

Using the Activity Observation Checklist

Summary and Objectives

This lesson offers guidance to trainers on ways to use the Early Learning Matters (ELM) *Activity Observation Checklist*. The checklist provides a systematic approach to observing how classroom staff use an ELM activity plan and support child-initiated explorations that may occur after an ELM activity. The ELM Curriculum was developed by Purdue University for programs serving children from birth to five years of age.¹

The lesson reviews the organization, content, and use of the checklist, including recommended practices for sharing observation feedback with staff. The lesson also offers strategies for helping staff use observation feedback to improve the quality of their support of young children's learning.

At the conclusion of this lesson, you will have a stronger understanding of:

- the purpose of the *ELM Activity Observation Checklist*, including connections between checklist items and the curriculum's approach to early learning;
- recommended practices for using the checklist to observe an ELM activity and productively share observation feedback with the observed staff member(s); and
- ways to facilitate staff members' use of observation information to improve their support of children's learning.

This lesson is to be pursued **after** becoming familiar with the *ELM Curriculum User Guide* that pertains to the ages of children in rooms you are supporting. It is valuable to review the sample of a completed checklist in the *User Guide* appendix and an example of a coaching session with a staff member based on the observation feedback.² The lesson builds on essential information in the *User Guides*. It is not a *User Guide* substitute.

REVIEW**Purpose of Checklist**

Research suggests that providing expert feedback on a caregiver's use of a curriculum, including interactions with children, can lead to meaningful improvements in the quality of children's learning experiences and outcomes.³ Feedback on staff actions in a classroom typically occurs through coaching or consultation in which a curriculum specialist meets with a staff member to review and discuss observation of the staff member's classroom behaviors. A valuable aspect of this arrangement is the opportunity to individualize information and discussion with a staff member.⁴

The *ELM Activity Observation Checklist* was developed for the purpose of supporting trainers

in helping direct care staff effectively use the ELM Curriculum. The benefits of any curriculum or best practice require implementation that appropriately adheres to curriculum or practice guidelines. Observation of practices is a time-honored way to identify strengths in how a curriculum or practice is used, and to consider possible improvements in quality of implementation. Information secured during a focused observation of staff practice can also be a basis of self-reflection on current and desired practices.

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The checklist focuses on staff uses of activity plans, which are at the heart of the ELM Curriculum. Checklist items reflect the curriculum's guidance⁵ for using ELM activity plans and supporting learning during child-initiated play. Information from the observation checklist is intended to be used in an individualized coaching session with the observed staff member. The checklist may also be used by direct care staff for strengthening their understanding of best practices in supporting early learning.

The ELM Curriculum recognizes that learning activities do not happen in isolation of other quality dimensions of a room and center. A room's physical arrangement, for example, sets the stage for children's social and cognitive engagements with materials, peers, and adults. The [National Association for the Education of Young Children \(NAEYC\) program standards](#) speak to factors that directly or indirectly address the quality of children's daily experiences, including leadership and management, community relationships, and staff competencies.⁶

Organization

There are separate checklists for observing activities for infants or toddlers, and activities for preschool-age children. The checklist for observing an activity involving children birth–36 months of age may be used with a one-to-one configuration or informal gathering. The checklist for preschool-age children is for a small or large group setting, the common configuration of ELM activities for children 3–5 years of age.

Each checklist has 16 items, 11 of which are similar across the two forms. There are spaces for observation notes. Each item has four response options:

- N/A (not applicable): not observed
- No: no evidence of the item during the observation

- Partial: some but not all aspects of the item were observed
- Yes: staff actions or arrangements described in the item were fully present.

There are examples of each response option in both *User Guides*.⁷

Checklist Items

The checklist items are organized into three sections as reviewed below.

Planning and Preparation. Items in this section pertain to the importance of securing materials and arranging space in advance of offering an activity. Space preparation includes removing any unnecessary items that might distract a young child's attention from the activity.⁸ Checklist items also reflect the curriculum's guidance on becoming familiar with a material, such as reading aloud a book or singing a song to be shared as part of the activity.⁹

One item in both checklists offers examples of evidence that suggest staff engaged in advance preparation. Also, an item for observing a preschool-age activity involves a review of a room's weekly *Planning Form* to determine whether activity adaptation(s) may have been planned in advance of the activity.

