

Behavioural Observation

Knowledge

An ability to draw on knowledge of the primary processes involved in shaping behaviour and learning including:
learning theory principles (e.g. reinforcement (positive and negative), contingency, stimulus control, punishment)
social learning theory principles (e.g. imitation/modelling, environmental influence, vicarious learning, predictive function and self efficacy)

Planning the observation

An ability to identify when behavioural observations can make a contribution to the process of assessment and formulation (usually when behavioural issues are relevant to, or are the focus of, the intervention)
An ability to identify a specific focus for observation (for example a particular behaviour, interaction or event)
An ability to draw on knowledge of the main strategies used in behavioural observations in order to select the most appropriate method
An ability to draw on information from the assessment to establish when, where and for how long observations should take place (e.g. drawing on information about the settings or circumstances are most likely to elicit particular behaviours, or the frequency of a specific behaviour)
An ability to reflect on one's own perceptual or attitudinal biases and maintain an objective, open minded stance
An ability to draw on knowledge of the ways in which subjective judgments can introduce bias (e.g. where the meaning of a behaviour is ambiguous, or where previous observations of the child in other contexts influence the observer's judgments)
An ability to obtain consent from the child and/or their carer(s) to carry out the observation
An ability to gain consent from individuals or services who may provide the location for the observation

Gathering data

An ability to draw on knowledge of the main strategies used for naturalistic behavioural observation (including their strengths and weaknesses)
An ability to engage family members, teachers and other observers in the process of collecting and maintaining diary records
An ability to explain the rationale for, and procedures used in, behavioural observation (i.e. the need to gather accurate information about a behaviour in order to plan the intervention)
An ability to make use of diary records (a chronological record of behaviour made after the behaviour occurs, or a way of tracking the child's development over time)
An ability to draw on knowledge of the potential limitations of diary records (e.g. consistency and accuracy of recording, observer bias, the risk that unstructured recording will result in extraneous detail)
An ability to make use of a "running record" (a sequential record maintained over a given time, made while the behaviour is occurring and which identifies the circumstances surrounding particular events or activities)

An ability to draw on knowledge of the potential limitations of this strategy (e.g. time, quantity of unstructured and undifferentiated data produced and failure to capture relevant detail)
An ability to make use of time sampling (recording the frequency with which behaviours occur within a given period of time)
An ability to make use of event sampling (recording the frequency of behaviours that occur when a particular event or activity takes place)
an ability to draw on knowledge of the potential limitations of this strategy (e.g. the application to covert behaviours, their inefficacy for behaviours that only occur infrequently)
Across all approaches to observation, an ability accurately to record:
the frequency of target behaviours
the content of target behaviours
environmental factors that may be temporally related to target behaviours

Ability to monitor the child’s environment using an “ABC” chart:

An ability to draw on knowledge of the use an ‘ABC’ chart to monitor the child’s environment and to identify:
Antecedents: setting conditions and specific triggers for the challenging behaviour
Behaviour: a record of target behaviour and any variations in severity and frequency in different settings and contexts
Consequences: what happens after the challenging behaviour, identifying, possible reinforcers (both positive and negative)
An ability to draw up an ABC chart which includes:
a clear operational definition of the behaviours to be observed
any guidance which may be required in order to obtain reliable recordings (e.g. criteria for defining when one incident ends and another begins)
An ability to select the contexts and situations to be monitored, guided by knowledge of the contexts and individuals associated with a greater likelihood of challenging behaviour
An ability to engage other individuals in completing the chart, where required, offering appropriate training and checking inter-rater reliability

Ability to minimise ‘reactance’

An ability to reduce the risk that the process of observation produces significant changes to behaviour:
where the observer is in close proximity to the subject, an ability to maintain an unobtrusive stance and minimise interaction with them
an ability for the observer to locate themselves in a position that minimises their visibility and their impact on the behaviour being observed (e.g. by sitting at the back of a classroom)
an ability to discretely redirect children if approached (e.g. to the teacher)

Ability to maintain an accurate record

An ability to include a concise summary of the subject, context and purpose of the observation:
An ability to record the scene at the commencement of recording
An ability to record information in the order it occurred
An ability to structure the recording by time (for example break the description into 30 second segments by recording the passing of each 30 seconds in the margin)

An ability to record observations accurately, including:
the exact words spoken, where possible
descriptions of specific behaviours
non-verbal as well as verbal communication
emotional content of behaviour/communication
An ability to identify clearly any inferences or judgements within the description by (for example) using brackets in a transcript

Ability to draw inferences from the observation

An ability to ensure that conclusions about behaviour are based on adequate evidence
An ability to recognise where inferences about the causes of, or relationship between behaviours, are being made and to record this accordingly
An ability to draw on knowledge of cultural differences in the meaning of behaviour and communication when attempting to understand the function of those behaviours
An ability to draw on knowledge of developmental and learning theories to help understand:
how the activities of individuals who are interacting with the target child impact on that child's behaviour
how the activities of the target child impact on their environment
An ability to include an account of the child's perspective when interpreting their behaviours or circumstances (e.g. their capacity to understand the impact of their behaviour)

Ability to assess and manage risk

An ability to assess any risk posed to the child or others during the observation and formulate a plan of action with the aim of maintain the child's safety (e.g. if required, intervening and removing an individual or individuals, recruiting assistance from others present)

Sources

Pellegrini, A.D. (2004) *Observing children in their natural worlds: a methodological primer*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates