouldn't have noticed if that child hadn't shown or told you?

Read this teacher's reflection to spark your thinking and discussion about this quote.

To me this quote means this: I go about my daily life rather quickly. A lot of times it involves going the same route, walking the same street, greeting the same people, and passing the same houses, trees, or flowers. As I keep my eyes straight ahead and my mind a million miles away I miss the small wonders of every day, the wonders that really make life precious. If I take off my blinders and my filters, the detail and the wonder will fill my senses and I will truly see! When I'm with children I will observe and take in the small wonders of what the children are doing and seeing, and I'll know I've seen something truly precious. — Sherry, early childhood education (ECE) student

## Art of Awareness Activity

**Looking Closely:** Take a walk around outdoors. Approach this walk as if you are seeing things for the first time the way Corita Kent describes a child's journey in the quote above. Keep your attention on the ground. Pause, circle, touch, and pick things up to smell, taste, rub, scrape, or bend them. Notice shadows, light, and sounds. Choose something you are drawn to and spend a few extra minutes exploring it. Draw a sketch of it and write a description of all of the aspects of it and your reactions to it. Talk with a partner about what you discover.

## Learn to See Childhood As a Significant Part of the Life Cycle

Children see so much that we miss. In fact, once we are adults, we miss out on most of who children are and the value of childhood. Even parents and teachers who spend each day with children often focus on who they will become, rather than who they are in the here and now. If we are to overcome this tunnel vision, we must start to notice and remember the remarkable point of view of a young child and the important work of childhood.

Given the short time they have been in the world, children are constantly demonstrating what they have learned and what they know how to do. Their expressions may seem naive or undeveloped, but in fact, they represent an incredible urge to make sense of the world. The more we learn about child development, and particularly the newest implications of brain research, the more it's confirmed that childhood is a profoundly significant time of life.

As we observe children pursuing an interest in their play and conversations, we have to recognize that these moments are the mortar and brick of a developing life. Being able to witness and participate in this process provides adults with a larger view of ourselves in the life cycle. Our lives are enriched and expanded when we pause to appreciate the experience of childhood.

When we take time to recall favorite childhood memories of our own, we value more fully what we see children doing. It is useful to think back to fond memories of your childhood regularly, for they provide continual insight into what children need from you. The next activity offers you this opportunity.



### Practice with a Favorite Childhood Memory

You can do this activity on your own, with a partner, or with a small group. First, gather your thoughts and recall a favorite memory from your childhood. Use the following questions to help you explore the details:

- Where did this memory take place?
- What was in the environment?
- What were the sensory aspects of this place?
- What did it look like, smell like, sound like, feel like, taste like?
- Who was there?
- What feelings do you associate with this memory?
- What was your sense of time?
- What skills and competencies were a part of this experience that have influenced who you are today?

As you reflect on your memory, and perhaps hear those of others, consider the themes that are there. Most people share some of the following common elements from their childhood memories:

- Spending time outdoors with nature and or animals
- Being inventive, transforming found objects into props for play
- Taking risks, wanting power, adventures, and physical challenges
- Having lots of time to explore without adult interference
- Getting messy, dirty, and sometimes into mischief
- Working alone and with others, solving problems and resolving conflicts
- Being involved in meaningful work, often with adults
- Enjoying celebrations and family or community gatherings

It's not surprising that these themes come up among adults over and over again. These are some of the most significant experiences of childhood. They influence children's development and learning, so it is important for teachers to be able to recognize and value them. One of the easiest ways to recognize the value they have for children is to remember the value they had for us when we were children. As you become a keen observer of the children you work with, you will also see the value of these experiences for them.

Remembering our own childhood helps us keep it at the center of our thinking and planning. It helps us to uncover the child's point of view in the observations we make.

## Observation Practice

Here are a couple of observation stories to help you practice uncovering the child's point of view.

### *Dancing with Shadows*

*Tiana, four months old, is propped on some pillows in a cozy corner of the infant room. Every day about this time the sun comes streaming in, creating a dance of shadows from the mobile hung in the window. Tiana seems content and relaxed, almost mesmerized as her eyes follow the shadow dance on the wall.*

*From time to time a larger shadow looms, covering the mobile shadow as a car or person passes by outside the window. Whenever this happens Tiana begins a dance. She waves her arms and legs rapidly as her dark eyes grow wide and her whole body leans forward with eager attention. "There it is again," she seems to be saying.*

As you picture this moment with Tiana, reflect on these questions in writing or with a partner or small discussion group.

