



Toolbox for an enhanced assessment of toddler speech, language and communication needs

INTRODUCTION

The work on this toolbox is part of the [Children's Information Project](#) – a collaborative research project involving four local municipalities which aims to improve understanding of how children's information can be used ethically and effectively.

This document presents the first draft of a toolbox which was developed in collaboration with service leaders, practitioners working within the integrated family hubs and health child services in Oldham, and parents with toddlers participating in these services.

The overall ambition for the project in Oldham was to improve the collection and use of information on infants and toddlers and their families, with a specific focus on early identification of and response to speech, language and communication needs (SLCNs).

Ambition:

Better use of information on child vulnerabilities and social-risk factors when assessing early speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)

Focus:

Focus on the voice of parents and practitioners, and the rich qualitative insights gained in processes of collaboration between parents and practitioners

Context:

Integrated early years services
Development reviews and language screening, often carried out during home visits by health visitors or child and family practitioners



Background and Aims

A child's language development in the early years is critical in laying the foundation for future life opportunities. Gaps in early language skills can emerge very early in childhood; for a significant percentage of children, they persist over time. There is an increasing consensus that early speech, language, and communication needs (SLCN) are most effectively addressed through preventative models of intervention which prevent poorer long-term outcomes for children at risk of poor language development. A central component of early intervention is the timely identification of developmental risk, followed by targeted support that strengthens those aspects of early learning environments which promote positive language outcomes before difficulties become entrenched. However, accurately identifying which children require which level and type of intervention remains a significant challenge.

Our aim was to develop materials that can help to improve the collection and use of information on toddlers and their families, with a specific focus on early identification of speech, language and communication needs. The focus was on supporting practitioners in routinely and consistently collecting, documenting and using information on child vulnerabilities and social risk-factors that can affect SLC development.

The service context

In England, developmental reviews are part of the Health Child Programme, a universal, integrated public health programme available to all children (PHE, 2018a). The programme is led by health visiting teams working in partnership with early years settings, children's centres, and services such as speech and language therapy. Developmental reviews are embedded within ongoing professional relationships, enabling early identification of emerging difficulties and timely support before difficulties become established and impact longer-term development. Early speech, language, and communication is consistently identified as a priority area within the programme. Speech, language and communication needs for infants and toddlers are first identified through the universal developmental review process conducted at several points during a child's first 2½ years of life. The Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ-3) is the nationally mandated screening tool used in these reviews.

In Oldham, if development reviews indicate potential early Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) for babies and toddlers, Child and Family Practitioners in Oldham meet with the child and their parent (often in their home) to carry out language screening using the WellComm tool. During the WellComm screening, practitioners engage the child in structured screening activities while also observing the child's interactions and having sensitive, supportive conversations with parents.

The assessment framework

This toolbox was co-designed with practitioners and parents and informed by a review of the literature and wider consultation. It is guided by the My World Assessment Triangle developed by the Scottish Government, which provides a framework for understanding a child's needs in a holistic and ecological way.

The framework supports assessment by considering how a child grows and develops in relation to the care they receive and their wider environment. Our toolbox makes use of an adaptation of the My World Triangle that applies the framework specifically to the assessment of Speech, Language and Communication needs.

As with the original framework, this adaptation focuses on three key areas to support a holistic understanding of need:

- How I grow and Develop
- What I need from people who look after me
- What I need from my wider world

Getting it Right for Every Child: Improving Outcomes for Speech, Language and Communication Development

Being able to communicate...



- Supports my learning
- Gives me confidence
- Helps me to enjoy relationships and friendships
- Helps me to make choices and tell you what I need
- Helps me to manage my emotions and express how I feel



- Close and loving relationships with responsive interactions early and often
- Response to my earliest communication and what I am telling you
- Respect and value for my home language
- Copying my sounds and words and letting me hear a bit more language
- Hearing songs, stories and rhymes and joining in the way I can
- Changing your communication to include me
- Chatting together in our daily activities
- Support to communicate in a way that's right for me

- Access to local resources and family supports that help to develop my communication
- Support for my important adults so they can have responsive interactions with me
- An early years workforce that understands how my language and communication develops
- An early years workforce that can identify when I need extra help
- Early learning and childcare experiences that support my communication development
- Language and communication supportive environments

Education Scotland, 2025

(<https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/glowblogs/public/creatingtheconditions/uploads/sites/10667/2025/04/29160812/My-World-graphic.jpg>)

The toolkit

A holistic understanding of SLCN is developed through ongoing dialogue and careful observation. It begins with conversations between practitioners and parents to build a shared picture of where the child currently is in their communication and language development. Practitioners also need opportunities to observe the child's communication and interaction in everyday contexts, alongside completing screening using the WellComm tool.

Drawing on the insights gained through these conversations, observations and screening, practitioners make a professional judgement about the level of SLCN and the type of support that will best meet the needs of the child and their family. They then share their reflections with parents and agree on appropriate next steps. Key insights are recorded, and relevant documentation is completed to ensure information is accurately captured on the system.

This toolkit has been developed to support practitioners through each stage of this multi-step process. The developed materials i) guide the collection of holistic SLCN information, ii) suggest ways to document and share meaningful insights that families and professionals who work with families have, and iii) demonstrate how this information can best be used to support decision-making on supporting children and families.