



# **EARLY LANGUAGE AND THE HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**



# EARLY LANGUAGE



During the first five years, a child's brain is at its most flexible, making this a critical period for learning and growth.

In typical development children naturally learn how to speak, use language and communicate which allows them to understand others' emotions, intentions, ideas and needs while expressing their own.

Understanding and using speech, language and communication is vital for self-awareness, self-advocacy, education, training, employment, friendships, self-esteem, life skills and emotional well-being.

What is Speech, language and communication?

**Speech:** articulating the sounds in language

**Language:** vocabulary, sentences, sequencing sentences into narrative accounts

**Communication:** patterns of conversation, interaction, body language and tone of voice



# HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT



A child's language development begins long before formal schooling, when the child first begins to distinguish sounds heard within the mother's womb.

Language skills are then shaped and nurtured by the child's 'home learning environment' (HLE), which includes the physical characteristics of the home, but also the quality of the implicit and explicit learning support they receive from the caregivers.

Studies show that everyday conversations, make-believe play and reading activities are particularly influential features of the home learning environment, although daytime routines, trips to the park and visits to the library have also been shown to make a positive difference to children's language development.

In particular, warm and nurturing parenting behaviours that encourage children's natural curiosity and communicate reasonable expectations for learning are especially strong predictors of children's school achievement.



# IMPROVING HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

**Chat, Play and Read** is a model which can be used to help improve a home learning environment and support children's language development.

## Chat

Back-and-forth conversations between a parent and their child, that are age-appropriate and reflect the child's interests, increase vocabulary and use of language throughout development.

Parental time investment can have a direct effect on wider cognitive attainment for children.

## Play

Play encourages communication and opens the dynamic to peers.

The components of playing, e.g. language, narratives and symbolic representation, have an impact on early literacy skills.

Learning through play supports overall healthy development.

## Read

Parents reading daily with their child in the early years can have a significant impact on later academic ability.

Dialogic reading has a positive impact on young children's language skills, especially their expressive vocabulary.

# SPEECH, LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Approximately, 10% of children and young people may not follow a typical pattern of speech, language and communication development, resulting in speech, language and communication needs, which can be life-long and limit access to the curriculum and social interactions.

These needs could be identified as Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) which is diagnosed when children fail to acquire their own language for no obvious reason, or could link to a diagnosis such as autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or sensory needs including deafness. These conditions are often initially present as behavioural or learning difficulties.

**LANGUAGE IS ...**

**CONTENT**

The meanings conveyed

- Events
- Objects
- Actions
- Relationships

**FORM**

The structures used

- Phonemes combine to make morphemes.  
/tako/
- Morphemes combine to make words.  
taco + s = tacos
- Words combine to make sentences.  
Let's make tacos please
- And sentences combine to make discourse.

**USE**

The speaker's goals

- Describe
- Convince
- Request
- Predict

Let's make tacos please

**RA DLD** Developmental Language Disorder limits **FORM, CONTENT & USE**  
Learn more at [radld.org](http://radld.org)

# EARLY LANGUAGE IDENTIFICATION MEASURE

The Early Language Identification measure is an evidence-based tool which focuses on speech, language and communication development to support early identification of need and intervention.

The Early Language Identification measure is integrated within a child's 2-year development check which is completed by the health visitor.

If speech, language and communication needs are identified, it helps the child and family receive a timely intervention.

## Appendix C. Early Language Identification Measure and Intervention Practitioner Template

Child Name: \_\_\_\_\_ D.O.B. \_\_\_\_\_ NHS Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Date completed: \_\_\_\_\_ Practitioner Name: \_\_\_\_\_

The ELIM and Intervention includes a **word list** which the parent/carer needs to complete based on the words that the child currently says, and a specific **set of observations** shared within a conversation to inform decisions on a child's SLC needs.

**Both** the word list and the observation must be completed. Make it clear to the parent that "this is not a test" – but it is a way of getting to know the child better and that all children develop at different rates.

Use this table to record what **you have seen** during the 2 to 2½ year review, rather than what the parent/carer reports. Observations should be carried out during the review with this section completed towards the end of the review.

Please tick which of the following behaviours you (the practitioner) observed or heard from the child when speaking with his/her parent/carer during the 2 to 2½ year review.

