

How can we create a language and communication supportive environment in early learning and childcare settings?

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Executive summary

This short practical guide describes the interactions, experiences and spaces that can support language and communication development for all babies and young children in the places where they play and learn.

This resource also describes what is needed to establish, embed and sustain a language and communication supportive environment in any early learning and childcare setting.

Language and communication supportive environment provide the responsive **interactions**, language-rich **experiences** and appropriate physical **spaces** and resources that together support early language and communication development for all babies and children. This is especially important for young children at increased risk of language and communication difficulties but also provides a strong foundation of support for children with developmental differences and for children with English as an additional language.

This guide focuses specifically on aspects of environment known to support the development of language and communication skills.

A language and communication supportive environment self-evaluation tool can be used to identify strengths, opportunities and areas for improvement. Self-evaluation should involve all staff in the setting, should include direct observation and self-reflection and might involve input from external specialists.

Those identifying a self-evaluation tool should also consider wider developmental needs of babies and children in their setting. Areas such as sensory development, emotional regulation and executive function are not within the remit of this guide but may be important considerations when establishing an inclusive learning environment for all.

Nurturing and responsive interactions lie at the heart of any language and communication supportive environment. With this in mind, the following evidence-informed elements of **interactions, experiences and spaces** interact to support language and communication development:

Interactions:

1. Adults are responsive
2. Adults get down to the child's level
3. Adults adapt their language
4. Adults model and label
5. Adults have conversations with babies and children
6. Adults balance questions with comments
7. Adults expand and recast
8. Adults use gesture, signing and other visuals



Experiences:

1. Song, rhythm and rhyme
2. Child-led play involving adults
3. Sharing books and stories
4. Small groups
5. Encounters with vocabulary
6. Considered use of screen-based technology
7. Involvement of parents



Spaces:

1. Noise management
2. Books and stories
3. Labelling of resources and areas
4. Quiet spaces



The quality of interactions provides a foundation for all aspects of speech, language and communication (SLC) development. Concerns about any aspect of interactions should therefore be prioritised ahead of experiences and spaces.

Any change in the language and communication environment will require the active involvement of each member of staff in the setting including new and temporary staff. Agreed actions might be included in the setting's improvement plan and incorporated into professional learning. Staff will benefit from peer support, informal coaching and protected time to reflect on their own practice. The involvement and inclusion of parents is also essential to ensure that all children benefit from opportunities to develop language and communication skills at home as well as in the ELC setting.

How can we create a language and communication supportive environment in early learning and childcare (ELC) settings?

Purpose of the guide

This short practical guide for ELC leaders and practitioners, including childminders, describes the interactions, experiences and spaces that can support language and communication development for all babies and young children in the places where they play and learn.

This resource will also describe what is needed to establish, embed and sustain a language and communication supportive environment in any ELC setting. These elements are essential for all babies and children and especially important for young children at increased risk of language and communication difficulties due to social and environmental factors.

Risk

A risk factor is anything associated with an increased possibility of a harmful event or outcome.

Speech, language and communication development can be influenced by risk factors interacting in complex and varied ways.

Known risk factors for speech, language and communication difficulties include:

- medical conditions
- genetic conditions
- neurodevelopmental differences
- environmental and social factors

Risk factors are not the only thing to think about. Every child grows up in unique circumstances. Parents' ability to provide responsive and nurturing care is a protective factor, reducing the impact of social or environmental risk factors.

What is a language and communication supportive environment?

A language and communication supportive environment can support the early language and communication development of all babies and children through responsive **interactions**, language-rich **experiences** and appropriate physical **spaces** and resources.



Why is it so important to support early language and communication in ELC settings?

Early language and communication development is a critical foundation for children's long-term attainment and wellbeing. Babies' and young children's language and communication development is profoundly affected by the **spaces** where they spend time and by the **interactions** and **experiences** that they have within these spaces.

Parents and carers play a leading role in supporting their child to develop early language and communication skills. ELC staff work in partnership with parents to support early language and communication and to support the home learning environment where help is needed.

All babies and children who attend ELC settings, or who are cared for at home by registered childminders, benefit from carefully planned interactions, experiences and spaces to support their language and communication development.

Children with developmental differences and additional support needs benefit from the opportunity to play and learn in a language and communication supportive environment, alongside more individualised support available from local specialist children's services.

Children with a home language or languages other than English will also benefit from this inclusive and supportive approach.

Strategies and approaches that support language and communication can also be of benefit to other areas of child development, including learning, problem solving, literacy, social development and emotional regulation.

How can we ensure that ELC settings are language and communication supportive environments?

A language and communication supportive environment self-evaluation tool can be used to identify strengths, opportunities and areas for improvement.

Language and communication supportive environment tools are designed with ELC centres in mind but can also be adapted for use in home learning environments such as those provided by registered childminders.

Choosing a self-evaluation tool

Various language and communication supportive environment self-evaluation tools are available online and several have been developed by Scottish Local Authority areas, often with the involvement of Speech and Language Therapy teams. Tools vary in complexity and length. A list of high quality, locally available tools can be found in Appendix 2.

Based on a review of evidence and best practice, this guide the key highlights elements that should be included in a self-evaluation of a language and communication supportive environment. Appendix 1 can be used to support benchmarking of any locally used tool or tool in development.

This resource focuses specifically on aspects of environment known to support the development of language and communication skills.

Those identifying a self-evaluation tool should also consider wider developmental needs of babies and children in their setting. Areas such as sensory development, emotional regulation and executive function are not within the remit of this guide but may be important considerations when establishing an inclusive learning environment for all.

Carrying out a self-evaluation

Self-evaluation should involve all staff in the setting and should include direct observation and self-reflection. A helpful way of capturing adult-child interactions is to use video recording to allow staff to individually reflect on their own practice. A specialist colleague such as a speech and language therapist or equity and excellence lead might be invited to contribute to the evaluation.

Language and communication supportive environment: what does good look like?

Nurturing and responsive interactions lie at the heart of any language and communication supportive environment.

Responsive: the adult notices something about the child, what they are doing, what they are saying or what they are interested in, and makes a relevant verbal or non-verbal response in the moment

Interaction: the adult and child take turns to contribute to the 'conversation', which may continue over several turns

The elements of **interactions, experiences and spaces** listed below are fundamental to the support of language and communication development and reflect evidence informed practice.

Evidence informed practice uses scientific evidence alongside practitioner expertise and experience and values such as inclusion, equity, children's rights in line with UNCRC, the GIRFEC national practice framework and national guidance documents such as Realising the Ambition and Scotland's Play Strategy.

Interactions

Research tells us that babies and young children benefit from both quantity and quality of interactions. Such interactions should happen regularly throughout the day embedded within all types of experience in the ELC setting including daily routines, indoor and outdoor play and transitions.



- 1. Adults are responsive:** Adults support language and communication development from infancy and throughout the early years of childhood, by consistently responding whenever a baby or young child initiates to communicate their emotions, needs or interests in any way, intentionally or unintentionally.
- 2. Adults get down to the child's level:** Being at the child's eye level supports a shared focus of attention and helps the baby or child to clearly see words being formed and facial expressions used by the adult. The adult can be face to face or alongside, depending on the situation and on the child's preferences.

What about eye contact? Eye contact is not comfortable or helpful for all children. Very young babies can't see very far, so it is usually good to get close and be face-to-face for short periods. Toddlers and young children should have the option to make eye contact only if or when they choose to do so.

- 3. Adults adapt their language:** Children are more able to join in with back-and-forth conversations when adults use fewer words and fewer questions and include more gestures. Speak a little more slowly than usual and pause regularly to give the child time to process and respond.
- 4. Adults model and label:** Adults can support language by labelling (naming) objects, actions, or feelings; commenting on what the child seems interested in. By commenting the adult increases the range of contextually relevant words and sentences that the child hears.
- 5. Adults have conversations with babies and children:** By joining in with children's experiences and having conversations, adults can model relevant vocabulary and language. The National Chatting Together key messages for early communication support early conversations with babies and very young children who may not be talking yet. Adults are encouraged to be at the baby or child's level, to use a sing song voice and to listen, watch and respond; paying attention to facial expressions, sounds and wiggles and responding by copying sounds and gestures and by commenting on what is happening.
- 6. Adults balance questions with comments:** Making more comments and asking fewer questions can help to keep a conversation going, especially for younger children and those with more limited language skills. Open-ended questions that match a child's developmental stage, can help to extend their thinking and create opportunities for extended responses.
- 7. Adults expand and recast:** Adults can expand on what the child has said, by repeating their comment then adding words or details to make a fuller sentence. Grammatical errors and mispronunciations are a normal part of learning. A recast happens when an adult repeats the word or phrase correctly, but without telling the child they got it wrong.

- 8. Adults use gesture, signing and other visuals:** Visual supports including gestures, key word signing (such as Makaton), pictures (photos or symbols) and real objects can help children to focus their attention and learn the meaning of new words.

Experiences

Babies and children should have the opportunity to participate a range of child-initiated, adult initiated and adult-directed experiences appropriate to their developmental stage and in response to any identified language and communication concerns or needs.



There is a lot of research evidence to indicate that a combination of adult-led, adult-initiated and child-led experiences can boost language learning.

- 1. Song, rhythm and rhyme:** Songs and nursery rhymes are naturally rhythmic and often feature repetition of words and phrases, emphasis on key words and a slower than usual rate of speech. Babies and young children tend to respond positively to songs and rhymes, with good evidence of benefits for language development.
- 2. Child-led play involving adults:** Children's play that involves adults is associated with improved outcomes for language and social development and other aspects of learning. Shared play creates opportunities for the adult to participate responsively, following the child's lead and using strategies such as labelling, modelling, expansion or recasting.
- 3. Sharing books and stories:** Early and frequent shared reading and opportunities for conversations about books has been found to support children's language development. For bilingual learners this might include having access to books and resources in their home language.
- 4. Small groups:** Carefully chosen adult-led small group experiences such as baking, storytelling and gardening encourage talk and create opportunities for children to express themselves and develop their language and communication skills.
- 5. Encounters with vocabulary:** Adults can help children to learn unfamiliar words when they talk about word meanings and make connections with children's experiences, repeat new words and use varied and interesting vocabulary.

- 6. Considered use of screen-based technology:** The World Health Organisation¹ recommends that children under 2 avoid screen-based technology and advocates for limits and care regarding screen use by older children. Emerging evidence suggests that some types and durations of screen use by young children are detrimental to development.

Adult screen use can create a barrier to responsive adult-child interactions. Older children can learn from some interactive books and games, especially when an adult responsively and playfully joins in.

- 7. Engagement with Parents:** Parental engagement in their children's learning is positively associated with children's social-emotional development and their longer-term academic outcomes. Opportunities such as stay-and-play can provide opportunities for ELC staff to connect with parents, helping them to notice what they are already doing to support their child's language and communication development.

Spaces



- 1. Noise management:** While some environmental noise associated with play is clearly unavoidable, there is evidence to suggest that continuous background music or sound from screen-based technology can be detrimental to the speech and language development of infants and toddlers. Music should be played intentionally only at set times and for specific purposes.
- 2. Books and stories:** There is ample evidence that books and stories support language learning for all children, including bilingual learners. Children should have ready access to books across different areas within the setting.
- 3. Labelling of resources and areas:** Visual labelling of resources and areas using photographs, pictures or symbols, with accompanying text, may help children to identify where resources belong, build their independence, support early print awareness and scaffold word learning especially when adults draw attention to labels and say words aloud.

