

**BEING A TEAM PLAYER:
OBSERVING YOUR CHILD IN THE CLASSROOM** (Katie Cooper, 2010)

Whenever a parent expresses concern about their child's lack of progress at school or home, my first piece of advice is to get into the classroom to see what is happening. Over the 13 years my son has been in school, I have learned a tremendous amount by observing him there.

Why do I go into the school? I need to see what my son is and isn't doing there. Like many children on the autism spectrum, he has difficulty generalizing skills to new people, new areas and new materials.

Sometimes he does things in class that I didn't know he was capable of. Sometimes he is not doing things there that he is capable of doing at home. By observing him at school, I can help him generalize skills across all settings: in the school, home and community.

Requesting Permission to Observe

How do parents get permission to visit their child's classroom? Most schools have a written policy about parent observations/visitations. The policy usually includes notifying the staff ahead of time, signing in and out of the school, and picking up some type of badge to indicate you are a visitor. Sometimes they may want another staff person to accompany you throughout your stay.

Before requesting permission to observe my son, I determine just why I need to visit. I look over the Individualized Education Program (IEP) to see which objectives seem to be mastered at home and which have not. Then I ask myself: About which skills am I most concerned? Which teaching approaches would I like to see demonstrated?

I usually deal directly with my son's teacher in setting up the time. I might say "I'd like to come in and observe him doing X. When would be a good time?" or "I'd like to observe him during story time. Would Monday or Wednesday be better for you?" Note that both ways you're not asking for permission; you are asking them when a good time is.

I also respect the teacher's answer. If she tells me that some of her staff have asked for a day off so she'll be shorthanded or will have substitute paraprofessionals in the room, I choose another day. I want to see my son on a typical day.

A Teacher's Perspective

I taught school for many years and I know that there are parents who don't know how to behave appropriately in the classroom. But in my experience, they are the exception and not the rule.

I always make an effort to demonstrate, by my overall behavior, that I am not interested in critiquing the staff or in observing anyone's child but my own. I'm there purely as a member of the pupil placement team (PPT) with the goal of making a constructive contribution to my son's educational program.

If a teacher or a school were to refuse me permission to observe, it would be a HUGE red flag for me. Of course, a parent should cooperate with the overall schedule and routine of the school and abide by all reasonable suggestions as to when to attend and where to place yourself in the room.

The key to being welcomed into a school is to have respect for the staff and to conduct yourself appropriately. If you word your request politely and make your legitimate intentions plain, no school or teacher should refuse you. If they do, ask to see the written policy about school observations or visitations.

If the teacher tells you that your visit will disturb the rest of the class, reassure her that you won't be interrupting. Find a place to sit in the room where you can see/hear and then just sit quietly.

Some parents report that teachers have tried to discourage them by claiming that the child would be upset and distracted by their presence. My son's first therapist from CREC told me, "If it bothers him to see you in the room, then you need to come in more often. He should be able to look up, say 'hi mom,' and go back to work/play."

Other parents have found it worthwhile to observe their children by volunteering in the classroom. Teachers are often grateful to have extra hands preparing class materials and otherwise helping out as needed. Working under the teacher's direction, parent volunteers help all of the children in the class and not just their own.

How to Observe

In order to see and hear what is happening, I have not always needed to be physically in the classroom. Some schools will have a remote camera and microphone set up in the classroom that allows you to watch and listen from another room. Others have observation rooms where you can see and hear what your child is doing.

But sometimes that may not be adequate. For example, my son's current classroom has an observation room with a two-way mirror. But I am not able to see the materials well enough to really understand what he is or isn't doing. Therefore I go in the classroom and observe there.

Four Easy Rules for Successful Classroom Observation

1. Don't interrupt the teacher or the lesson.

If I see something I don't understand, or would do differently, I make a note to talk to the teacher at some more appropriate time. Many teachers are concerned that you're really in the room to judge them and will get flustered if you interrupt what they are doing. That's not fair to the teacher and it's especially not fair to the children.

2. Observe only your own child, not the other children in the room.

I'm not looking around to see what skills the other children are working on or to determine what services they get. I wouldn't want a stranger observing my son for such improper reasons so I won't do it to others. I respect the privacy and confidentiality of every child in the class.

3. Let the teacher know ahead of time the skills you'd like to see.

Often, time is limited so if there's a certain skill I want to see my child perform, I let the teacher know. Sometimes my son will do things for the teacher that he won't do for me. Seeing it done, I

know I can make him accountable for bringing those skills home. Likewise, my son may have skills at home that he's not demonstrating at school. When I share that fact at the monthly meeting, the school staff can then increase their expectations of him at school.

4. Take notes about what you are seeing

I have one notebook dedicated solely to school observations. This helps me share what I've learned with the teacher and my husband. Otherwise it can be hard to remember the important details until the next monthly meeting or opportunity to speak with the teacher.

A Winning Team

A parent has the right to be in the classroom. As part of the PPT team you need first-hand knowledge of what your child is and isn't doing there. If you prepare and behave appropriately, the experience will be pleasant and constructive for all concerned.