Scoring: **Yes = 1 No = 0**

		Yes	No
1	Observed communicative intent (child means to communicate something verbally to parent/carer)		
2	Speech mostly intelligible to parent/carers		
3	Observed putting words together (mummy up, more dinner)		
4	Do the parent/carer and child take turns when communicating?		
5	Does the child understand what is being said to him/her when their parent/carer asks them something which is NOT obvious from the context?		
6	Attention: (please circle which one you observe the child doing)		
	Fleeting (flits from one thing to another)	Single channelled (attention can't easily be shifted)	Accepts adult direction when playing



# EARLY LANGUAGE TOOL

Most settings will have a tool which can be used to support practitioners in assessing a child's speech, language and communication skills.

Merton early year settings use the Early Years SEND communication audit which provides descriptors dependant on the age of the child.

If speech, language and communication needs are identified, further support can be implemented and a referral to a speech and language therapist can be completed.

## EARLY YEARS SEND COMMUNICATION AUDIT



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Age	Listening Understanding and Attention	Speaking (expressive language)	Social interaction and Social behaviours	Thinking/ Play/Exploration/Sensory
Birth	Turns to familiar sound. Startled by loud noises Changes body movements in response to sound. Responds to adult's voice tone – calmed or alarmed	Frequently cries when unhappy or uncomfortable. Makes cooing/gurgling sounds.	Copies facial movement when gazing at primary carer – sticking tongue out Likes cuddles and being held Gazes at faces and makes eye contact for longer periods	Gazes at the faces of others & makes eye contact. Begins to follow things with eyes Tolerates light touch from adult responding to personal care. Tolerates soft touch from smooth textures (flannel, cream)
3 months	Shows recognition of family member by smiling or cessation of crying. Accurately locates the source of a very familiar persons voice	Cries to express different needs. Makes sounds back when talked to Starts to laugh to express pleasure.	Smiles, laughs and shows pleasure Watches person moving directly in line of vision. Snuggles in with primary carers and close family members	Tolerates light and firm touch to hands and feet. and gazes at carers face Begins to cry or fuss if activity doesn't change
6 months	Imitates very familiar gestures (shake rattle, bang table) when with a close family member. Listens and responds to a simple instruction through pointing, gesture, facial expression and body language of others. Are soothed and calmed by the voice of a familiar adult	Watches someone's face as they talk and tries to take turns in conversations by babbling, and copying adult's speech and lip movements. Shows pleasure at interaction with others, smiling and gurgling. Makes sounds to get attention in different ways (eg crying when hungry, or laughing and babbling in response to others) Uses a variety of double sound pattern babble e.g. 'baba' 'dodo'. Makes four or more different sounds.	Smiles in response to facial expressions of others outside of the immediate family. Shows pleasure at interacting with others. Pats and pulls at adult facial features. Copies blowing 'raspberries'.	Moves hanging rattle or soft toy while moving arms and legs Tolerates firm touch from rough textures (bristled/nodule toys). Exploratory play – mouthing & chewing objects. Tolerates soft textures/objects to mouth. Shows interest in small objects or the detail of a toy, will gaze at small beads in a rattle. Repeats actions that have an effect for example kicking or batting a mobile to create movement, shaking a rattle so it makes a sound again Uses hands and eyes together such as seeing a toy and reaching for it Shows curiosity about things and tries to get things that are out of reach



# SPEECH AND LANGUAGE THERAPISTS

Speech and language therapists (S&LTs) assess children and young people's speech, language and communication, identifying underlying or overt needs.

This enables children and young people to receive the necessary level of support.

This support could be:

**Universal** - strategies built into their environment

**Targeted** – working with specifically trained Teaching Assistants and Mentors

**Specialist** - working directly with the S&LT

At times children may struggle to speak and S&LTs introduce signing systems such as British Sign Language, Makaton or Signalong. An S&LT might also need to introduce augmentative and alternative communication such as computerised devices or picture symbols.



# SPEECH AND LANGUAGE THERAPY SERVICE

The NHS Speech and Language Therapy Service is part of Central London Community Healthcare.

The targeted service works with children 0-4 year olds with speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) and 0-19 year olds who have SLCN with medical origins such as swallowing problems (dysphagia), stammering, complex speech disorders and those needing computerised augmentative and alternative communication.

Children must be registered with a Merton GP to access the Service.