¹ The World Health Organisation (*Guidelines on physical activity, sedentary behaviour and sleep for children under 5 years of age* ISBN 978-92-4-155053-6)

- 4. Quiet spaces:** Quiet and calm spaces in ELC settings support emotional regulation and wellbeing for many children. Quiet spaces may also create opportunities for children to think and talk with peers and with adults.

Setting targets and reviewing progress

The completion of a self-evaluation provides information about strengths and identifies action needed to build on strengths and address concerns.

The quality of interactions provides a foundation for all aspects of speech, language and communication (SLC) support. Concerns about any aspect of interactions should therefore be prioritised ahead of experiences and spaces.

Staff support and development

Any change in the language and communication environment will require the active involvement of each member of staff in the setting. Agreed areas for improvement should be widely shared, with opportunities to regularly revisit these areas of the audit and to celebrate improvement.

Including supports for language and communication in the setting's improvement plan will create opportunities to review and celebrate progress. In some areas this plan might be linked to local authority and health board led multi-agency planning for improvement.

All staff will need working knowledge of child language development and milestones and how to engage babies and children in responsive and language supportive interactions within play, structured activities and everyday routines. The knowledge and skills around this are described in a SLC Knowledge and Skills matrix available in the tools and resources section of the [National Early Language and Communication Project practice sharing site](#).

Professional learning opportunities can build knowledge and confidence. Training might be provided by more experienced staff within a setting or through a connection with local speech and language therapy services or early education specialists. The Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) online Learning Zone hosts a range of supportive resources including e-learning modules.

Agencies such as Speech and Language Therapy might contribute to training, self-evaluation or improvement depending on local services and agreements in place.

Knowing what to do differently is important, as is understanding why this change matters. It is easier to make changes when we see others modelling these behaviours. It is also helpful to have protected time to think about what we are already doing well, and what else we can try, with opportunities for peer support or informal coaching. Staff should have regular opportunities to talk about how they are working together to create a language and communication supportive environment.

A simple way to support self-reflection on practice is to use video. This [video reflection tool](#) can be used to support staff to create and individually reflect on a very short video of their own interaction with a baby, child or children in the setting.

Local Authorities and independent providers may wish to consider an accreditation process to celebrate success and keep the language and communication environment on the improvement agenda.

Senior staff in settings should talk to all new and temporary staff about the language and communication supportive environment and should provide training and support to help them put ideas into practice.

Reflective questions to support local planning can be found in Appendix 3.

Involving families

Given the central role that parents play in supporting their child's early language and communication, ELC settings must also work with families to build their knowledge and confidence in supporting early speech, language and communication at home.

The National Chatting Together key messages for early language and communication translate the foundations of early language and communication development into accessible child-first language. The posters and postcards, and links to BBC CBeebies Parenting videos can be used to support parents as they play and learn with their little ones.

The Chatting Together messages are available for parents on the Parent Club website.

[Top tips for chatting together with your baby | Parent Club](#)

[Top tips for chatting together with your child | Parent Club](#)

You can also [download posters, postcards and a practitioner guide](#).

Appendix 1

Aspects of interactions, experiences and spaces particularly supportive of early language and communication

You may wish to use this summary checklist to benchmark a local self-evaluation tool, or to support the selection or development of a new self-evaluation tool.

Interactions:

1. Adults are responsive
2. Adults get down to the child's level
3. Adults adapt their language
4. Adults model and label
5. Adults have conversations with babies and children
6. Adults balance questions with comments
7. Adults expand and recast
8. Adults use gesture, signing and other visuals

Experiences:

1. Song, rhythm and rhyme
2. Child-led play involving adults
3. Sharing books and stories
4. Small groups
5. Encounters with vocabulary
6. Considered use of screen-based technology
7. Involvement of parents

Spaces:

1. Noise management
2. Books and stories
3. Labelling
4. Quiet spaces



Appendix 2

Language and Communication Supportive Environment Self-Evaluation Tools

The self-evaluation tools below include most aspects of interactions, experiences and spaces particularly supportive of early language and communication and would therefore provide a good basis for any local self-evaluation of language and communication supportive environment.

