

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

Developed to be used during the WellComm screening in the context of the integrated family hubs and healthy child programme.



A collaboration between the Children's Information Project and the Oldham Borough  
Council

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## 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).

### **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. Parent voice was considered as an essential ingredient to conversational approaches that enable the collection of meaningful information, and parent concerns about their child's development were considered explicitly.

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

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with families have, and iii) demonstrate how this information can best be used to support decision-making on supporting children and families.

## **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; Squires & Bricker, 2009), 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 (GL Assessment, 2017). 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.

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## 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



## 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 (2022), 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 (Education Scotland, 2025). As with the original framework, this adaptation focuses on three key areas to support a holistic understanding of need:

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

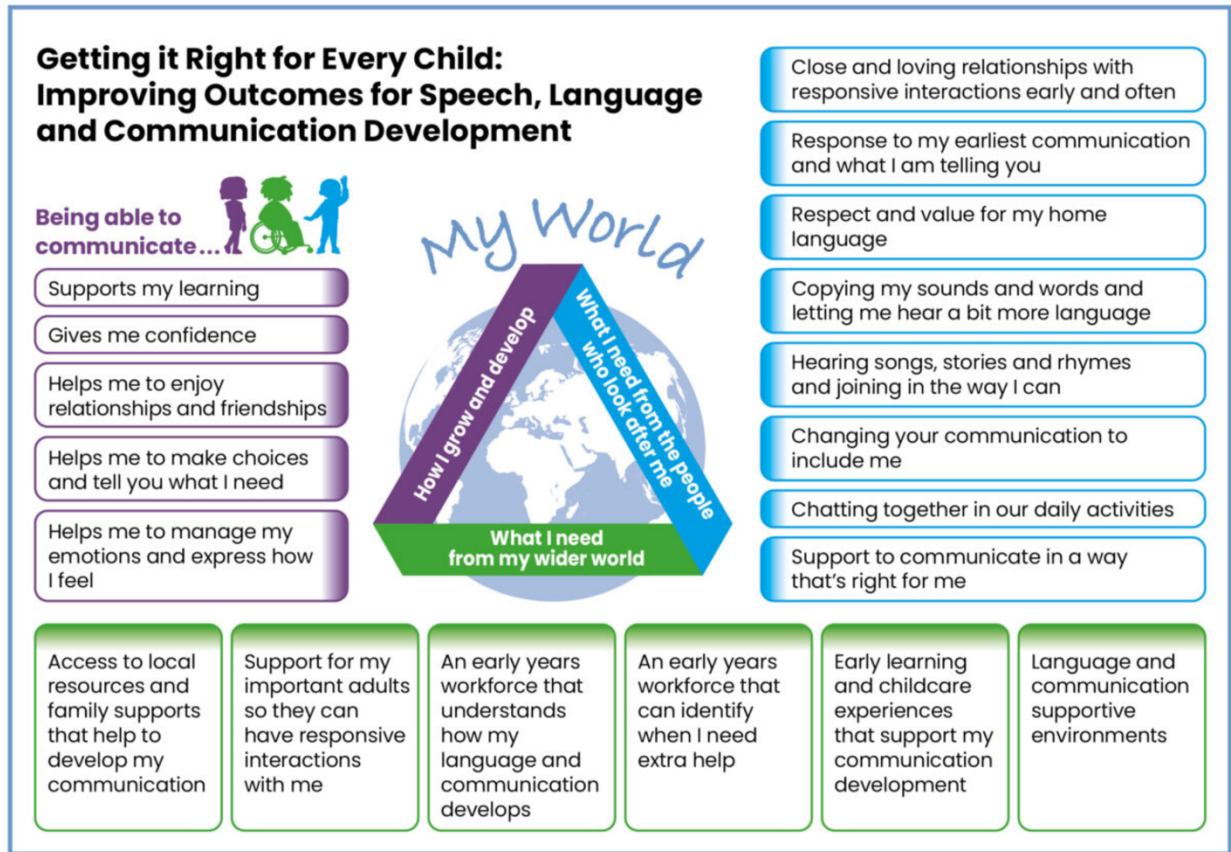
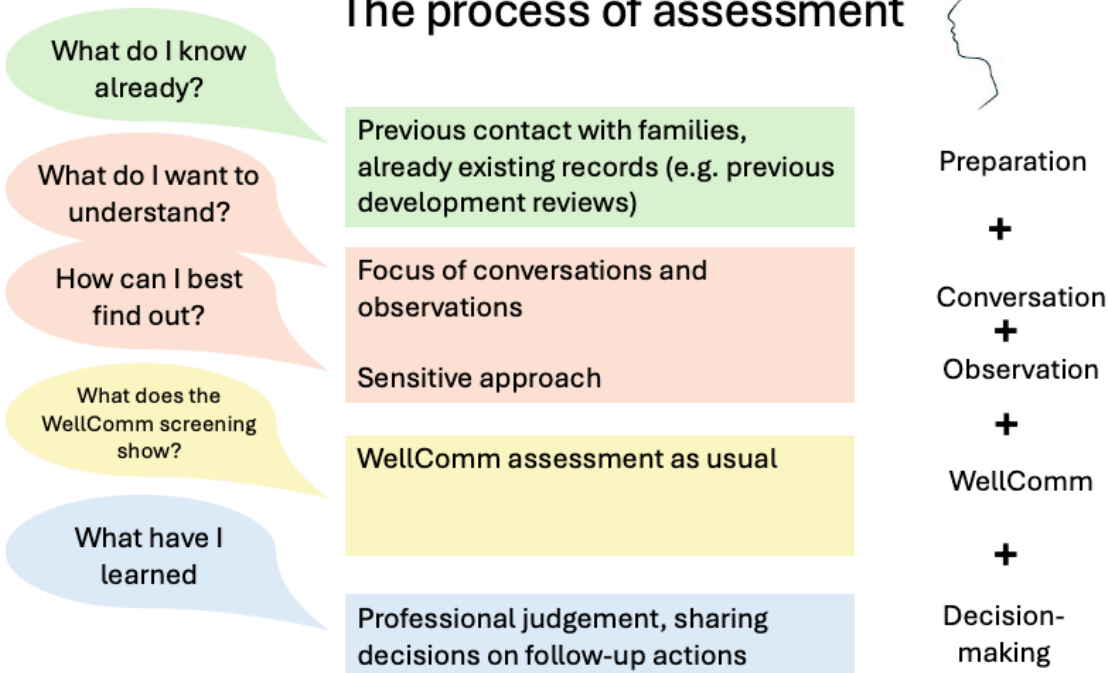


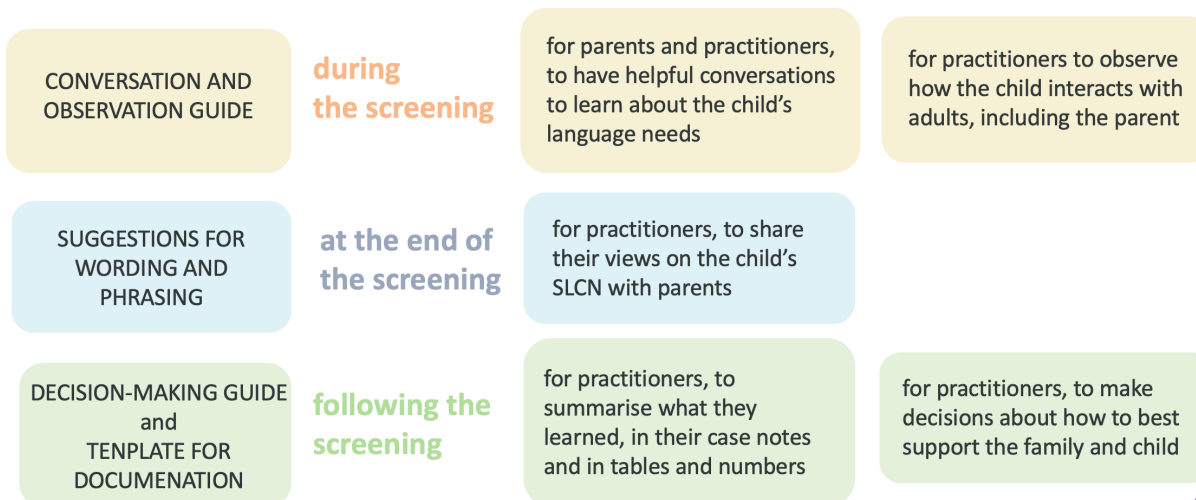
Fig 1: Education Scotland, 2025

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

## The process of assessment



## The content of the toolbox



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## Conversation and Observation Guide

### Notes about the conversation guide

#### **Informal, open-ended questions.**

This conversation guide starts with informal, open-ended questions to help parents share naturally before moving on to specifics. They are intended to be warm and non-technical and aim to invite an open conversation between practitioners and parents.

