





EARLY YEARS: **HIGH-QUALITY INTERACTIONS**

WHAT, WHY & HOW

Early Years in Fife

Acknowledgments

The images featured in this document were captured across a range of Early Years settings in Fife. Quotes and drawings were provided by children from these settings, who were invited to share what interactions look like to them and how those interactions make them feel.

Many thanks to the following centres for opening their doors and agreeing to share images of their practice with the wider Early Years community. Without their support, creation of this document would not have been possible.

- Little Rookies Childcare
- Montessori Children's House (St. Andrews)
- Mountfleurie Nursery
- Pitreavie Nursery
- University of St. Andrews Nursery
- Westfield Family Nurture Centre

High-Quality Interactions was developed through the collective efforts of a working group consisting of the following representatives:

- Emma Arneil (Educational Home Visitor)
- Lisa Beattie (Area Principal Teacher)
- Scott Bissett (Training Development Officer)
- Majella Downes-O'Dea (Early Years Development Officer)
- Genna Inglis (Early Years Development Officer)
- Birgitta MacDonald (Principal Teacher)
- Kerryn Marshall (Early Years Development Officer)
- Sacha Spence (Funded Provider Development Officer)

Grateful thanks are extended to Ceri Titley (Educational Psychologist), Dr Lynne Duncan (University of Dundee), Dr Conny Gollek (University of West Scotland) and NHS Fife: Speech & Language Therapy for providing specialist consultancy in support of the project.

CONTENTS

WELCOME

Interactions are an essential, yet broad and versatile aspect of early years practice. They encompass a wide range of approaches and techniques, and significantly influence multiple areas of children's development and wellbeing.

It was identified that in addition to the consistent and effective implementation of universal approaches across Fife ELC settings, a range of additional strategies, resources, and tool were also being used. However, awareness, accessibility, and consistency in the application of the these varied.

Recognisably, there was a requirement for a resource that not only brought together theories, approaches, and tools relating to interactions, but also provided a comprehensive exploration that would support readers to make meaningful links between theory, development, and practical strategies.

Regardless of role, experience, or setting, this document aims to support readers in developing their understanding of interactions, why they matter, and how to approach them effectively.

Given the breadth of interactions as a topic, the information within this document is not exhaustive. It brings together a range of established tools and techniques already being used effectively, draws upon national and local guidance, and reflects insights gathered through consultation with settings, practitioners, and supporting professionals about what information would be most beneficial towards practice improvement.

Significantly, the information, principles, and reflective prompts contained within this document and its accompanying audit tools align consistently to guidance and practice exemplars presented in publications such as *Realising the Ambition (2020)* and *The Quality Improvement Framework (2025)*.

While these documents are referred to throughout, the intention is not to provide lengthy recitations of expectations or a step-by-step guide to meeting criteria. Instead, this resource seeks to deepen professional understanding of high-quality interactions, clarify their significance, and strengthen knowledge of the practical approaches, strategies, and professional attitudes that underpin effective practice.

However, by understanding, engaging fully, and consistently applying the theories, approaches, and tools outlined within *High-Quality Interactions*, practitioners will be well placed to meet the expectations set out within national guidance.

To ensure that the document reflected the interests and needs of the wide range of professionals involved in the delivery of ELC across Fife, it was developed collaboratively through a working group comprised of representatives from the Area PT, EYDO, Funded Provider EYDO, and Training Development teams.

Specialist consultancy was sought from Educational Psychology and Speech & Language Therapy services, alongside representatives from the University of Dundee and the University of West Scotland.

This collaborative approach enabled the identification, consolidation, and presentation of a robust set of practice messages, justifications, and key considerations focused on promoting high-quality interactions across Fife's early learning landscape.

HOW TO USE

The topic of interactions is a broad and complex area of practice. Interactions perform a significant role in shaping multiple aspects of children's development and wellbeing, and require practitioners to possess a strong understanding of key principles, techniques, and approaches, alongside a nurturing and professional mindset.

While it is not possible for a single resource to address all aspects of interactions, this document brings together key explanations, relevant theories, points of reflection, and practical tools to explore what interactions are, why they matter, and how they can be approached effectively.

When exploring such a vast topic, it's important to structure content in a way that is reader-friendly and simple to navigate. As such, chapters have been built and structured in a way that supports a flexible approach, enabling the reader to engage with the document either as a whole or by navigating directly to sections of particular relevance.

Please note that the document is accompanied by an audit tool that can be used to evaluate the quality of setting's or practitioner's approach to interactions.

Teams are asked to provide a rating for each criterion, supported by evidence to demonstrate their evaluation. Professional dialogue is encouraged to identify strengths and areas for development, helping to inform next steps.

The final section evaluates the extent to which identified improvement aims have been achieved.

POP-UPS!

Keep an eye out for 'pop-up' features throughout the document. These contain quotes, children's voice, useful information, and points for reflection.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

WHAT ARE INTERACTIONS?	This chapter considers 'what' interactions are, examining their nature, key features and wider applications. It considers the role of the practitioner when engaging in and facilitating interactions, whilst outlining what makes an interaction 'high-quality'.
WHY INTERACTIONS MATTER	This chapter explores why high-quality interactions are critically important. It examines relevant theories and shows how interactions can support children's development, secure relationships, overall wellbeing, as well as speech, language, and communication.
MINDSET & ATTITUDES	This chapter highlights the importance of adopting a professional and nurturing mindset during interactions. It explores practitioners' responsibilities, the potential impact of their emotions, the importance of confronting biases, and the necessity of upholding children's rights.
APPROACHING INTERACTIONS	Approaching Interactions equips readers with knowledge, techniques, and strategies to support attuned, nurturing, and developmentally appropriate interactions. It bridges theory and practice while offering tools to understand the underlying causes of communication and behavioural difficulties.
COMMUNICATION HIGH 5	The Communication High 5 is a key tool supporting high-quality interactions across Fife early years settings. This chapter explains each element, offering practical techniques and examples to support effective integration into everyday practice within early learning environments.

WHAT ARE INTERACTIONS?

In order to think deeply about why interactions matter and how to approach them effectively, it's important to first establish what an interaction is.

Possessing a clear definition of an interaction supports understanding of how they function and provides a strong foundation for practitioners to recognise, support, and reflect upon interactions in practice.

This section explores 'what' interactions are, examining their nature, key features and wider applications. Furthermore, it considers the role of the practitioner when engaging in and facilitating interactions, whilst outlining what makes an interaction 'high-quality'.

GENERAL INTERACTIONS

In the most basic sense, an interaction is an exchange of communication or behaviour between two people, in which the actions of one person provoke or influence the response of the other.

Humans engage in a remarkable number of both verbal and non-verbal interactions throughout their daily life. These take many different forms, including saying *"good morning"* to a colleague, exchanging a smile, asking and answering questions, or having meaningful conversations.

No matter how simple or complex, interactions bring about some sort of reaction in the participants, shaping their thoughts, feelings, and responses.

Some interactions are brief, simple, one-off exchanges between strangers, such as a friendly greeting accompanied by an acknowledging wave, or a polite apology after accidentally bumping into someone.

Others may be more one-sided, with one participant taking a dominant role while the other remains more passive, as seen when a manager gives instructions to staff.

However, the most engaging and impactful interactions occur within ongoing relationships with family, friends, colleagues, and those we support and care for. Within these sustained relationships, repeated interactions foster shared understanding, meaning, trust, and emotional connections that form the foundation of secure and healthy bonds.

EARLY YEARS INTERACTIONS

Although interactions within early years share some of the features associated with interactions in general, they must be considered and approached from a perspective that accounts for a child's developmental stage, and their emerging language and communication abilities.

Additionally, it's important to remain mindful of the critical role that interactions play in building the nurturing relationships that are essential to meeting children's needs and supporting their learning, wellbeing, and development.

Within early years, a 'positive' or 'effective' interaction refers to the warm, responsive, and respectful exchanges between an adult and child that are central to the development of positive relationships.

Through being fully present, available, and attentive to cues, practitioners can address children's needs in ways that help them to feel heard, valued, and engaged.

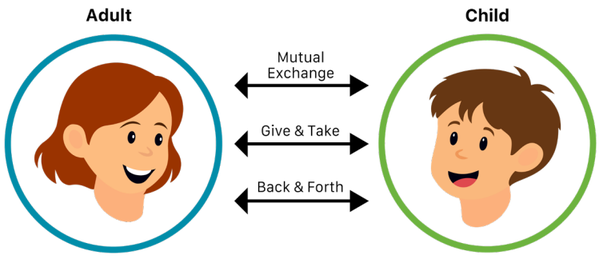
Through combining careful observation with the well-considered use of words, body language, and expression, interactions can be purposeful, nurturing, and impactful.

Recognisably, there are several elements that distinguish early years interactions from interactions in general. Early years interactions must reflect particular considerations and criteria to ensure that they effectively meet children's needs and remain developmentally appropriate.

The remainder of this chapter focuses on addressing the philosophy underpinning interactions, and what high-quality interactions include, encompass, and consider.

RECIPROCITY

Far from being a one-way process in which children are passive recipients, interactions are 'reciprocal' back-and-forth exchanges where both adult and child influence one another's behaviour, learning, and emotional responses. Simply put, 'reciprocity' means "mutual exchange" or to "give and take."



This exchange of communication can be both verbal and non-verbal, ranging from an adult responding sensitively to a child's emotional signals, a child smiling at an adult and the adult smiling back, or something more complex such as enjoying a shared conversation around learning.

Interactions are not something practitioners 'do' to children, they are co-created reciprocally through shared attention, communication, turn-taking, and emotional attunement. Through understanding interaction as a reciprocal process, practitioners recognise children's capacity to be competent communicators, capable of initiating, sustaining, ending, and influencing the direction of their interactions.

Reciprocal interactions develop like a tennis match, with one person 'serving' the ball and the other person 'returning'. Each participant's behaviour both influences and provokes a response from the other, creating a back-and-forth rally of communication exchange, until one player causes it to stop. The topic of 'serve and return' interactions is covered in-depth during a later chapter.

CHILD-CENTRED

High-quality interactions are child-centred. Rather than being driven by adult agendas or pre-determined outcomes, they begin with and are shaped by the child's needs, interests, and cues. Furthermore, they are highly individualised, tailored to each child's stage of development and communicative abilities.

> "Child-centred play pedagogy requires us to take the lead from children. A young child's voice is interpreted by our observations of their actions, emotions, and words."
>
> **Realising the Ambition (2020:46)**

A child-centred philosophy places children's interests, voices, rights, and wellbeing at the heart of practice, recognising children as capable and active participants in their own learning.

The approach is underpinned by valuing, understanding, and responding sensitively to children's needs, and demands a sound understanding of child development.

Through working in partnership with children and their families, practitioners can build trusting, co-operative relationships that place the child at the centre of all decision-making.

KNOWING CHILDREN WELL

The ability of the practitioner to engage in high-quality interactions is often determined by how well they know a particular child. The quality and depth of a relationship is a key factor in how effectively a child learns, develops, and thrives.

Knowing children deeply helps to ensure that interactions are genuinely child-centred, and are intentional and personalised rather than generic. Honouring each child's individuality and uniqueness enables practitioners to support development in ways that are more meaningful and impactful for the child.

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

As touched on previously, interactions within early years recognise the child as a powerful agent in their own learning.

Practitioners should share a strong commitment towards supporting children to be competent, confident and capable learners. High-quality interactions are the primary means through which this can be realised in practice, positioning children as active contributors rather than passive recipients.

Interactions enable children to participate actively by:

- Encouraging curiosity through questioning, exploration, and investigation.
- Supporting the co-construction of knowledge through dialogue and shared thinking.
- Providing opportunities for children to influence planning, environments, and routines.
- Helping children reflect on their thinking, building early meta-cognitive skills.

CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

Human rights are fundamental freedoms that everyone needs to live a healthy, safe, and happy life.

While children hold the same rights as adults, they have specific rights designed to recognise their need for additional protections. These rights are enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which serves to safeguard the dignity, wellbeing, and equality of all children.

A rights-based approach within early years is underpinned by high-quality interactions. It is through respectful relationships and conversations that children can begin to understand and exercise their rights. Furthermore, high-quality interactions are the practical mechanism through which the principles of the UNCRC become embedded within everyday practice. These principles are recognised and reinforced by the practice exemplars contained within the *Quality Improvement Framework* (2025:40).

Within a rights-based approach, children's voices and experiences are recognised as central to their agency and active participation. Interactions perform a pivotal role in ensuring these voices are not only heard, but genuinely valued, interpreted, and appropriately responded to.

CHILD'S VOICE

You have the right to play. I like to be able to play on the climbing frame.

- Max (Age 3)

Through high-quality interactions characterised by warmth, responsiveness and respect, practitioners support children to express thoughts, preferences, emotions and ideas. When practitioners listen carefully, respond sensitively, and take children's perspectives seriously, children learn that their views, voice, and rights matter.

RESPONSIVE ROUTINES

Interactions can occur at any time and in any place, with almost any situation offering opportunities for practitioners to foster nurturing relationships and support children's development through warmth, sensitivity, and responsiveness.

For example, during nappy changing, a practitioner who talks gently, explains what they're doing, and responds thoughtfully to a child's cues, not only recognises the child as far more than a passive recipient of care, they also foster language development, emotional security, and a sense of trust.

REFLECTION POINT

Where do opportunities for interactions naturally arise? Rather than viewing care routines as purely functional, recognise their potential for nurturing and developmentally supportive interactions.

Similarly, during mealtimes, practitioners can support and promote communication, independence, and social skill development by engaging in meaningful discussions around food, encouraging turn-taking, and acknowledging children's personal preferences.

There are an extensive range of scenarios within which high-quality, developmentally nurturing interactions can take place, including:

- Drop-off and pick-up times
- Changing routines
- Mealtimes
- Getting ready to venture outdoors
- Carrying-out tasks, such as updating a child's PLJ

ROLE OF THE ADULT

Although high-quality interactions are reciprocal and acknowledge children's capacity to influence and shape them, practitioners have a responsibility to facilitate engagement that consistently supports children's wellbeing, as well as their social, emotional, and communicative development.

