

Sample Observation Protocol for Observing in Family Child Care Homes
Teachstone Training
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- I. Introduction
 - a. This document presents an overview of the information that should be included in a protocol for conducting CLASS observations in family child care (FCC). This document is meant to serve as a guide to organizations that are developing a protocol for observing in this unique setting.

- II. Project details
 - a. Including project details in the protocol is optional for organizations conducting observations in house, but important for outside observers and research and evaluation teams.

- III. What the observer should do to prepare for the observation
 - a. Check the schedule and get directions to the family child care home
 - b. If observation is announced, call the provider to verify that she will be there and that it will be a typical day. Verify the following information:
 - i. How many children are enrolled in the home?
 - ii. What are their ages?
 - iii. When do the majority of the children arrive?
 - iv. Is there anything the observer should know about finding or entering the home?
 - c. Gather materials
 - i. CLASS manual(s)
 - ii. Pen or pencils
 - iii. Timer
 - iv. Score sheet(s)
 - v. Name badge/ID
 - vi. Teachstone CLASS certification card or copy of certificate
 - d. What the observer should do upon arrival
 - i. Plan to arrive at least 15 minutes prior to the start of the observation.
 - ii. Ring the doorbell or knock on the door. Be aware that the provider may be the only adult present and it may take a few minutes to answer the door if she is feeding or diapering a child. Try to arrive early to give the children time to get used to your presence before starting the observation.
 - iii. Thank the provider for allowing you to come to their home to conduct the observation and ask about the best place to sit or stand. If the provider is not actively engaged with children, explain the observation process (e.g., four 15–20 minute cycles followed by a 10-minute coding period; 15-minute cycles if you are observing infants, 15–20 minutes for toddlers, and 20 minutes for pre-K children.) Explain that you'll be taking notes about what's happening—writing is a part of the process of capturing interactions.

- iv. Ask the provider how many children are enrolled for that day. Document this information in the “Cycle Details” portion of the score sheet. Also ask for a general nap schedule for the children.
 - v. Ask the provider if she has any questions/concerns or needs any additional information before you start about why you are there, what you are observing, etc. Ask if she has had a chance to let the children know who the observer is and why she's there (e.g., “to see how our day goes and see the activities we do during our time together.”)
 - vi. Tell the provider that you will try to be as unobtrusive as possible and not interrupt any activities, and that you will gently redirect any children who approach or speak to you.
 - vii. Find a place to sit or stand where you are able to see and hear without being disruptive, keeping in mind that you may need to move around. Be aware that space is often limited and you may feel intrusive.
 - viii. Be certain to complete the information about the provider’s name, the observer’s name, and the observation start time at the top of the observation score sheet prior to starting the observation. The information about the numbers of children and adults and the content and format codes will be entered at the end of each cycle.
- IV. Guidance on selecting the CLASS observation tool for family child care homes
- a. Observing in family child care homes is different from observing in center or school-based programs because children in family child care homes are often grouped together across multiple age levels (e.g., infants, toddlers, and preschoolers). The most commonly-used options for choosing a tool are described below. For more details, including the benefits and downsides of these various options, review Teachstone’s document, *Considerations for Observing in Family Child Care Homes*.
 - i. Select the version of CLASS that matches the majority of children in the classroom.
 - 1. *Example:* A family day home has 3 toddlers, 1 infant, and 1 preschool age child. The observer uses Toddler CLASS.
 - 2. *Example:* A family day home has 1 infant and 3 preschool aged children. The observer uses Pre-K CLASS.
 - ii. If there are equal numbers of children in any age groups, select the Toddler tool.
 - 1. *Example:* A family day home has 2 toddlers and 2 infants. The observer uses the Toddler CLASS tool.
 - 2. *Example:* A family day home has 1 infant, 2 toddlers, and 2 preschool-aged children. The observer uses the Toddler CLASS tool.
 - 3. *Example:* A family day home has 4 infants and 4 preschoolers. The observer uses the Toddler CLASS tool.
 - iii. Alternate between age levels.
 - 1. Aim to conduct 3 cycles per age level if there are two ages of children present

2. Aim to conduct 2 cycles per age level if there are three ages of children present.
3. If alternating cycles, be certain to use the correct score sheet and refer to the correct manual when coding.

Keep in mind that the Infant CLASS may be used from 0–18 months, while the Toddler CLASS may be used from 15–36 months.