#### **Follow-up questions and prompts.**

The conversation guide lists follow up questions and suggests helpful prompts. A practitioner would not typically need all prompts, but they should help to follow up on something the parent has described and get more information to get a fuller picture.

#### **Flexibility to allow conversational flow; at the same time – some structure.**

The guide intends to leave room to make the conversation flow well. At the same time, it provides some structure to help make sure all practitioners get the full picture of the child in the areas of 1) speech, language and communication, 2) how the environment and interaction support the child's learning, and 3) which barriers might be present in families.

#### **Questions about the the parent's perspective.**

The guide also includes questions that intend for practitioners to hear from the parent what they think:

How do they describe their child? What are their concerns about the child's development? What progress have they noticed? What are they hoping for?

## SECTION ONE HOW I GROW AND DEVELOP

Questions to ask during the conversation  
with the parent

### 1.1 Opening

How are things going at the moment?

How is Sarah doing with her communication now?

Which changes have you noticed recently?

### 1.2 The child understanding others and responding

How is Aiden getting on with understanding you?

Helpful prompts

*Does Aiden seem to understand everyday words or routines?*

e.g., bath time, get your shoes

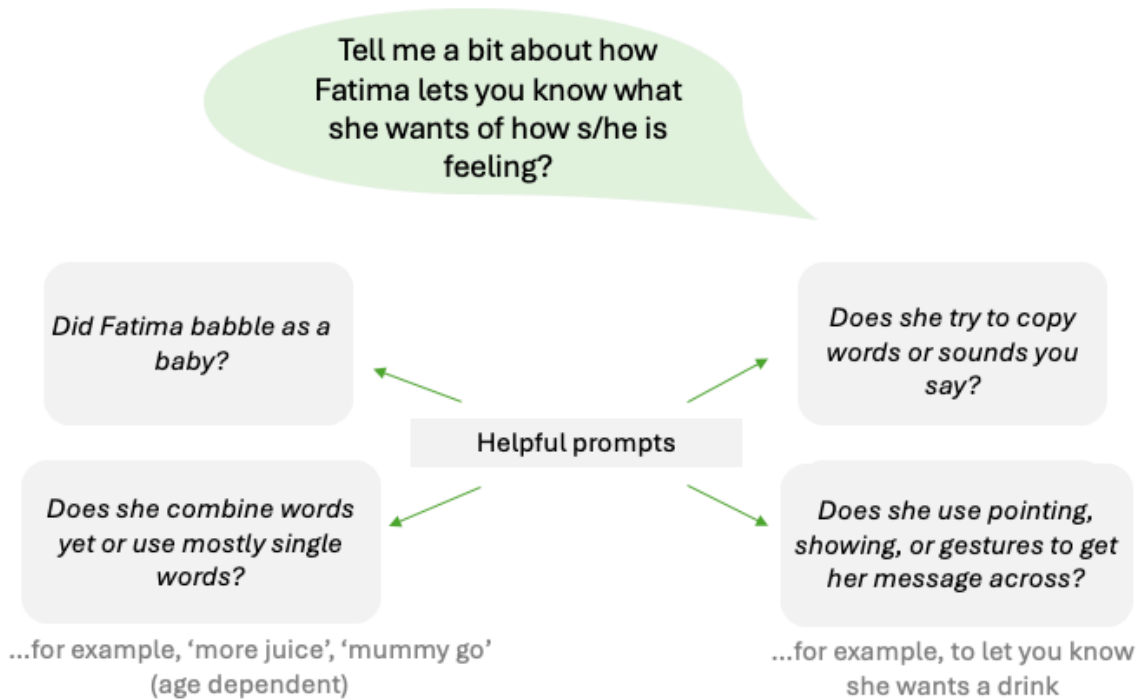
*What helps him understand you best – words, tone, gestures, or routines?*

*How does he respond when you talk to him or give simple instructions?*

*And how is he getting on with understanding other people?*

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## 1.3 How the child communicates and expresses themselves



## 1.4 Multiple languages at home



## 1.5 Parent Perspective



## SECTION TWO

# WHAT I NEED FROM PEOPLE WHO LOOK AFTER ME

### 2.1 Opening

E.g. "At home, and when you get on with everyday life, there are many opportunities for children to hear and practice their communication."