Practitioners can achieve this effectively through following these key practices:

Be warm, responsive, and fully engaged by listening actively, showing genuine interest and following the child's lead.
Have a thorough understanding surrounding the features of effective interactions, their importance, and potential impact.
Ensure that the environment and atmosphere support children to feel safe, confident, and secure, enabling them to engage in positive and meaningful interactions with others.
Possess clear understanding of each child's stage of development. Know children well and adapt interactions to meet individual needs and interests.
Skilfully balance when to step-in, step-back, ask questions, comment, or observe in order to effectively support children's learning, interests, and independence without disrupting play or limiting exploration.
Adapt interactions to be inclusive and equitable for all children. This may require use of symbols, gestures or reduced language. Recognise that children need time to process their thoughts.
Be present, approachable, and readily available, demonstrating genuine curiosity in what children are communicating. Understanding the child's perspective can inform practice and approaches to interactions.

HIGH-QUALITY

Realising the Ambition (2020) emphasises that young children learn about self-respect through the way that others interact with, look at, treat, and care for them. The document explains that the quality of the interactions that children have with adults strongly influences their enjoyment of learning, as well as the manner and extent to which experiences impact their development.

> The key part of the environment for children is the human, social environment of positive nurturing interactions.
>
> **Realising the Ambition (2020:15)**

> **CHILD'S VOICE**
>
> When the teachers talk to you, you talk to them. I like it, it makes me happy.
>
> **- Millie (Age 4)**

It is critical that practitioners recognise the potential impact their everyday interactions with children can have.

Given that a child's early exchanges with significant adults fundamentally shapes their learning, development, and sense of self – as well as their understanding and expectations of the world around them – it's vital that practitioner's interactions are consistently of the highest-quality.

In practice, high-quality interactions do the following:

- Build warm, trusting, nurturing relationships that help children feel safe, valued, and understood.
- Tune-in to verbal and non-verbal cues, recognising behaviour as communication.
- Follow the child's lead, interests, and pace of learning.
- Use intentional, supportive language to model, extend and clarify thinking, scaffolding learning to support understanding and enable children to think deeply.
- Engage in sustained shared thinking, exploring ideas together, rather than directing.
- Offer sensitive support and timely challenge. Practitioners understand when to step-in and when to step back.
- Promote independence and agency, valuing children as capable, powerful, and active participants in their own learning.

When reading the document, it's important to reflect on ways that practice corresponds to the criteria and practice exemplars outlined within the *Quality Improvement Framework* (2025).

In-depth exploration regarding the elements of high-quality interactions, why they matter, and how they can be applied in practice will be explored throughout the remainder of this document.

WHY INTERACTIONS MATTER

While the previous chapter focused on defining and exploring the nature of interactions, this chapter examines why getting them right is critically important. It highlights and justifies the need for practitioners to not only recognise that their interactions matter, but to ensure that they are consistently of the highest possible quality.

To achieve this, the chapter explores how the quality of interactions can impact multiple areas of children's development, integrates relevant theoretical perspectives, and demonstrates how high-quality interactions provide a foundation for children's wellbeing, the building of secure relationships, and the development of language and communication skills.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment theory examines how emotional bonds form between a child and their caregiver. Developed by psychologist John Bowlby, the theory proposes that the quality of early caregiving relationships plays a crucial role in shaping a child's development and can have a profound impact upon future relationships and wellbeing.

Bowlby believed that children are born with a natural instinct to form attachments with their caregivers. Attachment-seeking behaviours, such as crying, calling-out, smiling, clinging to, or following, help children keep their caregivers close and increase their chances of receiving comfort, care, and protection when they feel stressed or unsafe (Bowlby, 1969).

When children consistently experience sensitive, responsive, and nurturing interactions from a caregiver attuned to their needs, they feel contained and understood during moments of anxiety. This supports the development of a reciprocal relationship and increases the likelihood that a 'secure attachment' will form (Ainsworth, 1970).

Importantly, attachment security is not dependent upon 'flawless' interactions (Winnicott, 1953). However, children do benefit from repeated experiences where caregivers respond sensitively and repair moments of misunderstanding over time.

Within secure attachments, children learn to trust that others will be available to meet their needs, are better equipped to manage emotions and anxiety, and understand that they are worthy of love and care, developing a strong sense of self-worth, value, and self-esteem.

Alternatively, if a child's early interactions and relationships with caregivers are unpredictable, challenging, or insufficiently responsive, an 'insecure attachment' may develop. Without consistent, nurturing, and supportive interactions that meet their needs sensitively, children struggle to regulate their emotions, experience heightened anxiety, and find it difficult to trust others, perceiving them as unreliable. Significantly, this can impair their ability to build healthy connections throughout childhood and into adulthood.

High-quality interactions are fundamental to the development of secure attachments. It is therefore essential that staff understand how the quality of the interactions children experience can impact the way that attachment patterns develop.

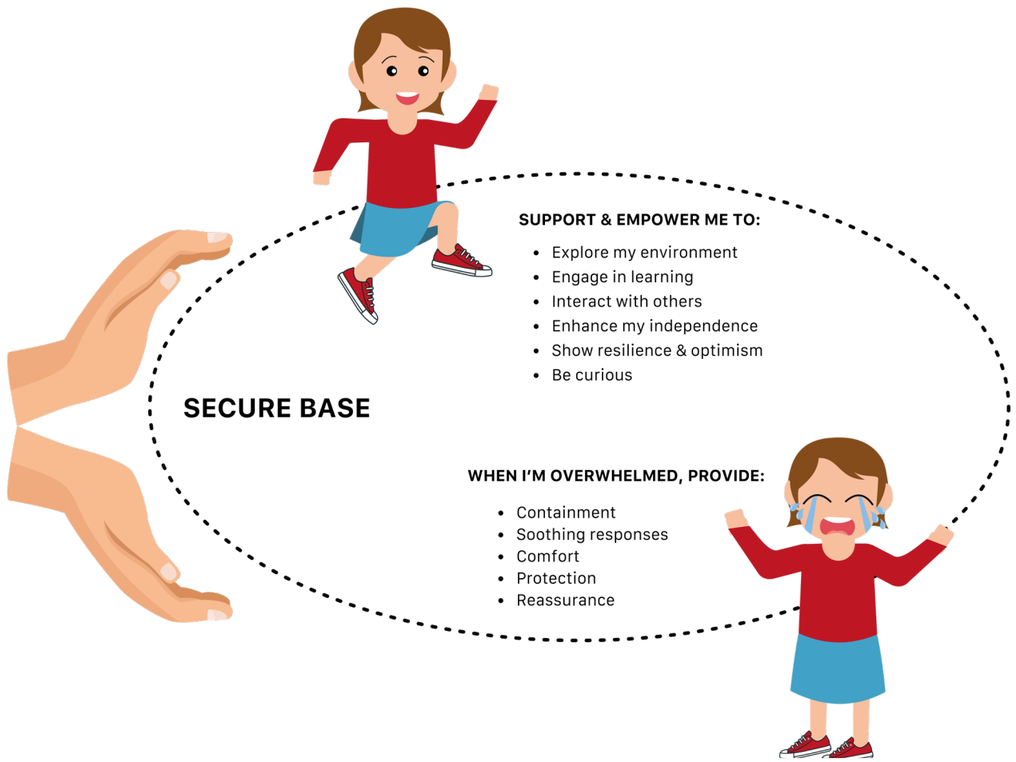
SECURE BASE

Through consistent, high-quality interactions that foster feelings of safety, trust, and reliability, children can come to view the practitioner with whom they share a healthy attachment as a ‘secure base.’