V. Start the observation

- a. Complete the needed number of cycles based on the observation protocol. If you are observing with more than one age level, keep in mind that you may need to switch age levels as children go down for and wake up from naps.
- b. Observation approach
 - i. Observers should use an observation style where their gaze appears to float over the provider, child, or group, rather than directly staring at individuals for long periods of time. This will help create a comfortable experience for the provider and children. In addition, if children approach the observer, the observer should acknowledge their presence with a warm smile or a nod. More engagement than this may cause the observer to lose track of the child and/or activities being observed, and potentially disrupt the flow of the observation. If approached by a child, the observer may say, “I’m busy writing now, and need to observe,” or “I am here to work and I need to do my job now,” or “You can go ask [insert provider’s name]” if the child persists in trying to get the observer’s attention.
- c. Observers should also be prepared to move around the room discreetly if the provider and/or the children are moving. This can be difficult during certain activities, but it is important to capture as much information as possible without disrupting the flow of activities.

VI. Ending a cycle early

- a. There are certain circumstances when you may need to stop an observation cycle, such as when children go down for a nap, go home, or go outside (the last item applies only to preschool-aged children). When this happens, you may assign ratings to the CLASS codes based on what you have observed up to that point only if you have been observing for at least 10 minutes. Note the end time of the cycle on the protocol. If you have not been observing for at least 10 minutes, end the cycle and wait for the children to wake up or for more children to arrive before starting the next cycle. If you are alternating between multiple age level tools, you may switch to observing a different age level.

All cycles should occur on the same day. If for some reason that is not possible, a new observation should be scheduled. Any data already collected needs to be discarded.

VII. Activities that may and may not be observed

- a. Observers *will* watch and code nearly all activities, including:
 - Outside time
 - Snack and mealtimes
 - Bottle feeding
 - Preparing for nap
 - Diapering
 - Handwashing and other daily routines
 - Transitions
- b. Observers *will not* watch and code the following:
 - Nap time when all children are sleeping; however, the observation should continue as providers help children fall asleep. Similarly, the observer should start the next cycle as the first child wakes up, as the interactions that take place during these times are important to capture.
 - Bathroom time or outdoor time for preschoolers, unless the outdoor time consists of a structured activity.

VIII. Coding

Always use the CLASS manuals to code. It is critical that observers follow the protocol outlined in the manual(s). In addition to using the face and descriptive pages, observers should consider the frequency, duration, and depth of the observed interactions, and think holistically about the purpose of each dimension. Observers must remain objective at all times.

Coding Process

- Observe and take behavioral notes on your score sheet, sorting each into the correct dimension/indicator.
- Use the face page to consider the definition and dimension of focus.
- Use the low, mid, and high range descriptions on the face page to assign a preliminary or “soft” range for each indicator.
- Confirm the assigned range by consulting the corresponding descriptive paragraph for that range.
- Read the “next best fit” range description, to check for bias.
- Mark L, M, or H for each indicator on the score sheet.
- Determine a score for the dimension, using the scoring guidelines on page 14 (Infant), 16 (Toddler), or 17 Pre-K).
- Keep the overall holistic definition of the dimension in mind when assigning a score.

IX. After the observation

- a. Thank the provider for participating, keeping the conversation short.
- b. Ensure completion of all cycles and all fields on the observation score sheet.
- c. If you are providing written feedback, take a few notes on what you plan to write in your observation summary.

X. FAQs

a. What should I do if the regular provider is not there?

If the regular provider is not present, the observer should ask if the person with the children that day is a regular employee. If so, the observation may be conducted, assuming that the purpose of the observation is to gather information on the FCC. If the purpose is to gather information about the provider (less common), then the observation will need to be rescheduled. Similarly, if the individual caring for the children is a family member or a friend, the observation will need to be rescheduled.

b. How many children need to be present in order to start the observation?

Upon arrival, observers should ask the provider about the number of children enrolled for the day of the observation. Many children do not attend family child care homes full time, and enrollment may vary from day to day. If enrollment is 5 or fewer infant–pre-K children, the observation can begin when 1 child is present. If enrollment is 6 or more infant–pre-K children, the observation can begin when 50% of the enrolled children are present. If the required number of children are not present, the observer should wait in an inconspicuous place until the required number of children arrive. The observer should be certain not to let anything that happens during this time factor into their codes.

c. How many children need to be awake in order to observe?

If 5 or fewer infant–pre-K children are enrolled, the observation can continue as long as 1 child is awake. If 6 or more infant–pre-K children are enrolled, 50% of enrolled children must be awake for the observation to continue. There may be instances when all children fall asleep during an observation. In this case, stop the observation. If you have been observing for at least 10 minutes prior to the interruption, you may code the cycle. The ratings you assign will be based on what you observed during the 10-minute period of observation. Note the end time of the cycle on the protocol. If all children fall asleep fewer than 10 minutes into the observation, end the cycle and wait until the required number of children are awake to begin observing again.

d. How should I factor multiple adults into my codes?

Observing in family child care homes can provide additional challenges due to the presence of other adults in the home. In some cases, an additional adult may serve as an assistant. If this is the case, the observer should weigh the interactions of each adult based on the number of children with whom they are working, the amount of time they spend with the children, and their responsibility for the activities. At other times, however, non-caregiver adults, such as parents dropping

off their children or family members who live in the home, may be present. The interactions of non-caregiver adults should be taken into account in coding only if they enhance or detract from children's experiences.

e. How does alternating between age levels work?