What do you and Aiden like to do together?

When do you notice Aiden communicating most?

E.g., talk during mealtimes or bathtimes, when sharing books, before bedtime etc.

## 2.2 Play Interactions

E.g. "Playing together is a great way for your child to practice talking and listening. I'd love to hear a bit about what play looks like at home for you and your child."

Tell me a bit about what Sarah enjoys when she plays?

*What activities or games does she like best?*

*Which toys does she enjoy playing with?*

*Who does she like to play with?*

Do you and Aaron have favourite books or stories or songs you share?

How easy is it to engage Sarah in play and activities like singing, stories or looking at books together?

How does Aaron interact with others during play?

Are there certain play situations where Aaron needs more support?

*e.g. joining in with others, handling turn-taking, sharing, flexibility?*

*e.g. independence, social play, staying engaged?*

## 2.3 Parent Perspective

Can you share an example of Nadia playing in a way that made you feel she was doing well?

Is there anything about play or learning at home you find difficult or would like more ideas for?

Which play skills would you like to see her developing?

## 2.4 How to observe the child’s communication

This **observation guide** provides a description on how to set up some time during your home visit to observe the child’s communication, including communication between the child and parent.

### Opportunities for the parent and the child to turn towards each other and communicate

Where possible, the WellComm materials can be set up so that the practitioner and the child can sit together (on the floor). This helps the child to get engaged. It is also important for the parent to have opportunity to join in – for example by making sure they can sit down with you. They might have to be invited to join the practitioner and the child during the WellComm assessment. During the WellComm assessment, allowing opportunities for the natural interaction between the parent and child important – for example, the child might choose to show the parent a toy, or the parent might gently encourage the child to listen or respond.

### An observation checklist

Below is a checklist of behaviours to look out for, and some explanatory notes with more details on what to look out for. This list is a slightly adapted version from the ELIM observation list (Public Health England, 2020).

Information for some items on the checklist might already be collected in other ways, but it is also good to check if these behaviours can be observed on the day.

## Observation Checklist: Interactions between the child and adults (adapted from Public Health England, 2020)

Observation Items	yes/no
1. Is communicative intent observed? i.e. does Sarah try to communicate something to her mum?	
2. Does Imran use spoken language, and not only gestures or sounds to get his message across?	
3. Is Fatima’s speech easy for her mum to understand most of the time? (i.e. is her speech mostly intelligible to her mum)	
4. Does Aiden understand what is being said to him in clear contextual situations? (e.g. when being shown toys)	
5. Do Nadia and her mum take turns when they communicate with each other? (e.g. looking out for how the other responds, listening, responding back)	
6. Does Aaron follow adult direction and shift his attention when needed?	
7. Does Sarah’s mum speak to her in their home language?	
8. Does Imran’s mum adapt her communication and language to Imran’s age and development (e.g. short sentences, key words, warm and expressive tone?)	

## Explanatory notes – Observation Guide

(adapted from Public Health England, 2020)

1. Communicative intent: What you are looking for here is evidence that the child is relating to the parent/carer and showing them a toy of interest, perhaps pointing to something familiar in the room but the key thing is that they don't just make a sound but that they relate it back to the parent/carer. (e.g. pointing at something, vocalising, and looking back to the parent)
3. Intelligibility (from around 18m onwards): By intelligible, this refers to the child's ability to convey meaning verbally to the parent/carer. In many cases at this age parents/carers can understand their child when you cannot. What you are looking to detect here is any situation in which the child's speech is very unclear – so much that even their parent/carer does not understand. You can find out by asking the parent what the child is trying to say.
4. Turn-taking: This question refers to the child's reciprocal turn taking with the parent/carer, whether verbally or non-verbally. Do they have more than 1 "exchange" – can they keep a turn going? If this does not happen naturally you might give the child a toy and ask them to give it to their parent/carer and ask them to respond. It is important to note here that this is really about observation rather than "testing" the child's performance, but this type of activity can elicit turns.
5. Understanding: You are looking here for an indication that the child is able to understand what an adult says to them. It is important that you observe this rather than relying solely on what the parent/carer says they understand because children often learn to understand routines and are not necessarily understanding the words that their parent is using.
6. Observe the focus of the child's attention. How long do they focus on a toy or activity? Do they only focus fleetingly, or buzz from toy to toy very quickly? Do they manage to shift their attention (e.g. when being spoken to) and return to their activity? ( Note: At very young age, many children continue focusing on something even when the parent/carer is talking about something else, but some children are able to switch their attention between the toy that they are enjoying playing with and what someone else is saying and then switch back again once they have responded; accepts direction).

## FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS, SECTION ONE

### Speech

*Parents can get really focused and worried about speech sounds when the practitioner feels that there is not really a concern in this area. While speech is an important element of development to consider, it might be good to do the assessment of the child first, and observe and listen to the child's speech, and then ask parent questions, if you have observed issues with the child's speech, and if the question is age-appropriate.*

Tell me a bit about other people being able to understand Imran's speech.

How clearly can you understand what Imran says?

Do other people find Imran easy to understand?

Who How do you usually respond when you don't understand what Imran is trying to say?

...for example, grandparents or nursery staff

### Feeding, dummy use and toilet training

*While these can be important elements to consider in relation to SLC development, listen carefully to the parents and observe to decide if these questions feel relevant to the parent and the child. Ask these questions only if they feel relevant.*

“Feeding and dummy use can both have an impact on early sounds and words.”

Can you describe how weaning went?

Are there foods or textures Fatima struggles to handle?

Can you tell me about Fatima's dummy use?

Can you tell me where things are with nappy and toilet training right now?

When does she usually use her dummy?

What does the dummy seem to help most with?

How does Imran seem to feel about using the potty?

## SECTION THREE

# WHAT I NEED FROM MY WIDER WORLD

*E.g. "Other people outside the immediate family also help children learn language by giving them new words, ideas, and ways of talking about the world."*

**What do you and Aiden like to do outside the house?**

Prompts about having a park nearby they like to go to? Any baby or toddler sessions?

**Who are the special people in Aiden's world?**

*Only ask this if it hasn't already come up in the conversation earlier – if the parent says for example the child likes to play with granny – there is a chance to follow up with questions like – "Oh, does granny visit regularly?"*

**Have you thought about nursery yet? Do you have plans for Aiden to go to nursery?**

### **Family Context**

*E.g., We know that parenting can be harder when life is stressful.*

**Is there anything that feels more demanding for you right now?**

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## Sharing your views on the child's SLCN with parents: Suggestions for wording and phrasing

### Notes about this manual

Following the language screening, observations with the child, and conversations with the parent, practitioners come to a professional judgement about the type of support that can best support the child's development. Depending on the level of need, the type of support that is offered to families can be categorised into four groups:

#### **Universal signposting**

Printed and online resources (e.g. GM 10 Top tips for talking, Tiny Happy People, The Big Bok of Ideas, Words for Life, NHS Best Start in Life)

Universal sessions offered at the Family Hubs (rhyme time, music and play sessions)

#### 2) The above + **Individual advice to parents**

#### 3) The above + **Targeted support**

Making it Real

Play, Learn, Grow

#### 4) The above + **Contacting the Better Communication Team**

When sharing results and making suggestions for support, it can be challenging to put into words what to say to a family. This guides lists phrases that may help; these have been co-designed with practitioners and parents in Oldham, and were informed by the literature, specifically work carried out by the ELIM-I Development Project Team (Newcastle University, 2025).

## Universal signposting message to all parents

If you would like some new ideas for activities that help your child develop his/her communication and language, this is a really good source.

*+ hand out flyer/send message with sources*

We also run rhyme time/music sessions and stay and play sessions. Come and join us, these sessions are a really great place with activities that are fun and help learning. There are toys, sand and water for them to play with, space to play outdoors and much more! Sessions are free and can be booked online.



Would you like me to book you in one of those sessions?

*+ hand out flyer/send message with session times*

How do you feel about that?

Do you have any further questions?

## Universal signposting only

Practitioners might say ...



From our conversations and from the activities we did today it seems like your child is doing well with their communication and language. I have no concerns. Carry on doing what you are doing, and if you would like some new ideas for activities, this is a really good source.

*+ continue with universal signposting message (previous slide)*

## Universal signposting + individual advice to parents

Practitioners might say ...

Based on how your child did the WellComm activities today and interacted with us, I have no concerns. I am aware however that you mentioned some concerns and described some things you think your child struggles with. Let's think together about how we can help.

