

INSIGHT | OBSERVATION

What the Behaviour is Trying to Tell You

ABC observation as a service-wide habit, not just a one-child plan. How to move from labels to patterns — and from opinion to prevention.

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"Eric is aggressive again at pack-away" does not help the next educator. A better record gives the time, the context, what happened, and what adult response was used. That is how we move from opinion to prevention.

Labels close the inquiry

When we use labels — "difficult," "defiant," "attention-seeking" — we stop looking. The label becomes the explanation. Pattern language reopens the question.

Label language	Pattern language
Eric is aggressive again.	Eric pushed during pack-away after 40 minutes of deep construction play, before lunch.
She's always difficult at group time.	She leaves the mat within two minutes when the group exceeds eight children.
He's attention-seeking.	He calls out when the educator's back is turned and quiets when an adult moves closer.

The ABC scan

1. Antecedent — where was the child, who was nearby, what demand was happening?
2. Behaviour — what did the child actually do or say? Facts only.
3. Consequence — what did adults or other children do next?

Repeat across incidents. Look for the pattern. Same time? Same routine? Same trigger? The pattern drives prevention — not the label.

FOR CASUAL EDUCATORS

Even one shift matters. You may not know the whole story, but your observations can help the team see the pattern more clearly. Document the ABC and hand it over — so the next educator is not starting from zero.

The professional question

Instead of "what is wrong with this child?" ask: "what is the child trying to manage, and what adult plan would make success more likely?" That question opens the door to prevention. The label closes it.

This article is part of The Practitioner's Guide to the NQF — McArthur's editorial series for the early childhood education sector. For the full whitepaper and webinar replay, visit www.mcarthur.com.au/insights.