Start with the tool that addresses the majority of children present, provided that they are awake and present in sufficient numbers. An observer who is alternating between ages must be flexible. If the observer is observing Pre-K children and they go outside to play, the observer will need to switch to observing toddlers, as outdoor free play is not codable in Pre-K CLASS. Similarly, , if the infants go down for a nap, the observer should switch to the older age level. However, the observer should continue to observe as the provider prepares the children for nap and helps them settle down. It's fine to observe the provider rocking/soothing an infant until the infant begins to disengage from the provider (e.g., stops making eye contact, begins to fall asleep.) If 10 minutes of observation have elapsed, the observer may code. If not, they will need to start another cycle when the infants wake up. Ask the provider about the general schedule to get a sense of when the infants generally go down and plan accordingly.

f. What should I do if I'm alternating levels and there are other children present who are not in that age range?

When observing with Infant CLASS, only focus on the provider's interactions with infants. When observing toddlers, only focus on her interactions with toddlers. Adults' interactions with children of other ages should only be taken into account if they enhance or detract from the experience of the target children.

g. Where should I go to assign codes?

While some family child care homes have a dedicated space for the children (a completed basement or a large room set aside for child care, for example), there are many homes in which children spend their time in the family's main living space. To minimize distractions during the coding period, the observer should try to find an inconspicuous spot away from the group to assign codes.

h. What if a related service provider (e.g., therapist or other visitor) is leading the main activity?

If the provider or an assistant is leading the activity, then you may observe. If another adult who only occasionally works with the children is leading the main activity, wait until the provider resumes teaching to observe.

i. What if the language of instruction isn't English?

Teachstone recommends that anyone observing dual language classrooms know the primary language of instruction. This allows the observer to accurately record the interactions in the classroom. If the primary instruction is not in English, end the observation and alert the individual responsible for scheduling. If the primary instruction is in English, but the provider uses short phrases with some children in another language, continue with the observation. Make sure to pay attention to non-verbal cues from the provider and children in order to understand the effectiveness of the interaction.

- j. What if the provider tries to provide information about the children?

Observers must remain unbiased and receiving information such as special education status or problems with certain children may interfere with an observer's ability to remain objective. If the provider attempts to provide additional information, politely and gently tell her that you are not allowed to discuss specifics about the children.

- k. What should I say if the provider asks me for feedback?

Let the provider know that you can't give feedback. The scores and notes will be compiled into a classroom summary and will be shared at a later date.

Appendix

Cycle-level information

The following information should be completed on the score sheet at the end of EACH CLASS cycle.

Provider-child ratio:

Number of adults

Enter the number of adults who appear during the **majority** of the observed cycle.

Number of children

Enter the number of children who are involved in the **majority** of the observed cycle.

Activity and Content Format

Observers should complete the section on the score sheets that captures the activity format and content for each cycle. There is a different set of activity codes for each version of the CLASS. The Infant CLASS has Activity Settings, the Toddler CLASS has Activity, Grouping, and Content. The Pre-K CLASS has Content and Format. Details about each are below:

Infant Activity Settings

Napping
Feeding
Play
Diapering
Other

Note that the Infant tool requires that the observer note the physical setting*

Classroom
Outside
Other

Toddler Activity Settings

Free choice/interest area
Routine
Transition
Group Time

Toddler Grouping

Whole group
Small group
Individual

Toddler Content

Lit/Lang arts
Social studies
Math/numbers
Art
Music/movement
Science
Other

Pre-K Activity Format and Content Codes

The activity format and content codes are adapted from the Emerging Academic Snapshot, an unpublished measure used for the National Center on Early Development and Learning research studies (Ritchie, S., Howes, C., Kraft-Sayre, M., & Weiser, B., 2001). This set of codes captures the ACTIVITY in which children are engaging. Throughout each observation, select **ALL** that apply. After stopping your coding time for the cycle, please select **one** activity format and one content code that occurred for the majority of the observation cycle, or that took up the largest amount of time.

- **Whole group time:** The provider is addressing the majority of children in the classroom at once. Activities can include stories, songs, calendar instruction, discussions, book

reading, or demonstrations. During this time, *the child's focus is on the provider*. This may include structured PE activities on the playground.