Rather than a physical place, Bowlby described the ‘secure base’ as the role of an attachment figure who provides a dependable source of comfort, containment and protection. This reliable presence empowers the child to explore their environment, engage in learning, and interact with others, confident in the knowledge that they can return to the trustworthy caregiver when feeling distressed or overwhelmed (Bowlby, 1988).

A practitioner who is consistently available, responsive, and attuned to the child can act both as an effective ‘safe haven’ in times of distress, and as a stable home point from which the child can venture forth to explore the world.

High-quality interactions are critical to the development of reciprocal, trusting relationships that enable the child to perceive a practitioner as reliable, understanding, and capable of containing their emotions.



The consistent interactions and attunement children experience, cultivate a belief that their needs will be met and care will be available, supporting them to develop an ‘internalised secure base’ which they can draw upon when an attachment figure isn’t physically present.

Not only does this enable them to better tolerate separation from their carer, and help them manage uncertainty, it also enhances independence, resilience and optimism.

ATTUNEMENT

Attunement refers to a practitioner’s ability to sensitively ‘tune-in’ to a child’s emotional state and respond in ways that convey genuine understanding, empathy, and connection. It is a relational process that underpins the development of reciprocal relationships and secure attachments, supporting a child’s emerging ability to regulate emotions.

Crucially, attunement doesn’t happen in isolation. It depends on consistent, meaningful, high-quality interactions with a sensitive and fully present caregiver who demonstrates reliability and emotional availability.

CHILD’S VOICE

When the teacher is sitting beside me and talking to me it feels kind, it feels happy.

- Ollie (Age 3)

Repeated experiences of interactions in which a child feels seen, heard, and understood supports their ability to make sense of emotions and internal experiences, helping them learn that these can be safely expressed and effectively managed within relationships.

When interactions lack quality and consistency, there is an increased risk that children’s emotional cues may go un-noticed or be misread. Repetitively mismatched or inappropriate responses can leave the child feeling misunderstood, disrupting the development of attunement and secure attachments.

INTERNAL WORKING MODEL

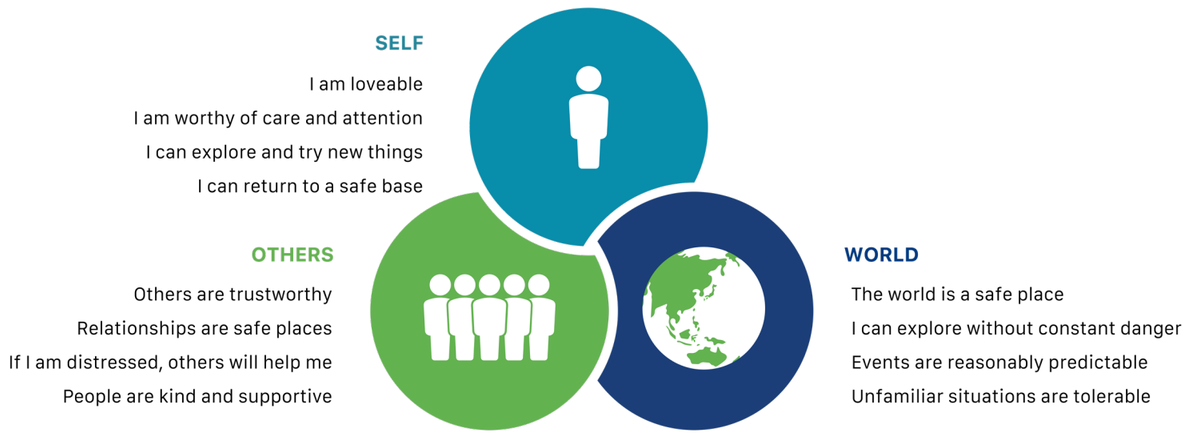
The quality of early interactions and attachments directly impact the way in which children learn to view the world, themselves, and others.

John Bowlby referred to this 'view' as an Internal Working Model, which acts as an inner template or map that guides the way children perceive themselves, predict and interpret the behaviour of others, and engage in relationships.

Based upon experiences of how the world or relationships have functioned previously, the child develops a set of beliefs about their own worthiness of love, care, and attention, as well as expectations about whether others will be available, trustworthy, and appropriately responsive to their needs. Formed as a result of repeated interactions and experiences, these models can inform a person's relational behaviour across their lifespan.

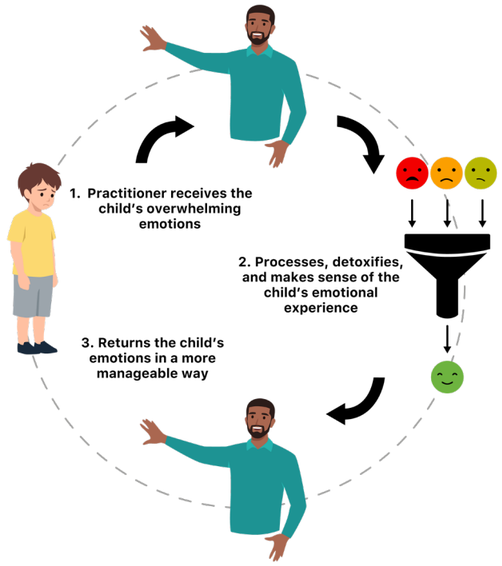
In early years settings, children arrive with pre-existing internal working models shaped by prior experiences and interactions. These models may influence how children relate to practitioners, respond to separation, engage in play, and manage emotions.

INNER WORKING MODEL (SECURELY ATTACHED)



Encouragingly, Bowlby noted that internal working models are not set-in-stone. Through consistent, high-quality interactions, children's internal working models can alter as they experience evidence that adults can be reliably responsive, and that they themselves are worthy of care, attention, and love. This highlights the transformative power of high-quality interactions (Bowlby, 1973).

CONTAINMENT



Containment refers to the process through which a practitioner receives, interprets, and responds to a child's overwhelming emotions in ways that help the child feel safe, understood, and emotionally supported.

Originating from the work of Wilfred Bion, containment involves the adult effectively 'holding' the child's emotional experience, making sense of it, and responding in a calm, attuned manner that supports the child to manage feelings they may not yet be able to regulate independently (Bion, 1962). Essentially, this involves responding calmly, naming emotions, and helping the child feel understood, rather than attempting to immediately 'fix' the issue.

High-quality interactions are central to the efficacy of containment. Through attentive listening, reflective responses, and empathetic communication, practitioners create a secure relational environment in which children feel safe to express and explore their emotions.