- How does Tiana show us her interest in the shadows?
- What clues does she give about the differences she notices with the shadows?

- What might she be understanding or trying to figure out with this shadow exploration?

Although babies don't use words, they have many ways of telling us what they are noticing and trying to understand. Tiana uses gestures as her language, showing us the attention to detail she has by making changes in her body. Grown-ups often overlook these seemingly small experiences for babies, when in fact, close observation shows us the complexity of what is going on.

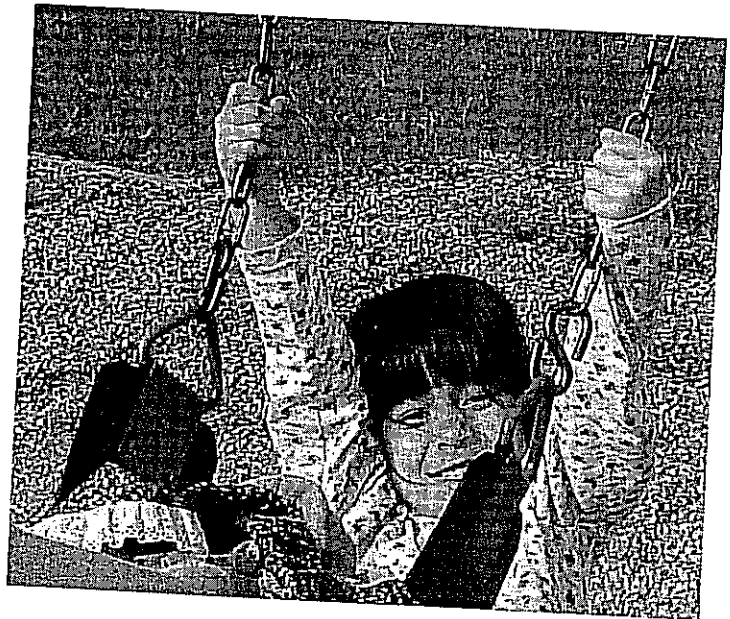
From the time they are born and maybe before, babies are naturally equipped to use their ever-developing skills to learn about the world around them. They are also powerful communicators in calling our attention to their needs and interests.

Some adults have to discipline themselves to pay attention to these small moments. Others are easily drawn to these expressions of a baby's experience. Which is true for you? What might help you begin to notice more?

### *Making Things Right*

*Valerie, who is seven years old, goes through the same routines each day when she gets to her after-school program. First she goes around and greets everyone, addressing them with their first and last names with a monotone cadence: "Rhonda Black," "Pam Verner," "Tracy Custer." She then checks all the doors in the room, and if any of them are open, she closes them. On the days when the lights are off, she turns them on. Once she has completed these tasks she goes to the swings and stays there as long as the teachers will let her.*

*Though she doesn't have close friendships or get involved in activities with others, the children know that she is able to read and write and call her over to assist them. She responds to their requests to write or read to them, but that is the extent of her interactions and then she returns to her solitary activity. Typically this means connecting all the wooden train tracks together until every piece is used.*



Look closely at the details of this story to see what you can learn about Valerie.

- What are some consistent patterns in her behavior?
- What is she good at?
- What does she seem to enjoy?
- What can you say about her relationships with others?

Do some reflective writing or discussing to explore Valerie's capabilities and perspectives.

Valerie has been diagnosed as an autistic child, but falling back on this diagnosis can lead to missing who she is and ignoring what she knows and can do. While it's true children like Valerie need some special consideration, the starting point for working with any child should be recognizing the way she sees the world and the strengths she brings to herself and others.

If your response to Valerie is one of irritation or a desire to control her, can you transform it to one of curiosity and eagerness to know more about how the world looks through her eyes? What questions might you ask yourself to help you focus on her capabilities?