Professional referrals: [children speech and language therapy referral form](#)

Merton 0-19 Integrated Single Point of Access (SPA) :  
0330 053 9264 / [CLCHT.HCPAdminMerton@nhs.net](mailto:CLCHT.HCPAdminMerton@nhs.net)



# LANGUAGE AND LEARNING SUPPORT TEAM

The Language and Learning Support Team is part of Merton Local Authority and delivers speech and language therapy to pupils of statutory school age (age 5 – 16) who attend a Merton school. This includes Merton's two special schools where children have speech and language therapy provision detailed in their Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).

The Language and Learning Support Team:

Carry out Education Health Care Needs Assessments for SENDIS (Special Education Needs Disability Integrated Service)

Can be bought in by schools to assess children without an EHCP whose speech, language and communication development causes concern

Work with the Youth Offending Service to identify speech, language and communication needs and provide intervention for young people, contributing to reducing their offending

Work with The Virtual School for Children in Care and linked social workers identifying speech, language and communication needs making recommendations and contributing to improving school attendance

020 8288 5692 / [admin.lbl-vbs@merton.gov.uk](mailto:admin.lbl-vbs@merton.gov.uk)



# EARLY LANGUAGE SUPPORT



[Family support and parenting](#)

Merton children's Centres offer a range of programmes alongside drop-in sessions including, open garden sessions and social communication groups, which provide support for families around language and communication, learning, behaviour and emotional wellbeing, including for families with children with SEND. Programmes and drop in's also give parents a chance to meet other parents and discuss any issues with a children centre practitioner.



[Merton Libraries Events](#)

Merton Libraries have events for children under 5, including SEND activities, story time, rhyme time and stay & plays. These sessions support parent-infant relationships and early language development. All events can be booked via the library website.



[Portage Parenting Service](#)

Portage Parenting Service is an educational support service for children 0-3yrs with significant additional needs and disabilities and their families. Designed around the individual needs of a child, the Portage Parenting Service helps parents and carers to become more skilled in supporting their child's development, either individually or as part of a group. Referral to the service is required. [fsd@merton.gov.uk](mailto:fsd@merton.gov.uk)



# EARLY LANGUAGE SUPPORT



[Young parents drop-in](#)

A drop-in play session for parents aged under 21 years old with a child under the age of 5 years. Lots of opportunities for babies and children to play and meet other children and for parents and carers to meet new people and make friends. Staff can provide information and advice on child's learning and early language development.



[Home-Start Merton](#)

Home-Start Merton enables families experiencing stress or difficulties to meet the needs of their children from conception to five years old. Home-Start also offers weekly groups for parents and children who are supported by Home-Start Merton. These groups encourage socialisation, peer support and activities. 0208 646 6044



[Family Services Directory](#)

Merton Family Service Directory is a great resource to keep up to date with all activities and services available for children, young people and adults in Merton. There are loads of activities which take place across the borough for children 0-5 which can support parent-child relationships, early language and development.



# EARLY LANGUAGE SUPPORT



[Start for Life](#)

Better Health helps parents give their infants the best start in life. Information and advice is provided on early language with lots of useful tips and activity ideas for children 0-5 years old. Some of the tips include naming objects and offering choices, singing songs together, looking at picture books together and playing pretend games together.



[Tiny Happy People](#)

Tiny Happy People on the BBC website helps parents develop their child's language skills. Parents can explore simple activities and play ideas and find out about babies and toddlers' amazing early development.



[Speech and Language UK](#)

Speech and Language UK's vision is to ensure Every child who is facing challenges with talking and understanding words can look to the future with confidence. They do this by creating tools for schools and nurseries, giving advice and guidance to families and putting pressure on politicians. There is also lots of useful information for professionals on signs of speech and language challenges and ages & stages.



[Still Face Experiment](#)

The Still Face Experiment conducted by Dr. Edward Tronick demonstrates the link between a parent/carer's emotional behaviour and responsiveness, and their child's behaviour.



# FURTHER SUPPORT

Families can receive further information on early language and home learning environment through the Family Information Support Hubs (FISH).

FISH provides parents/carers with information, support and guidance on all aspects of family life.

FISH sessions take place Monday – Friday with FREE face-to-face or telephone appointments available. Appointments can be booked via [Eventbrite](#) either by a parent/carer or a practitioner on their behalf.

Or parents/carers can come along to one of the FISH drop-in sessions (no appointment needed):

**Family Hub at Church Rd Children Centre – Mondays, 1.30pm-4.30pm**  
**Family Hub at Acacia Children Centre – Wednesdays, 9.00am-12.00pm**