When a child feels overwhelmed, practitioners can absorb and process these feelings, returning them in a more manageable form. Over time, consistent nurturing interactions support the development of self-regulation and resilience.

It's worth noting that containment is a relational process that can occur within all relationships, not only those between practitioners and children.

CO-REGULATION

Co-regulation is the interactive process through which an adult supports a child to manage their emotions, behaviour, and psychological state before the child has fully developed the ability to do so independently.

Central to this process is ‘containment’, whereby practitioners help children feel emotionally held, understood, and supported during distress. In this sense, containment is the mechanism through which co-regulation occurs.

Developmentally, young children’s neurological systems are not mature enough for them to self-regulate their attention or emotions, so they depend on practitioners to provide external regulation through soothing, predictable, emotionally attuned responses and interactions. The repeated experience of being regulated with a securely attached adult supports children to form their own capacities for regulation (Siegel, 2012).

> A child’s expression of their emotions is the unconscious way in which they tell us that they have an unmet need, and that they can’t manage this themselves.
>
> **Realising the Ambition (2020:32)**

Everyday events and routines naturally create moments where practitioners may need to engage in co-regulation, supporting children to manage their emotions, including coping with separation during drop-offs, managing frustrations during play, or navigating conflict with other children.

High-quality interactions ensure that these moments are approached with empathy and intentionality. Through this process, children learn that emotions are manageable and that support is available within relationships.

RESILIENCE

Resilience is the ability to cope with and adapt to challenging situations or events. Rather than being a fixed characteristic, a person’s resilience can change and develop.

Through meaningful interactions, practitioners nurture children’s resilience, strengthening their capacity to bounce back from challenging experiences and enhancing their confidence to cope with and overcome difficulties in the future.

> **CHILD’S VOICE**
>
> If it doesn’t work, I can just try again.
>
> **- Sonny (Age 3)**

Whilst practitioners cannot prevent children from experiencing challenging events, they can help them develop the skills required to manage such situations in a healthy manner.

Through being reliable and consistently present, practitioners help children feel loved, cared for, and accepted. This supports the development of confidence and self-belief, both of which are crucial to building resilience.

It’s important that practitioners take responsibility over their own emotions and actions to demonstrate healthy ways to respond to challenges. Managing situations calmly and constructively models effective emotional regulation and behaviour management, supporting children to develop emotional intelligence and coping strategies of their own.

EMOTIONAL LITERACY

Emotional literacy refers to a person's ability to recognise, understand, manage and express their emotions (Sorin 2004:4). The development of young children's emotional literacy is essential to their wellbeing and influences all areas of development, including academic achievement, peer relationships, and social interactions.

Through sensitive, attuned interactions, practitioners support children to identify, understand, and share their emotions both verbally and non-verbally. By modelling appropriate and regulated emotional responses, practitioners further equip children with the skills required to manage their own emotions effectively.

Research (Eckman, 1992) shows that children develop emotions from birth and require safe, secure attachments in order to explore them. Therefore, practitioners need to build trusting, individualised relationships with children, recognising each child's unique stage of development whilst adapting their interactions accordingly.

Responsive, meaningful, and personalised interactions are vital in supporting emotional literacy, helping to prevent missed opportunities for children's emotional development.

Resources such as *The Colour Monster* are an excellent way to interact with children about their emotions.

SENSE OF SELF

A child's sense of self is shaped by the nature of their experiences, interactions, and relationships, as well as the societal and cultural contexts in which they live. This sense of who they are evolves as they grow.

Feeling valued and understood, as well as seen and heard by others, helps children to develop confidence in themselves and to establish secure relationships with those around them.

Without a positive sense of identity, long-term issues with trust, intimacy and attachment may arise.

Through early experiences and relationships, children come to recognise themselves as separate, distinct individuals who can influence others through their actions. When practitioners interact consistently, attentively, and responsively, they convey to children that they are valued, significant, and matter.

High-quality interactions allow practitioners to acknowledge and celebrate each child's unique characteristics, abilities, and preferences, supporting the development of a strong and positive sense of identity and self.

A POSITIVE SENSE OF SELF

I am important

I can solve problems

My opinions matter

My ideas matter

I can learn new things

I can try new things

I keep trying

My feelings matter

I belong here

I am loved and respected

SENSE OF BELONGING

Taking the time to welcome each child and their family whilst embedding inclusivity at the heart of practice reinforces a sense of belonging, connection, and feeling valued.

High-quality nurturing interactions foster a child's sense of belonging, strengthening connections between their home and the setting, promoting feelings of security and familiarity.

When children feel known, respected, valued, and understood, they are more likely to engage meaningfully, participate fully, and express themselves.

Inclusive settings ensure that every child can see themselves reflected and celebrated. This is achieved not only through spaces and experiences, but through interactions that communicate respect, understanding and the valuing of diversity.

Through high-quality interactions, practitioners can support and encourage children to develop understanding and appreciation for a variety of cultures and family backgrounds, fostering an ethos of inclusion, equity, and respect.

The Quality Improvement Framework recognises each child as an individual with their own personality, views, needs, and rights. Children should be supported in ways that promote engagement, inclusion, and belonging (2025:53).

CHALLENGING BIAS

Bias refers to the attitudes, assumptions, or judgements about individuals or groups not grounded in fact or evidence. These judgements may be positive or negative, conscious or unconscious, and are shaped by social, cultural, and environmental influences.

Typically, biases are centred upon characteristics such as race, gender, ethnicity, disability, religion, language, and socioeconomic status.

During early childhood, bias can significantly shape children's developing beliefs, expectations, and self-concept. Children do not form attitudes and beliefs in isolation; they absorb language, ideas, behaviours and expectations from:

- Adults
- Family
- Friends
- Media
- Wider Society
- Interactions

Without guidance, children may internalise stereotypes and develop preferences or prejudices reflective of the biases within their environments.

Repeated exposure to bias can impact how children perceive both others and themselves. Being the target of negative stereotypes can be detrimental to wellbeing and self-concept, resulting in diminished self-confidence and limited aspirations. Exposure to biased messaging can normalise inequality, reinforce stereotypes, and hinder the development of critical thinking and empathy.

High-quality interactions afford powerful opportunities to challenge and counteract the effects of bias. Given that children construct knowledge through relationships and dialogue, reflective and equitable interactions can play a crucial role in disrupting the development of harmful perceptions and attitudes.

Interactions can provide children with models of fairness, respect and inclusion. Through responding thoughtfully to children's questions, biased remarks, or stereotypical perceptions, practitioners support children to critically examine the messages they encounter.

REFLECTION POINT

Are there any forms of bias that you commonly observe in children's interactions? How can you respond in order to support children to reflect and develop an understanding of fairness, respect, and inclusion?