**OR**

From our conversations and from the activities we did today it seems like your child might need a little help to support them with their communication and language.

**+**



Often there are some simple steps we can take to help children's learning. We can talk about those with you, and we have some guidance which can help.

Would you like for us to book in a time for this?

+ continue with universal signposting message

Do you have any further questions?

## Universal signposting + targeted support

Practitioners might say ...

From our conversations and from the activities we did today it seems like your child might need a little help to support them with their communication and language.

We run session to practice with parents some specific ways of communicating which we know help children learn. We know you might be doing lots of these already. When children are finding it harder to communicate we need to find different ways of helping them, and ways to embed these strategies in everyday routines and play.

I think that it would be good for you and your child to come and join some of these sessions.



Our XX sessions are all about finding different strategies to support your child in their development, and about practicing those. There is this intervention [name] which I think would really help by giving you the tools to use at home.

Can I add you to the waiting list?

+ continue with universal signposting message (previous slide)

Do you have any further questions?

## Universal signposting + targeted support

### Practitioners might say ...

From our conversations and from the activities we did today it seems like your child might need a little help to support them with their communication and language.

We run session to practice with parents some specific ways of communicating which we know help children learn. We know you might be doing lots of these already. When children are finding it harder to communicate we need to find different ways of helping them, and ways to embed these strategies in everyday routines and play.

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Can I add you to the waiting list?

+ continue with universal signposting message (previous slide)

Do you have any further questions?

## + Contact Better Communications Team

### Practitioners might say ...

Based on our conversations and the activities we did, I think it would be good to ask the Better Communications Team for some next steps and advice, and to check how your child is progressing.

Are you happy for me to contact them?

Do you have any questions?



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## Template for writing up case notes

<b>CASE NOTE TEMPLATE</b>					
<b>Child's Name</b>					
Date of Birth		Age (months)		Gender	M / F
				Date	
<b>WellComm Score Sheet</b>					
<b>Total Score (0-10)</b>		<b>Additional Comments</b>			
What the child understands (0-5)		Speech Sounds			
What the child uses (0-5)					
Code (Green, Amber, Red) Please refer to score guide					
Enter the section on which the child scored 'Green'					
Attention and Listening		Dysfluency / Stammering		Voice Difficulties	

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## CASE NOTES FROM THE CONVERSATION AND OBSERVATION

What the parent described	Family activities at home	Languages at home
<i>Describe what you learned by talking to the parent about SLCN, and mention parent concerns if they raised them.</i>	<i>Describe the activities the family does at home (time for conversations, play activities, shared reading/story telling/singing)</i>	<i>Mention which languages the child hears / uses at home</i>
		Childcare
		<i>Child attending an early <u>years</u> provision? Plans for child to do so?</i>

Family / Social Context	Child interactions and engagement during the WellComm
<i>Describe</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>-the physical resources available to the family and access to places for playing and chatting</li><li>-the family's support network</li><li>-other aspects of the family context that are important to consider</li></ul>	<i>Describe the interactions you observed on the day, and how the child engaged in the WellComm</i>

## CASE NOTES FROM THE CONVERSATION AND OBSERVATION

Conclusions	Follow-Up Actions
<i>Describe your decisions on the level of support need</i>	<i>Describe the follow-up actions you agreed on with the parent / type of support offer</i>

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## Documentation for analysis and reporting

### Section 1: Background and assessment information

Child Name		Child gender	
Carar/Guardian present	Mother / Father / Other: Who		
Home address		Child DOB	
Carar/Guardian present	Mother / Father / Other: Who		
Place of assessment		Assessment date	
Practitioner name			
Child language background	EAL	yes / no	Child age (months)
Languages child hears			
Languages child speaks			NHS Nr

### Section 2: WellComm scores

Enter the section (1-9) on which the child scored 'green':	
Score	
Total Score:	
Total score on items 1-5 (What the child understands):	
Total score 6-10 (What the child uses):	
Code*:	

*\*at the level expected for their age (W/white), slightly below the level expected for their age (G/grey), significantly below the level expected for their age (B/black)*

### Section 3: Parent reported concerns about their child's SLC development

	Yes / No	Notes
Parent described concerns about the child's SLC		
Parent described behaviour that indicates ...		
... possible difficulties with expressing and speaking		
... possible difficulties with understanding language		
... possible speech difficulties		
Other Notes		

