

Observation and Perception – Module IV

Child welfare professionals are constantly acquiring information through the five senses—sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. They must then organize and attach meaning to these sensations so they become part of a clinical observation. An observation, therefore, consists of two distinct parts: 1) receiving the stimuli and 2) making sense of the stimuli.

1. Receiving stimuli

Sight: The following factors affect vision:

- Visual acuity largely depends on distance or proximity, size (of objects), and light conditions.
- Dimly-lit objects are more difficult to see, especially if their colors blend with the background.
- Slow-moving objects are more difficult to see at night.
- Movement may be noticed from the corner of the eye almost as well as from straight on; stationary objects are not noticed as well from the corner of the eye.
- It is harder to observe effectively if one is nearsighted rather than farsighted.
- Depth perception requires proper coordination of both eyes.
- Colors are not seen equally over the entire retina of the eye.
- If a blue and a red object of the same size are placed together, the blue one will appear larger.
- Weather conditions such as rain, high winds and fog can distort vision.
- Adaptation to darkness does not occur immediately; it usually takes five to 10 minutes for the eyes to adjust completely.

Hearing: The following factors affect hearing:

- The origin of a sound may be determined if one ear is slightly closer to the origin, or if the head is turned when the sound is equidistant from both ears.
- Distance from a sound is judged by absolute intensity.
- Sounds carry over a greater distance at night and over water.
- An object that makes noise appears larger.

Smell: The following affect the sense of smell:

- Substances like gasoline and ether will temporarily deaden the sense of smell.
- Nasal congestion will reduce the sense of smell.
- People quickly become accustomed to smells and no longer can smell the particular substance.

Touch: The following affect the sense of touch:

- Adaptation. For example, lukewarm water will feel cool if the hand is placed in hot water first.
- Abnormal events may produce a surge of adrenaline or induce shock. For example, someone may not feel an injury immediately.

2. Making sense of the stimuli

People differ in their perception of objects and events because they organize and attach different significance to them based on the following:

- Past experience and education of the observer
- Maturity
- Emotional condition (such as stress)
- Emotional involvement
- Environmental conditions
- Training
- Cultural background
- Prejudice and bias of observer
- Physical condition of observer (such as poor eyesight, color blindness, depth perception, and fatigue)
- Interest in the object or event
- Attention span

Improving Observation Skills

It is possible to improve one's ability to observe accurately. For example,

- There are ways to compensate for low light. Stop before entering a dark place and allow eyes to adjust to available light. Keep one eye closed when going from darkness to light and then back to darkness. Look slightly above, below or to one side of an object to prevent fadeout of its image at night.

- Look at a picture of a scene for a few seconds, turn away and write down what was seen, and then compare notes with the actual scene. Continuous practice can greatly improve ability.
- Learn where to look. Avoid being so focused on talking to a parent that you miss the condition of the house. Look beyond the obvious.
- In obtaining a description of a person or situation, try to do so in a systematic way—e.g., describe a person from the top of the head down to the feet; describe a room from right to left; describe an incident sequentially (what happened first, second, third, etc.).
- It is essential to write down or record the information gathered as soon as possible after the incident, since the longer the time, the less reliable the data. Caseworkers should record their thoughts immediately after an interview or home visit.
- Talk to yourself while observing an environment or situation. After mentally sectioning a room into quadrants, say to yourself, “*dishes to left of sink covered with dried food; smells like ‘spoiled milk’; trash can overflowing; floor nearby littered with dried ravioli, chicken bones, and bread crumbs; ants crawling in litter.*” By putting words to the observations, the worker is more likely to remember them.