ELM Activity Use.¹⁰ Items in this section reflect four benchmarks: adaptation(s) of an activity, caregiver use of his/her own words and style, maintainance of the goal and content of an activity, and caregiver engagement with a child(ren). There are 10 items in the checklist for infant/toddler activities and seven items in the checklist for preschool-age activities related to this section.

Items in this section include teaching strategies that are incorporated into ELM activity plans.¹¹ For example, items in the checklist for infant/toddler activities provide opportunities to observe a staff member providing information, such as describing a child's actions or accomplishment; encouraging

a child's communications; and demonstrating how something works. An item in the checklist for observing an activity with children 3–5 years focuses on book sharing practices recommended in the ELM Curriculum, including offering child-friendly definitions of novel words and acknowledging children's comments or questions.

Child-initiated Activities. Items in this section reflect the ELM Curriculum's commitment to offering a coordinated balance of staff-guided and child-initiated activities.¹² Many ELM activity plans suggest ways staff can support children's play, especially in centers and interest areas.

A center activity for children 3–5 years of age, for example, offers ideas on ways to support guided play with child-size crutches, a walker, or an arm sling.¹³ A dollhouse play activity¹⁴ for an older toddler suggests the staff member use multiple strategies, such as the following, to initiate and sustain interaction with the toddler without directing the play:

- describe the toddler's actions,
- invite the toddler to tell about his/her ideas or what he/she is doing,
- repeat and extend the toddler's words, and
- join the play with an item the toddler offers and/or in ways the toddler suggests.

Checklist items in this section offer an opportunity to observe the extent to which direct care staff support child-initiated play, including guided play that may occur as part of a center or interest area. Item #14 in both checklists, for example, suggests the staff member ask questions or offer suggestions directly related to a child's interests or actions without directing the activity.

Observing with the Checklist

Four major considerations in using the checklist to observe a caregiver's practices are described below.

Preparing to Observe. Use of the *ELM Activity Observation Checklist* begins with familiarity with all of the checklist items. This enables observation time to be devoted to observing rather than reviewing the checklist form.

The staff member who is to be observed should also be familiar with checklist items that will guide the observer's visit to his/her classroom. Transparency in the observation process can build and support trust in the relationship between trainer and caregiver.

Use of the checklist also begins with a careful reading or review of the activity plan to be observed. An observer should be as familiar with the activity plan as the staff member who is to implement the activity. This means, for example, reading a book that is featured in the activity and paying attention to a plan's suggestions for how to share the book with children. A well-conducted observation also involves advance familiarity with a plan's goal, materials, teaching strategies, scaffolding tips, and other adaptation suggestions.¹⁵ A trainer may wish to use a copy of the activity plan for taking notes during the observation as a supplement to notes written on the observation checklist form.

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It is beneficial to review the record of a prior observation(s) of the staff member whose practices are to be observed. Discussion of a previous observation may have led to a practice improvement goal that could be considered in the forthcoming observation. For example, a caregiver may have a goal of engaging in more responsive interactions with children during an activity. A caregiver's progress with this goal could be monitored during a forthcoming observation.

As noted previously, a checklist item (#3) in the observation form for preschool-age children

suggests looking at the room's *Planning Form* for possible planned adaptations of an activity.

Scheduling the Observation. The observation should be scheduled at a time when an ELM activity is typically offered, and at a time that respects the schedules of trainer and direct care staff. An activity should not be offered for the purpose of conducting an observation. Flexibility in when an observation visit occurs is important, especially in infant/toddler rooms where schedules can be more fluid in response to children's routines and their responses to the day.

The ELM Curriculum urges direct care staff to pursue an appropriately supportive (versus hands-off) role in children's play. For this reason, it is valuable to devote at least 15 minutes of the observation visit to a child-initiated activity. This may occur prior to or after an ELM activity.