Each of the tools listed contains some additional items. Those carrying out the self-evaluation should seek to include the listed core elements of interactions, experiences and spaces. Inclusion of any additional items is at the users discretion, based on knowledge of their individual setting.

- **Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool**

[The Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool](#) was developed in 2012 as part of a UK Government funded research programme. This resource was developed for early years classrooms but has its foundations in robust evidence informed principles which can also be applied in ELC settings.

- **East Ayrshire Communication Friendly Environments: Early Years Self-Evaluation Framework & Accreditation Assessment Tool**

This accredited programme for ELC was developed in East Ayrshire through partnership working between Speech and Language Therapy, Education and Educational Psychology. For access and further information contact [Ariana Thompson](#).

- **Falkirk Council and NHS Forth Valley Early Level Spaces / Experiences / Interactions**

This suite of in-depth self-evaluation tools for early level includes separate audits to support teams look inwards at the quality of their interactions, experiences and spaces. They aim to promote a shared understanding of the delivery of high-quality pedagogy in Falkirk's ELC settings and schools and were developed through collaboration between NHS Forth Valley Speech and Language Therapy services and Falkirk Council's Education Quality Improvement Team (ELC).

For more information about the audits, please contact [Fiona Pascall](#) (visiting teacher – early years).

- **Glasgow's Language and Communication Friendly Establishment Key Indicators Framework and Self-Evaluation Toolkit**

This [key indicators framework](#) was developed through partnership work between Glasgow City Council and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and supports the award of 'Language and Communication Friendly' status to ELC, primary and secondary establishments.

- **Promoting and Nurturing Early Communication and Language in East Renfrewshire**

This set of early years indicators was developed by East Renfrewshire Education Department and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde Speech and Language Therapy and can be accessed by contacting [Katherine Walters](#) or [Siobhan Drummond](#).

- **Renfrewshire Inclusive Communication Environments (RICE) Self-Evaluation and Key Indicators for Early Years Establishments**

This key-indicators framework was developed through partnership work between Renfrewshire Council Educational Psychology Service and Renfrewshire Health and Social Care Partnership Speech and Language Therapy service as a joint initiative to develop the capacity of all educational establishments to support and develop the language and communication skills of all children. For more information contact [Catriona MacGregor, Educational Psychologist](#).

Appendix 3

Reflective Questions

These reflective questions may be used to support the journey from self-evaluation to implementation of a language and communication supportive environment.

1. What are the SLC risk factors that impact on babies and children in your setting?
2. Why is supporting SLC important in your setting?
3. Which children in your setting stand to benefit from spending time in a language and communication supportive environment?
4. To what extent is SLC already supported in your setting through:
 - Responsive interactions
 - Language rich experiences
 - Language and communication supportive spaces and resources
5. Does your setting have access to a language and communication supportive environment self-evaluation tool that meets the recommendations laid out in this guide?
 - If no, what steps can be taken to create or identify a self-evaluation tool that is fit for purpose in your setting?
6. Are there any surprises or challenges for your setting among the recommended elements of interactions, experiences and spaces?
7. How can staff be supported to understand the findings of their self-evaluation?
8. How can staff be supported to put change into practice?
9. Is support available locally from your local authority, outside agencies such as Speech and Language Therapy, or other training sources?
10. Is there existing expertise within your setting or opportunities to develop this? (e.g. communication champion, equity and excellence lead or similar role)
11. How can staff support parents to support their child(ren)'s language and communication development?

Education Scotland

Denholm House

Almondvale Business Park

Almondvale Way

Livingston EH54 6GA

T +44 (0)131 244 4330

E enquiries@educationscotland.gov.scot

www.education.gov.scot