### *My Life As a Dog*

*José spent almost the entire playtime (well over an hour) being a doggie. He crawled everywhere, across the room, into various nooks, exploring different areas of the room. Sometimes he pulled himself up briefly to a piece of furniture to see what others were doing, but he always hastily returned to his hands and knees to continue his doggie behavior.*

*Initially, a few other children were also on the floor meowing and crawling in catlike behavior. But this lasted no more than a few minutes, and they were on to something else. José stuck with it for the whole time, mostly on his own, but with very ingenious ways of interacting with others. Sometimes he snuggled the full length of his body up to someone's feet or legs. He used a variety of sounds to get attention, and in fact, hold brief conversations.*

*Many distinctive body motions and sounds were part of José's play. He whined, barked, growled, and showed his teeth. He shook his head and his behind back and forth. There were different actions for different people he came across, sometimes offered as a simple "Hi, what are you doing?" or a clear "Stay away from me." When he saw objects he liked or disliked, a doll, block, or puzzle piece, he did the same thing.*

*At one point he truly found a dog friend. His eyes met those of another child, and they seemed to immediately recognize that they were of the same species. They spent the next fifteen minutes moving back and forth across one area of the room with ever more complex sounds and motions bonding them as fast friends and playmates who knew how to teach each other things. They could invent ways of spending time together and enjoy each other's company.*

Use the following questions to focus on José's experience in this observation:

- What is the essence of this experience from José's point of view?
- What does José know and know how to do?
- What is José exploring, experimenting with, or trying to figure out?
- What does José find frustrating?
- How does José feel about himself?

A first impression of José's doggie play may be that he is immature and unable to engage in any significant learning activity. But a closer look reveals how much he is communicating about what he knows and wants. José has found a way to explore the classroom and the range of materials, activities, and playmates it

contains. Though he hasn't developed more formal skills in entering in this play, he has invented an engaging way to include himself. He demonstrates an understanding about how to communicate a range of feelings and interests.

At four years old José shows us he has closely observed dogs and knows the details of how they behave and express themselves. He knows other children are interested in this as well, and this is a way to connect with them. Indeed, he is quite successful in finding a playmate who can meet him at his level and take this play further.

When you look closely and examine the details of their actions from their point of view, you discover how ingenious and motivated children are to learn and connect with others.

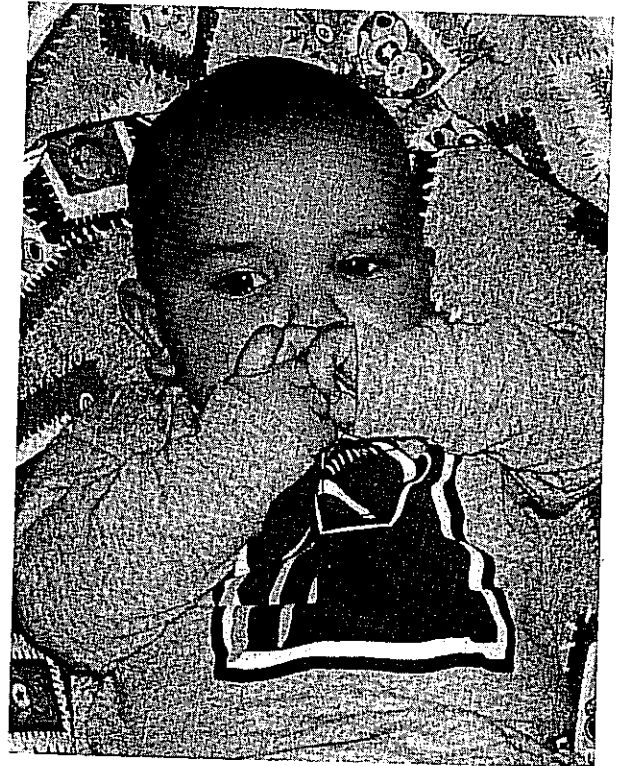
### Take Another Look

Each day in your teaching you have the opportunity to notice children's competence and creativity, even when they are engaging in annoying activities. If you approach your time with them as a researcher, filling your mind with questions rather than labels or judgments, you will discover a new way of seeing them. As you begin to cultivate this mindset, try the following activities to heighten your awareness.

#### Reflect on the Quote

On your own, with a partner, or with a small group reflect on the following quote: What's your view of children? Do you see them as the author does or in a different way?