Conducting the Observation. We recommend the observer occupy a unobtrusive spot in the room that also enables the staff member's voice to be easily heard and facial expressions and visual attention to be readily observed. It is fine to move around during observation. A caregiver may shift his/her physical position, especially during children's play.

Include notes on the checklist form that illustrate your decisions along with response options. This principle applies to all response options, not "no" or "partial" only. Notes should reflect objective descriptions of caregiver actions. Most likely the notes will contribute in important ways to your discussion of the observation with the staff member.

Frequency of Observations. The frequency of observation is a matter of program policy. The ELM Curriculum recommends observing a staff member with the *ELM Activity Observation Checklist* at least once a month. The activity focus of an observation should vary across areas promoted by the curriculum. A staff member may find activities in some areas to be more challenging to implement than activities in other areas. Observing

a staff member in 1–2 areas only may provide an incomplete picture of overall skill in supporting children's learning.

Sharing Observation Feedback

A coaching session should be scheduled with the observed staff member soon after the observation visit, when memories of what happened are reasonably fresh. The observer is encouraged to share information on the observation form objectively, without any speculation about a caregiver's intent or thinking during the time of the observation. One strategy is to talk about each checklist item and corresponding notes in the order in which they appear on the checklist form. Another strategy is to begin with items that are of greatest interest to the caregiver, and then cycle back to other items. All items should be discussed.

Two types of feedback are shared and discussed with a staff member: positive feedback and constructive feedback.¹⁶ Positive feedback recognizes staff for effective practices, especially teaching strategies and practices encouraged in the ELM Curriculum. Constructive feedback identifies ways to strengthen a practice or approach to working with a child(ren).

One way to initiate discussion of positive feedback is to ask the staff member what he/she thought was the best part(s) of the activity. The staff member may include mention of a practice he/she wished had gone differently as part of discussing what went well. If this happens, it is valuable to nudge for a more complete discussion of positive feedback to ensure that (1) the staff member is recognized for good work, and (2) subsequent discussion of possible improvements occurs within the context of fully acknowledged positive effort.

Discussion of constructive feedback can be initiated by asking the staff member to talk about aspects of the activity that he/she would like to do differently next time or by reviewing checklist items that have a "no" or "partial" response. If a caregiver

describes what he/she would like to do differently, make explicit connections between checklist items and plans for practice improvement. Ensure that checklist items with a “no” or “partial” response are incorporated into discussion of constructive feedback.

It is helpful to invite staff to describe reasons for a specific action(s), including taking no action. The sample coaching session with a caregiver¹⁷ in an older toddler room shows how it was helpful for the caregiver to tell why she did not talk about where different types of clothing are worn on the

body. The sample coaching session with a caregiver working with preschool-age children illustrates the usefulness of discussion that led, in part, to a caregiver’s disclosure of discomfort with math activities.¹⁸ Steps toward practice improvement with each caregiver were a result of constructive feedback discussions that included caregiver views of their practices.

Decisions about steps to pursue toward improving a caregiver’s practices should be recorded on the program’s form for documenting professional development activities.

REFLECT

How is the *ELM Activity Observation Checklist* similar to and different from other types of classroom observations you currently conduct? In what ways is the suggested approach to providing positive and constructive feedback similar to or different from your current coaching sessions with direct care staff?

What reactions do you anticipate from direct care staff about the observation process, including the *ELM Activity Observation Checklist*? How might

anticipated staff reactions influence your approach to discussing the checklist and procedure?

What aspects of the observation and feedback process, if any, might be challenging for you to do? What steps might you take to bolster your skills in carrying out this part of the observation and feedback process?

What are your ideas about how to use discussion of observed staff practices with children to promote staff reflection on their practices?

EXTEND

- Plan an orientation training to introduce staff to uses of the *ELM Activity Observation Checklist*. Consider the following as you develop the training.
 - What to emphasize when you describe the purpose of observing staff use of activity plans and support for children’s play
 - Ways to help staff connect specific checklist items to guidelines for using ELM activity plans offered in *User Guides*¹⁹ and components of activity plans
 - What to say about how you prepare for an observation
- What to highlight in your description of the feedback process, including what happens in coaching sessions and opportunities for staff to reflect on their practices
- A trainer’s support of staff efforts to strengthen their practices with young children often continues after a coaching session focused on observation feedback. The staff member involved in the preschool-age example of a coaching session decided to review the section on mathematics in the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: 3–5 Years*.²⁰ The staff member’s goal was to become more familiar and comfortable with how to help young children understand math.