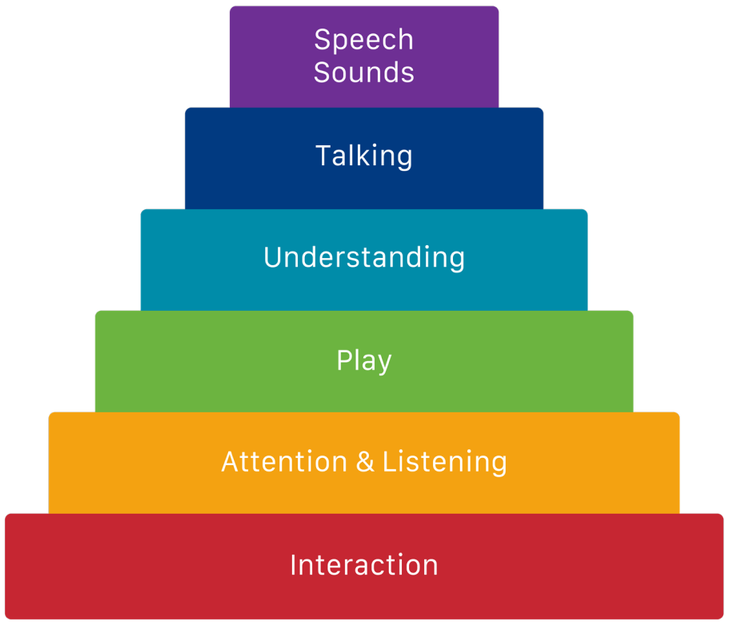
LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Developed by NHS Fife's Speech & Language Therapy Service, the *Communication Handbook* brings together practical information and evidence-based strategies to support children's early speech, language, and communication development. It provides information about how skills typically develop and offers strategies to try when difficulties arise.

Using the metaphor of a tower to explain how language develops, the handbook emphasises the importance of laying each brick in the right order to create a firm foundation upon which further skills can be built.

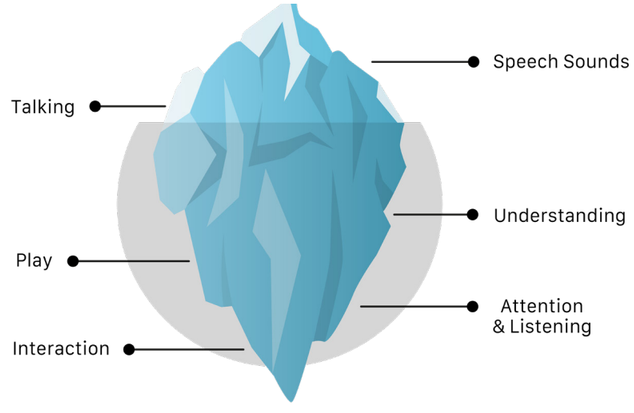
Recognisably, 'Interaction' rests at the base of the language tower, it underpins all other elements of language development and provides the foundation from which they can develop. Whilst the stages are interdependent, a child's language tower will be wobbly and unstable if the foundational block of interactions is not strong.

As emphasised in the *Quality Improvement Framework*, *"interacting and exploring with children is a valuable way to build vocabulary and foster understanding"* (2025:28).



It can be useful to think about the language tower as an iceberg, with only a small percentage of its total size showing above the water.

When parents or practitioners have concerns about a child's language skill development, it typically surrounds elements above the imaginary water line. The easily observable signs that language isn't developing are that the child doesn't use words or sentences to communicate, or that speech is unintelligible.



However, it's important to consider that difficulties may be related to one of the earlier developmental bricks. Often, the answer could be to work on interactions, attention and listening, or play, rather than talking or speech.

> Children who haven't had lots of opportunities to interact with others may not know the 'rules' of interaction and may be passive or attention seeking.
>
> **NHS Fife - Communication Handbook**
>
> **(2020:10)**

Ultimately, a strong and stable tower cannot be built without opportunities to engage in and experience meaningful, high-quality interactions.

It's important to recognise that some children may not be afforded the opportunity to experience high-quality interactions at home.

Therefore, the interactions that practitioners engage in with children can have a major impact, helping to establish strong foundations that can positively influence the way in which children's communication and language skills develop. Each element of the Language Tower will be explored more fully during a later chapter.

TALKING, LISTENING & UNDERSTANDING

When children develop skills for talking, listening, and understanding together, they cultivate strong foundations for learning, thinking, later literacy, and the building of relationships.

Listening

Significantly, children need to develop listening skills before they can effectively process or use language. Through listening, they begin to tune into sounds, rhythm, vocabulary, and grammar. It also helps them understand how conversations work and to make sense of language within different contexts.

High-quality interactions provide consistent exposure to rich, meaningful spoken language, helping children develop their vocabulary, phonological awareness, and comprehension skills.

Talking

Talking affords children opportunities to practise producing sounds, form sentences, and use new vocabulary.

Through responsive interactions, practitioners can model language, encourage turn-taking, and help scaffold children's ideas, explanations, and stories, supporting the development of communication skills.

Understanding

Understanding comes from making sense of vocabulary, processing instructions, interpreting questions, and comprehending stories and concepts. Practitioners' sensitive, attuned interactions help children internalise meaning, apply new knowledge, and engage confidently in conversations, routines, and learning activities.

Through collaborating in rich, responsive interactions, practitioners support the development of listening, talking, and understanding, fostering the critical language skills that underpin children's learning, communication, and social competency.

SOCIAL COMPETENCY

Social competence refers to an individual's ability to interact effectively with others, build positive relationships, and navigate a range of social situations in an appropriate and respectful manner. This includes the capacity to interpret social cues, adapt behaviour to different contexts, resolve conflict constructively, demonstrate empathy, and collaborate with others.

The skills associated with social competence are not innate; they are learned and developed over time through experiences, relationships, and interactions.

Through both observing and participating in exchanges with adults, children learn essential skills such as turn-taking, conflict resolution, appropriate expression of emotions, and the demonstration of empathy (Denham et al, 2003).

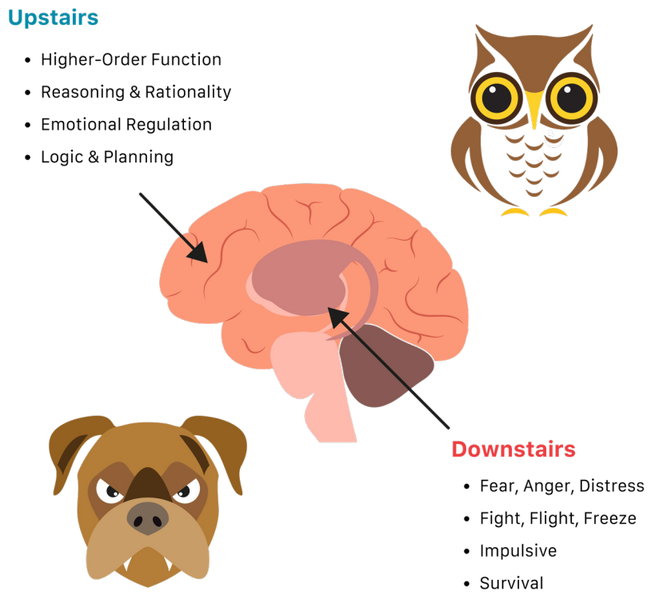
Early social experiences offer valuable opportunities to explore, practise, and refine skills such as sharing, cooperating, and taking turns, enabling children to develop the competence and confidence to navigate increasingly complex social situations.

BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

Upstairs & Downstairs Brains

When considering the vital importance of ensuring that interactions are sensitively attuned, responsive, and of the highest possible quality, it's worthwhile examining the role they play in children's brain development.

Whilst the brain is infinitely complex, Siegel (2012) used a simple to understand metaphor of an 'upstairs' and 'downstairs' brain to explain how different elements of the brain interact to influence emotions and behaviour.



The 'downstairs' brain develops first and is responsible for survival, safety, and responses to stress or perceived danger. As such, it controls the activation of fight, flight, or freeze responses. Given its role in protection, it is referred to as the "Guard Dog."

Meanwhile, the more gradually developing 'upstairs' brain, responsible for higher-order thinking, reasoning, reflection, and emotional regulation, is referred to as the "Wise Owl."

When children feel safe and supported, they are better placed to access the 'Wise Owl'. However, when they feel overwhelmed, stressed, or unsafe, they are more likely to draw upon their 'Guard Dog' for protection. High-quality interactions help children feel safe, secure, and understood, reducing the need for reliance on survival responses, and instead, supporting the development of thinking and capacity for self-regulation.

Neural Pathways

Children's brain development is shaped by the repeated experiences and interactions they encounter. Neural pathways are like trails through a forest, the more frequently they are used, the easier they become to follow. This applies equally to children's emotional responses and expectations of relationships.

When children consistently experience calm, responsive, and supportive interactions, the brain strengthens connections between emotional responses and areas responsible for thinking, reflection, and self-regulation. Over time, this supports development of greater capacity to effectively regulate strong emotions.

Alternatively, children who repeatedly experience rejection, criticism, or inconsistent responses during distress may develop strong pathways to areas of the brain associated with survival responses, fear, and mistrust.

The brain's ability to grow, prune, and rewire neural connections in response to experience is called 'neuroplasticity.' Each empathetic and sensitively attuned interaction helps strengthen a child's capacity for regulation, resilience, and healthy relationships.

Although early negative experiences can adversely influence brain development and lifelong outcomes, individuals are not necessarily defined by their past. Owing to the brain's plasticity, recovery from negative experiences is possible. Positive experiences, interactions, and relationships build new neural connections, patterns, and networks that support individuals to relate, interact, and respond in healthier, more resilient ways.

Consistent, warm, and sensitively attuned interactions from reliable and responsive adults can make a significant difference for a child who has endured difficult relationships or circumstances, helping to counteract the effects.

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Cognitive development describes the process through which children acquire knowledge and develop the cognitive abilities required to process information, think, and reason. In turn, these abilities support the development of self-regulation, executive function, movement, and coordination.

Given that young children's learning is shaped through social experiences and meaningful engagement with others, high-quality interactions are central to cognitive growth.

Lev Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development emphasised that a person's learning and development are profoundly shaped by their social interactions and surrounding culture.

Vygotsky argued that learning is a collaborative process, with knowledge being constructed in the social context of interactions with 'more knowledgeable others' before it is internalised by the child (Vygotsky, 1978).

Central to this theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which represents the distance between what a learner can do on their own, and what they can achieve with support and guidance from a more knowledgeable other, in this case an early year's practitioner.

Similar to the way that physical scaffolding supports the building of structures, 'educational scaffolding' through interactional techniques, supports children to develop knowledge and skills, with scaffolding being removed gradually as children gain greater mastery.

A core component of Vygotsky's ZPD is 'sustained shared thinking', which is when a child and practitioner work together in an intellectual way to explore ideas, solve problems, clarify concepts, and evaluate.

To allow for cognitive processing, thinking must be 'sustained' for enough time to enable both parties to contribute towards the thinking. Rather than a one-sided communication of information, sustained shared thinking is a meeting of minds, often simply described as "thinking together."

REFLECTION POINT

When a child asks a question, rather than simply providing the answer, consider if it's possible to engage in Sustained Shared Thinking to support the child to develop their ability to solve problems independently.

Using high-quality interactions, practitioners can listen actively, tune-in to children's thinking, use higher-order and open-ended questions to extend learning, and model new vocabulary to support the understanding of different concepts.

Vygotsky viewed language and vocabulary as foundational to developing complex thinking and understanding, with words serving as tools for both communication and thought (Vygotsky, 1986). Practitioner–child interactions play a vital role in supporting this development, enabling children to build relationships, express ideas, and develop skills to internally plan, reason, and solve problems.

MINDSET & ATTITUDES

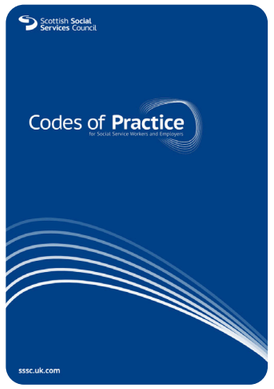
An essential, yet often overlooked aspect of high-quality interactions is the adoption of a professional and nurturing mindset.

Effective interactions are not solely determined by theoretical understanding of strategies and techniques, but by the practitioner's frame of mind, attitude, and commitment to professional practice and conduct.

Additionally, in order to effectively support children to contain their emotions, practitioners must be capable of recognising when they themselves feel overwhelmed or 'full-up'. Through awareness and management of one's own stress and emotions, practitioners are better positioned to engage in sensitively attuned and appropriately responsive interactions with children.

This chapter provides readers with key insights regarding how to maintain a professional approach by fulfilling associated obligations and responsibilities. It reflects upon ways that practitioners' own emotions can impact upon interactions, and emphasises the importance of upholding children's rights.

PROFESSIONALISM



Practitioners working within early years settings are required to adhere to the Codes of Practice set out by the Scottish Social Services Council (2024). These codes emphasise the expectation that all practitioners conduct themselves in a consistently professional manner when interacting with children, colleagues, families, support staff, and external agencies.

Essential to this professionalism, is maintaining awareness of how conversations are conducted within the learning environment. It's important to remember that children are continually observing, listening, and learning from the adults around them. As such, language, tone, behaviour, and the nature of conversations must reflect high standards of professional practice, remaining appropriate and responsive to the needs of children.

> The SSSC regulates the workforce to make sure that people can count on social services being provided by a trusted, skilled, confident and valued workforce.
>
> **SSSC - Codes of Practice**
>
> **(2024:2)**

Particular care must be taken to ensure that sensitive or inappropriate topics are not discussed in the presence of children.

Conversations relating to confidential information, safeguarding concerns, family circumstances, personal matters, or workplace disagreements should be reserved for appropriate times and conducted in private spaces.

Maintaining clear boundaries in this regard is essential to safeguarding both children's wellbeing and practitioners' professional integrity.

Practitioners must also remain mindful of how their communication, both verbal and non-verbal may impact others. The use of respectful language, appropriate tone, and a considered approach to dialogue are fundamental. Significantly, negative or critical comments about children, families, or colleagues are unacceptable, as they undermine trust, damage relationships, and can compromise the professionalism and reputation of the setting.

Notably, early years professionals are important role models for children, therefore, daily interactions and conversations should consistently demonstrate respect, care, and a nurturing approach.