*Children are capable, competent, curious, and creative. They are natural researchers as they question what they see, hypothesize solutions, predict outcomes, experiment, and reflect on their discoveries. Children are not passive, empty vessels waiting to be filled; rather, they are self-motivated learners actively seeking to understand the complex world in which they live. They are intrinsically motivated to learn and can be trusted as partners in curriculum development. Learning is therefore an ongoing, flexible, open-ended process wherein children construct their own understanding. Teaching is not telling; teaching is guiding discovery. —Lynn Staley*



Staley reminds us of our first task when trying to make meaning from our observations. We must ask ourselves, What are the children in any given observation showing us about their capabilities and curiosities? What are their hypotheses and predictions, their feelings and desires?

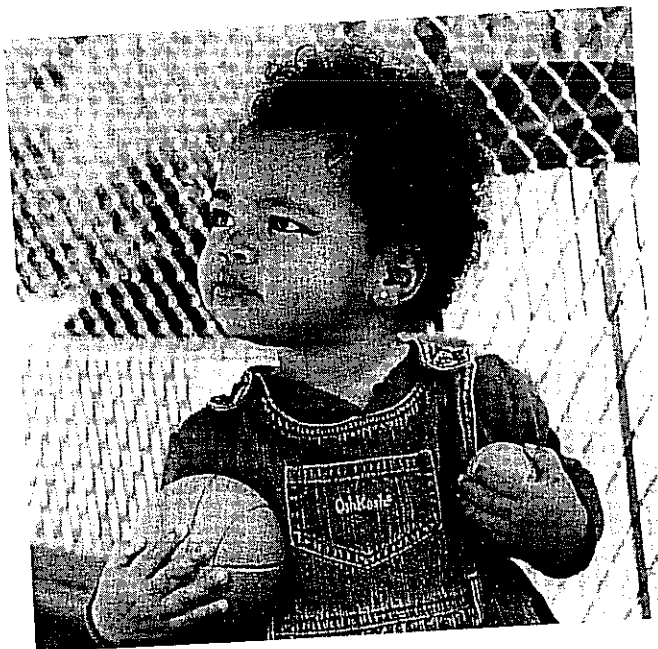
## Practice Taking the Child's Perspective

Observe a child in your setting who is involved in ordinary self-directed play. Use the questions below to help you understand the child's perspective.

- What is the essence of this experience from the child's point of view?
- What does this child know and know how to do?
- What is this child exploring, experimenting with, or trying to figure out?
- What does this child find frustrating?
- How does this child feel about herself?

## More Things to Do

It will take continual practice to cultivate these ways of seeing and being with children. Here are activities to contribute to your development.



### Explore Your Current View of Children

Read the following statements and look at the accompanying photo, alone or with others, and explore how you typically see children. Consider which of these statements comes closest to representing your view. There is no right answer here and in many ways, each of them is true. Just reflect on which view most guides your behavior.

- Children are vulnerable and need protection.
- Children do fine on their own and adults should stay out of their way.
- Children need strong guidance and direction from adults in their lives.
- Children benefit from adults who both support and challenge them.

What are some of your specific behaviors that reflect your view of children? Are you comfortable with how you view children? Is it serving you well and keeping you interested and growing in your job?

### Explore Images of Childhood in Children's Literature

From *Winnie-the-Pooh* to *Oliver Twist*, images of childhood engage our imaginations and emotions. They also can help us deepen our commitment to providing rich childhood experiences in our programs. Find a selection of children's literature to study. Compare three or four books, on your own or with others. As you reflect on each story, consider the following questions:

- What elements of childhood are portrayed in this story?
- How is this experience contributing to the children's sense of self and belonging?
- What elements from this story do you want to create for the children you work with?

## Recommended Resources

Greenman, Jim. *Places for Childhood*. Redmond, Washington: Child Care Information Exchange, 1999. The essays in this book offer a lovely and practical picture of how programs can be places that value childhood.

Greenspan, Stanley I., and Nancy Thorndike Greenspan. *First Feelings. Milestones in the Emotional Development of Your Baby and Child*. New York: Viking, 1989. This book helps the reader recognize the central developmental stages of a child's emotional development and how to nurture it.

Stern, Daniel. *Diary of a Baby. What Your Child Sees, Feels, and Experiences*. New York: Basic Books, 1990. The author creates engaging stories of various experiences of a child from infancy through preschool years as the child might describe them in the child's own voice.