What type of follow-up might you pursue with the staff member regarding this plan?

- Improvements in staff practices with young children are typically incremental, involving small steps rather than big leaps toward a goal. Reflect on the example of a coaching session offered in the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: Birth–36 Months*.²¹ An outcome of the coaching session is the caregiver’s plan to do a better job of connecting a book to what children know, and to remain focused on children’s play (rather than talk with a staff member). What smaller steps might be useful for the staff member to pursue toward these larger goals?
- Some staff may believe that the best way to support children’s play is to provide access to a material(s) of interest to a child(ren) and then maintain a “hands-off” posture toward the play. Items in the Child-initiated Activities

section of the checklist offer an alternative view of staff contributions to children’s play. Plan a discussion with staff about developmentally appropriate ways to support child-initiated play by talking about how children benefit from some of the practices suggested in checklist items, such as commenting on a child’s actions without prescribing what to do and inviting a child to describe what he/she is doing.

- A [NAEYC accreditation criterion](#) calls for a description of how a program provides direct care staff with access to trainings that deepen their understanding and ability to implement the program’s curriculum.²² How would you describe resources for staff understanding and effective use of the ELM Curriculum, including the activity observation and coaching process reviewed in this Lesson?

PRACTICE

Scenario #1: You observe a caregiver implement a one-to-one activity²³ with a mobile infant. The goal of the social-emotional activity is to support the infant in back-and-forth interactions with the caregiver. A toy xylophone and two mallets are used in the activity. Two other mobile infants eagerly join the activity. The three infants want to play with the toy xylophone. The caregiver attempts to encourage the infants to share the two mallets. Eventually the infant initially offered the activity crawls to another area, and the caregiver focuses on the two remaining infants. During the feedback session, the caregiver indicates that she did not know what to do when the two other infants joined an activity designed for one infant. She asks, “What would you have done? Do you think these one-to-one activities are really worth it?”

Scenario #2: You observe a staff member’s interactions with children in a preschool-age

room. The staff member facilitated play initiated by several children in an interest area. The interest area corresponded to suggestions offered in the activity plan. The staff member’s efforts were fully consistent with practices described in checklist items in the section on Child-initiated Play. The staff member shared a book with a small group of children at the conclusion of the play period. You marked the checklist items pertaining to this part of the observation as “no” or “partial.” The staff member used his own words to describe some pictures in the book. But there was no evidence of advance planning for sharing the book and the staff member seemed unfamiliar with the book. No novel words were defined, the staff member kept his eyes on the book rather than on children during the book reading, and there was no discussion of the book. How would you approach the discussion of constructive feedback at the coaching session focused on observation feedback?

Suggested Responses to Scenarios

Scenario #1: Communicate empathy with the caregiver's response to the situation. Sometimes activities do not go the way they were planned. One-to-one activities that involve an appealing material can attract the interest of other children. Discuss with the staff member ideas offered in the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: Birth–36 Months* (p. 63) about ways to manage one-to-one activities. Consider with the caregiver whether any of the *User Guide* suggestions might have helped the situation. Brainstorm other possibilities. Talk about the major benefits of one-to-one exchanges with a child, including the value of individualized attention and responsiveness to child. Review what studies say about the value of back-and-forth interactions, also known as serve-and-return exchanges (see p. 5 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: Birth–36 Months*). At an appropriate point in the discussion, remind the caregiver that infants and toddlers cannot be expected to take turns in playing with a desired item.