- **Small group time:** Children are working in small groups that have been organized or directed by the provider. This means that the provider decides what children are to be doing and assigns which children participate, even if the provider is not participating in the group. It is also considered small group time when all the children in the class are doing the same thing, but under the direction of providers in smaller groupings. Small groups can include group art projects, writing stories, collective building, cooking projects, small group instruction, science experiments, structured PE activities, etc.
- **Free choice/centers:** Free choice activities. During this time *children are able to select* what and where they would like to play or learn. Activities can include individual art projects, blocks, pretend area, puzzles, reading, puppets, computers, science areas, etc. The key here is that *children have chosen* their activities. It does not matter if the activity they have chosen is individual or with other children. It does not matter if the activity is with or without the provider.
- **Routines/transition:** This code captures the transitional settings common in schools, including toileting, standing in line, clean-up time. Although children are not directly engaged in learning, they are participating in some activity that is related to daily life (meaning children are not sitting idly waiting).
- **Meals/snack:** Children are engaged in eating, such as during lunch, breakfast or snacks. This code is also applicable when children are enjoying food that the class cooked during a cooking project.
- **Individual time:** Children are *assigned* to work individually with or without provider direction, on worksheets, independent projects, computer work etc. This is coded when this is the activity setting for the whole class or for small groups. The main focus is that *the children are working/learning independently*.

Activity Content

- **Language/Literacy:** Code this category when a provider is engaged in reading books, and stories, or engaged in talking about the author, showing the cover, or asking questions about the book/story. Code when children are: reading as individuals or in groups, listening to a book on tape while looking at a book, involved in a sequencing activity, or recognition of whole words. Code when children are: practicing rhymes that help the children recognize sounds, talk about sound-letter relationships, identify letters, sound out words or practice vowel sounds. Code when children are: involved in an activity or interaction where a provider is *taking action to draw communication from the children to build expressive language* or is actively listening to children speak, by allowing them to complete their thoughts. Code when children are: writing, pretending to write, writing their names, incorporating writing into play (such as writing grocery lists or taking orders).
- **Math:** Code when children are: rote counting, counting with 1:1 correspondence, skip counting, identifying written numerals, matching numbers to pictures, making graphs, playing counting games (e.g., dice, dominoes, Candyland, Chutes and Ladders), keeping track of how many days until a special event, counting marbles in a jar, playing Concentration or Memory with *numbers*. Also code when children are identifying shapes,

talking about the properties of shapes (e.g., how many sides), finding shapes in the room, identifying same and different, opposites, *quantitative* comparing (e.g., big/little, biggest), sorting (by color, size, shape), discerning patterns (red, blue, red, blue), measuring for cooking or size. *Code anything that has to do with the CALENDAR; even if it does not expressly refer to numbers, it is still a concept of TIME.*

- **Science:** Code when children are: identifying and exploring natural phenomena in their environment (mirrors, magnets, magnifying glasses), *working with sand or water* (using funnels, pouring, sifting, packing sand for molds or castles). Includes topics such as health, animals, body parts, birth, foods and nutrition, or class pets. The class may be planting seeds, or gathering rocks. The class may hypothesize, guess, or estimate. The children may be engaged in *trial and error* or experimentation, such as figuring out *how to use* features on a computer or how to solve a problem (such as how to open a box or fix something that is broken). Block play may be included here if the children are experimenting with blocks (e.g., stacking, etc.). Also includes exploration of the senses: smell, touch, taste, sound, and vision. Also includes class discussion of science.
- **Social studies:** Code when children are: talking, reading, or engaged in activities about their world (their neighborhoods, school, the farm, the community workers). Includes talking or reading about trips to the dentist or doctor, going on vacations, or learning socialization skills such as cooperating and sharing. Includes block building (only when the children are building a structure of some sort and NOT when they are just experimenting with size, shape, etc.), fantasy play, dress-up, or role-playing. May include discussions or books about cultural diversity, skin color, different family practices (what different families eat, what holidays they celebrate, family configurations). May include discussions or books about stereotypes, prejudice, and bias based on ethnicity, gender, age, or physical challenges. All religious studies are included in this category.
- **Art:** Code when children are: participating in art or music, whether it be to a direct aesthetic-related learning activity (i.e. learning how to paint) or a learning activity which includes aesthetics (i.e. drawing a flag). Children may be painting, illustrating stories, sharing artwork, making original drawings, using pastels or watercolors, modeling with clay or play-doh, making collages, or making jewelry. Children may be singing, listening to music (double-code with other activity if the provider *purposefully* has music related to the activity playing during other activities), using musical instruments, dancing, or taking part in a play. If the object of the learning activity is not aesthetics, the content should be coded as well (ex: singing a song about activities at the beach should be coded under Art and Social Studies).
- **Other:** write in other activities that do not fit into the group. If none of the other activities occurred, and the majority of the time no activity occurred, write “no activity” here and identify this as the majority.

Additional Resources

[Video blog on conducting live observations:](#)

Blog posts about coding in FCC

[What makes FCCs different](#)

[Observing mixed age groups](#)

[Coding with multiple adults present](#)

[Blog post on where to stand during an observation](#)

[Tips to prepare for a CLASS observation](#)