ASSIGNMENT OPTION #3: Field Observation of a Child

This project requires you to do a one hour observation of a child (ages 0-12) or adolescent (ages 12-18) in a natural setting, and then write a 3-4 page typewritten report about your observations. You should be as unobtrusive as possible and use a notebook to write down the activities, behaviors, and interactions that you are observing during that time. The types of observations you will be making will vary greatly depending on the age of the child you are observing, the setting the child is in, and the activities occurring within the setting.

HOW TO PROCEED

1. IDENTIFY A SUBJECT. If you have friends or relatives who have children whom you could observe, contact them. When setting a time to observe, keep in mind that you want the child to be awake, alert, and active. If you have children of your own you may use them as subjects, but keep in mind that this will only be effective if you can separate your observation from your normal mode of watching. You want to be free to see things you would not normally notice, and you want to be an “observer” and not a caretaker. If you need assistance locating a subject, contact your instructors. Finally, if you wish to observe in a public place (ie: the mall, the ice cream shop), you may do so. In this situation, you will be observing a group or a stream of individuals passing by you (in other words, do not follow a child around a public place!). Observe and record the behaviors and interactions of the individuals you see.

2. OBTAIN PERMISSION to observe a child from both the main care-giver and the child (if age-appropriate). Explain that the observations is a class assignment for child development, and the purpose is to acquaint you with the types of activities and interactions that children that age engage in, and to bring alive some of the material you have been studying. Some people may appreciate reassurance that this is not a clinical or abnormal psychology class, and that you are not watching for problem behaviors. Explain that you will simply be writing down the activities and interactions that you observe for about an hour, and you will be reacting to that material with respect to what you have learned in class. Also, ASSURE CONFIDENTIALITY. Explain that nobody will be identified by name or identifiable characteristics in your report. Finally, provide the care-giver with the written description of the class assignment from the instructor (see attached).

3. PREPARATION. Before observing the child, use the index of your text to locate appropriate sections that describe the expected behaviors of a child the age of your subject. Focus on: language, cognition, social interaction, motor abilities, socialization, emotional development and gender roles. Your note taking will be much more productive if you have prepared.
4. **OBSERVE and RECORD.** Give the child a pseudonym to preserve confidentiality. Note the following: date, time, setting, age, sex, distinguishing characteristics (dress, appearance, etc.). Take notes on the activities the child engages in, the objects used (and how), the quality and quantity of social interactions (Does the child initiate? Is the child seeking attention? If so, positive or negative? Is the child seeking play? Comfort? Assistance?) How about the interactions with other children? Is the child playing? If so, is it cooperative, interactive, parallel, independent, structured, creative…? Take notes on the content of language, motor development and coordination, and indications of use of concepts or cognitive stages of development (ie: what cognitive concept must be mastered to play Hide-and-Go-Seek?). Write down, verbatim, some of the language interactions or vocalizations. What stage of language development is the child exhibiting?

This gives you an idea of how to make detailed observations of several developmental issues. There is LOTS more you can observe and report! Remember, areas you can focus on include language, cognition, social interactions, emotional development, motor and perceptual competence, socialization, and gender role development. When you are done observing, thank the participants for their help, and try to answer any questions they may have. Remember, they may be wanting to know “what you found.” Remind them that this is just an observation, not a test or clinical/diagnostic session.

5. **WRITING THE REPORT.** Read your notes carefully and think about how to organize the information for your report. Organize the top of your report as follows:

Subject: Pseudonym        Date:
Age:                   Time:
Sex:                    Setting:

Next, provide a general description of the setting, the child’s presentation, the other people in the setting, etc. Don’t go too crazy here, because you will probably find you are short on space. The major body of your paper will be reporting your observations and interpreting through the lens of a developmental psychologist. Whenever possible, you should relate observations to what you have learned in class. Do not simply describe or list what you observed. Interpret or explain what your observations illustrate about the child’s stage of development. This is the most important part of this assignment. These interpretations should be thoughtful and should be applied to as many of the observations as possible. If you wish you may end the report with a personal reaction to the experience.

**FINAL HINTS:**
1. Take some time to organize your notes before writing the report.
2. There are copies of past good papers on reserve.
3. The report should be 3-4 pages long, and is due no later than April 17, 2002.