

Evaluation of Communication Environment Tool - guidance for practitioners

Early Years practitioners will be aware of the importance of the environment in supporting the development of each unique child. There are many elements that contribute to a setting environment and this evaluation tool is designed to assist Inclusion Co-ordinators (INCos) in looking closely at how well the environment in their setting supports children's speech and language development. The tool has been designed by Speech and Language Therapists with input from Early Years Advisory Teachers and it identifies the different elements of the environment they consider when observing children and advising settings.

When will this tool be useful?

The Communication Environment Evaluation tool was devised in order to assist practitioners in developing their environment to meet the needs of children whose speech and language development is causing concern. It would be particularly useful to use when you have a child with identified Speech and Language needs. However, the principle of inclusion is that developments made to meet the needs of one child often benefit many others. Practitioners who are familiar with ECAT (Every Child a Talker) or the ELDP (Early Language Development Programme) will see how the tool is consistent with advice for developing the environment to support the language development for all children.

How should the tool be used?

Whilst the first section *Communication Friendly Environment* can be observed in a general way for all children, it will be necessary to focus on a specific child for observations in the second section *Adult Interaction (including verbal and non-verbal interaction)*. If you choose to observe more than one child within a short space of time, you could use the same first section and make separate observations for the second section.

Who should make the observations and how are other staff involved?

It is important to see the evaluation tool as an opportunity to work together as a setting to identify and prioritise areas for development. This should be one part of a process of continuous reflection and development that underpins good practice in the setting.

The setting INCo should be involved in the observation in order to gain an overview of the way children with speech and language needs are supported within the setting. However, it is important for the INCo to consider with the manager how to obtain the best outcome from the evaluation. This may be through joint observation (with the manager, another member of staff or a supporting professional).

It will be noted that the key person's interactions will be observed specifically. The reason for this is that a key person will know the child very well and may often have developed positive ways to interact with the child. Analysis of such positive interactions can often be helpful to share with other staff.

Where more than one child is to be observed, it would be helpful to involve different key persons where possible.

It is very important that all practitioners are made aware of the purpose of observations and how the information will be used. One positive way to use the observation is to note evidence only initially. The key person can then be involved in the reflection and agreeing areas for development. INCOs and managers should bear in mind that the process should be supportive and motivating for staff.

Making the judgements

The evaluation tool should be used in the way that best supports you to make developments in your setting.

In order to improve your communication environment, the most important element is to collect evidence to support your own judgements of where you are now and how to prioritise developments, which can form part of your setting's development plan. Analysing the evidence is more important than the final *judgements*. The best settings constantly reflect on their current practice and plan for development.

The following suggestions of what to look for will help you and the staff in your setting to develop a common understanding of what constitutes a communication friendly environment.

It is important to consider both indoor and outdoor environments for all sections that follow, unless it refers specifically to the outdoors.

Communication Friendly Environment	Evidence to look for
Access to outdoor learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For what proportion of the session/day are the children able to access the outdoors? • Do children go outside in all weather? • Are children able to 'free-flow' between the inside and outside environments? • Are there quiet spaces outside? • How are children supported by adults in the outdoor environment?
Communication friendly spaces available	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider indoors and outdoor environments. • Communication Friendly Spaces™ Approach
Range of child led play opportunities available	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider indoor and outdoor environments. • What is the variety of experiences offered to children to initiate their own play in the environment? Consider the different areas of learning and development. • Are resources and materials added to support children's current interests? • Are children able to access their own resources?
Access to adult supported activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are adult supported activities open ended to enable all children to achieve at an appropriate level? • Is there evidence that adult supported activities are adapted to enable access for all children in the group? • How are children's interests considered in planning adult supported activities?
Clear prompts to support nursery routine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What specific visual and auditory prompts are used regularly to support routines and activities?

Adult Interaction (including verbal and non-verbal interaction)	Evidence to look for
Engaging in play alongside the child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the appropriate level of engagement – parallel play/commentary/responding to the child’s ideas etc.
Recognising child’s attempts at communication (verbal and non verbal)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What different forms of communication does the child use? For example, facial expression, gesture, physical contact, actions, sounds and words. • How frequently and how positively is each responded to by practitioners?
Using language levels appropriate to individual children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are practitioners aware of the child’s level of understanding as well as speech, attention and listening? Has the speech and language monitoring tool been used? • How are practitioners adapting their language levels? Is this consistent?
Supporting the child to access play opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How well do practitioners: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ enable the child to choose play experiences? ○ support and extend interest? ○ support the child when others join his/her play? ○ support the child in attempts to join the play of others?
Supporting the child to access the nursery routine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is the child supported to take part in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ entering the setting ○ snack/ meal times ○ appropriate group times ○ transition times during the session