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## Section 4: Practitioner insights into the need for targeted communication and language support (based on the conversation and observation)

	Yes / No	Notes
Family identified for targeted communication and language support		
--to strengthen/embed SLC support at home		
-- to strengthen physical opportunities to support SLC development		
-- to strengthen social opportunities to support SLC development		

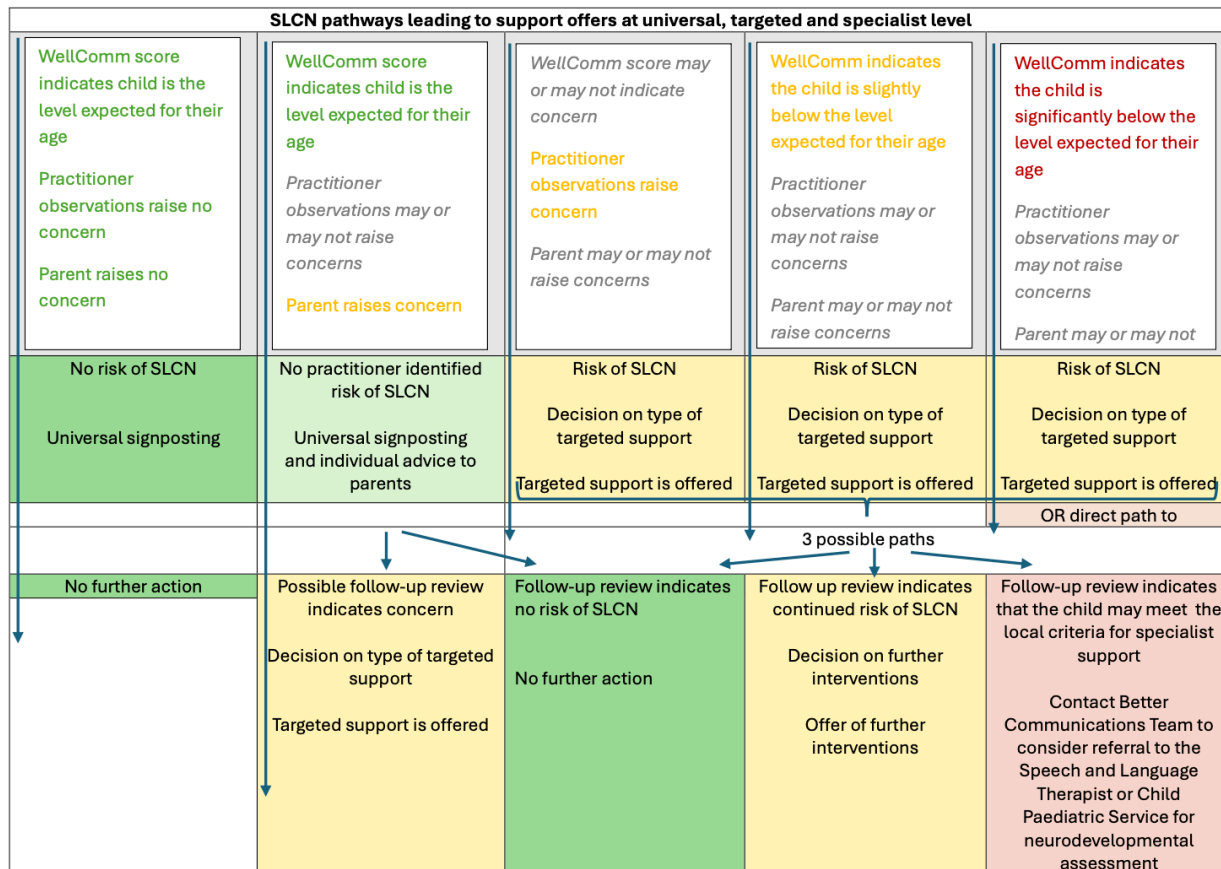
## Section 5: Type of support offer

	Yes/No	Type
Signposting to helpful resources		
Signposting to universal stay and play sessions		
Offer of individual advice		
Offer of targeted group sessions		
Offer to see the Better Communications Team		

## Section 6: Agreed follow-up actions

	Yes/No	Notes
Booking the family into a play and stay session		
Booking a time for and individual follow-up conversation with the family		
Adding the family to a waiting list for targeted sessions		
Contacting the Better Communications Team		

# Decision making guide



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