Scenario #2: Encourage the staff member to share his reflections on the book reading segment

of the activity. Acknowledge the staff member's appropriate practices during the child-initiated play period and ask what might be done to use these types of responsive interactions with children during a book sharing. Talk about how children can benefit from the curriculum's recommended practices in book sharing (see pp. 17–20 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: 3–5 Years*). Invite discussion of how the staff member uses planning time to prepare for use of activity plans. Acknowledge that sometimes preparation time is cut short. Use a book sharing activity plan to suggest how to maximize a brief preparation period, especially reading the book out loud, determining what illustrations to describe and how, and considering questions and child-friendly definitions offered in an activity plan.

This lesson was written by Douglas R. Powell, with contributions from Kathy Broniarczyk and Chanele Robinson-Rucker. The current version is the first revision of the lesson. For information about the ELM Curriculum, contact: elmcurriculum@purdue.edu.

Endnotes

- 1 Development of the Early Learning Matters (ELM) Curriculum was supported by the U.S. Department of Defense Child Development Competitive Program of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA), grant number 2013-48762-21537 to Purdue University as part of the DoD-USDA Partnership for Military Families. The ELM Curriculum is based in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana 47907-2055. Douglas Powell, Principal Investigator. Shelley MacDermid Wadsworth, Co-Principal Investigator.
- 2 An example of a coaching session with an infant/toddler caregiver is on p. 76 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: Birth–36 Months*. An example of a coaching session with staff in a preschool-age room is on p. 110 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: 3–5 Years*.
- 3 Bierman, K. L., Domitrovich, C. E., Nix, R. L., Gest, S. D., Welsh, J. A.,...Gill, S. (2008). Promoting academic and social-emotional school readiness: The Head Start REDI program. *Child Development*, 79, 1802–1817. See also: Powell, D. R., Diamond, K. E., Burchinal, M. R., & Koehler, M. J. (2010). Effects of an early literacy professional development intervention on Head Start teachers and children. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 102, 299–312; Hemmeter, M.L., Snyder, P., Kinder, K., & Artman, K. (2011). Impact of performance feedback delivered via electronic mail on preschool teachers' use of descriptive praise. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 26, 96–110.
- 4 Powell, D. R., & Diamond, K. E. (2020). Promising approaches to professional development for early childhood educators. In O. N. Saracho, (Ed.), *Handbook of research on the education of young children* (4th ed., pp. 314–321). New York: Routledge.
- 5 See pp. 65–67 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: Birth–36 Months*, and p. 94 and pp. 96–98 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: 3–5 Years*.
- 6 [National Association for the Education of Young Children. \(2019\). *NAEYC early learning program accreditation standards and assessment items*. Washington, DC: Author.](#)
- 7 See p. 74 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: Birth–36 Months* and p. 109 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: 3–5 Years*.
- 8 See benchmark #2 on p. 67 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: Birth–36 Months* and p. 94 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: 3–5 Years*.
- 9 See p. 97 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: 3–5 Years*.
- 10 This section is called ELM Large/Small Group Activity in the checklist for observing preschool-age activities.
- 11 Teaching strategies are reviewed in Lesson 1 for direct care staff and also discussed in Lesson 1 for trainers.
- 12 See p. 8 in the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: Birth–36 Months* and p. 9 in the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: 3–5 Years*.
- 13 ELM Curriculum, 3–5 Years, Week 4, Social Studies, Day 4.
- 14 ELM Curriculum, 24–36 Months, Block 4, Social-Emotional.
- 15 See Lesson 2 for trainers.
- 16 [Positive feedback is also called supportive feedback. Virtual Lab School. \(n.d.\) *Communication and language development: Communication: Coaching and mentoring staff*.](#)
- 17 See p. 76 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: Birth–36 Months*.
- 18 See p. 110 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: 3–5 Years*.
- 19 Reviewed in Lesson 2 for direct care staff.
- 20 See p. 110 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: 3–5 Years* for the coaching session example and pp. 27–36 for the section on mathematics.
- 21 See p. 76 of the *ELM Curriculum User Guide: Birth–36 Months*.
- 22 [Accreditation Assessment Item Number 6D.7 in National Association for the Education of Young Children \(2019\).](#)
- 23 ELM Curriculum, Birth–12 Months, Block 8, Social-Emotional, Option 2.