

Observing quality interactions in your early years setting

The development of children’s spoken language underpins all seven areas of learning and development. Children’s behaviour and learning hinge on high-quality interactions with sensitive and skilful practitioners, who play a key role in supporting development and learning, through observing children and deciding when to step back and when to offer support, encouragement, and stimulation for children’s own efforts. Children’s language is enriched and enhanced by back-and-forth exchanges with practitioners who respect and respond to children’s conversation or help to keep the child’s attention on the activity. For example, your interaction might **support** the child to consolidate ideas and refine skills. Or it may be the moment to **extend** the learning through introducing a new idea or resource, some new information or a new challenge, and **finding opportunities for sustained shared thinking**. The practitioner’s role as co-regulator is critical in a child’s development of self-regulation (children’s ability to regulate or adjust their thoughts, feelings, and behaviour). **The number and quality of the conversation’s children have with practitioners and peers throughout the day in a language rich environment is crucial.** By commenting on what children are interested in or doing and modelling back what they say with new vocabulary added, practitioners can help to build children’s language effectively. Any successful interaction depends on body language as well as words.

What cues are your staff giving children?

- Do your staff position themselves at the same height as the children when they are talking to them and make eye contact?
- Do your staff really tune in and listen attentively to children, recognising non-verbal messages and actions by following their lead?
- Do they model language clearly and extend where appropriate?
- Do they give children time to respond?
- Do your staff support children’s emotional wellbeing, by encouraging the child to express their feelings through words such as ‘sad’ or ‘angry’, helping them by naming and labelling how they are feeling?

What is important for the children you are working with?

Using your observations on children’s communication and language development will help you identify how you can support their learning. The success, or failure of an interaction also depends on our personal responses to children and situations. Why can children seem so uncooperative? Why would staff rather spend time with one child rather than another?

We need strategies to help us to analyse practitioners’ interactions with children, to support this. The Start Well Communication and Language Development Service have put together two adult child observation guidance recording sheets to help you monitor the quality of interactions within your setting. One looks at observation **guidance for non-verbal children** and the other **guidance for confident communicators**.

As the observations cover different elements of interaction strategies, **it is recommended to focus on one element at once**. Perhaps start by asking a member of staff if you could record their interactions for a short period (5 minutes), and then using the adult child observation sheet to record what you observed. This would lead the discussion as to what worked well and identify any areas for development? Overtime, you will be able to identify staff’s strengths and areas for development. Adult-child interaction is the basis for forming a language rich environment.

The Ofsted inspection framework judgements of ‘overall effectiveness, quality of education, behaviour and attitudes, personal development and leadership and management’, makes this an ideal time to reflect on your interactions with children. Inspectors use all their evidence to evaluate what it is like to be a child in the provision, this includes having key entheses on children’s communication and language development and adult/child interactions.

“A ‘language rich’ environment is about talking with children, not building displays, or sticking on Post-it Notes”. Reference: Gill Jones, Deputy Director for Early Education Ofsted.