Furthermore, practitioners are expected to promote a positive attitude within the setting, actively engaging, influencing, and motivating others to contribute to a supportive, inclusive, and ever-developing learning environment.

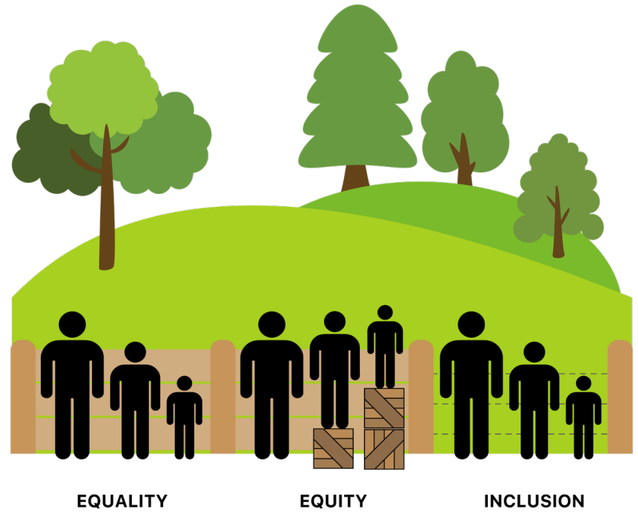
EQUALITY & EQUITY

The Equality Act (2010) is a legal framework that protects individuals from discrimination on the basis of specific protected characteristics, these are:

- Age
- Disability
- Gender Reassignment
- Marriage & Civil Partnership
- Pregnancy & Maternity
- Race
- Religion or Belief
- Sex
- Sexual Orientation

The legislation underpins expectations for fairness, respect and inclusion. In practice, this means actively creating environments in which all children and their families feel welcomed, respected and valued. Through high-quality interactions, practitioners can demonstrate the principles of equality, model respect, and reinforce a culture of inclusion and belonging.

It is essential that practitioners possess understanding of the differences between ‘equality’ and ‘equity’ within this context.



‘Equality’ involves offering the same opportunities, rights, protections, and resources to all children, whereas ‘equity’ recognises that children have diverse needs, experiences, and starting points, therefore they may require tailored support.

In order to make interactions equitable, practitioners may need to adapt their responses and strategies to support each child’s individual development and ensure learning experiences are accessible and meaningful. This is particularly important given that children’s early language and communication skills are strong predictors of later literacy and academic attainment.

Significantly, practitioners have a professional responsibility to challenge discriminatory language, behaviour or assumptions. This includes the subtleties of everyday communication with children, families, and colleagues, and means ensuring that policies, procedures and practice reflect an accepting and inclusive environment.

Through embedding principles of respect, inclusion, and fairness within interactions, and the modelling of equitable practice, children and families can experience environments where diversity is valued, individual needs are supported, and every child is empowered to participate and thrive.

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

Unconscious bias refers to the automatic, often unintentional attitudes or stereotypes that influence a person's perceptions, decisions, assumptions, and behaviours.

These biases are shaped by a variety of sources, including personal experiences, cultural norms, societal messages, media representations, and organisational culture.

Whilst everyone holds some form of unconscious bias, these can lead individuals to make assumptions or judgements about people based upon stereotypes or beliefs rather than objective facts.

Within early years, unchecked unconscious bias can significantly affect the nature and quality of interactions.

> Although admitting and dealing with you own biases can be challenging, it is essential to identify, reflect on, and discuss them.
>
> **Realising the Ambition**
>
> **(2024:42)**

For example, a practitioner may unintentionally favour a particular child over another when affording learning opportunities, interpret behaviour differently based upon unfounded stereotypes, or overlook the needs of a particular family based on assumptions.

Unchallenged biases can limit children's experiences, hinder development, and perpetuate inequality within the setting.

Practitioners can address their unconscious biases, bring them into awareness, and increase personal awareness through on-going self-reflection. Reflecting upon interactions and questioning stereotypes and assumptions can help uncover biases that they may hold.

Although biases are something all individuals possess, it is essential to recognise that they can be identified, brought into conscious awareness, and actively addressed to minimise their potential impact on practice.

THINK before acting or responding

REFLECT on actions and responses

ACKNOWLEDGE unconscious bias

UNDERSTAND the root of bias

PLAN an alternative unbiased response

Taking the time to pause and reflect before responding or acting, enables practitioners to make well considered decisions and reduces the likelihood of bias negatively impacting interactions.

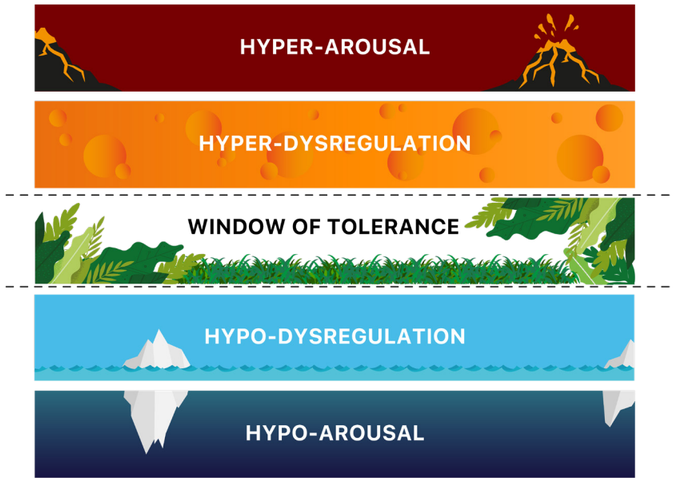
Additionally, by consciously using respectful language, promoting inclusive practice and adapting strategies to equitably meet individual needs, practitioners can minimise the impact of bias and ensure interactions remain fair, non-judgemental, and supportive for all children, families, and colleagues.

REFLECTION POINT

How often do you reflect upon your own biases and assumptions? To what extent are you receptive to evidence that may cause you to reconsider your perceptions and beliefs?

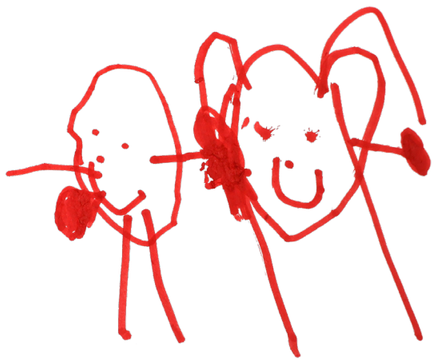
WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

Originally developed by Dr. Dan Siegel, the term ‘Window of Tolerance’ refers to the zone in which individuals feel safe, emotionally regulated, and able to function effectively.



Within this ‘window’, it is possible to think clearly, manage emotions, cope with stress, make sound decisions, and respond appropriately to everyday challenges. This places the individual in a good position to interact positively, build connections, and maintain meaningful relationships with others.

Although feelings of stress, fear, or emotional discomfort may still arise, remaining within the window of tolerance means it is possible to manage these effectively without becoming overwhelmed.



Everyone has a different ‘window of tolerance’. What one person can cope with and how much they can cope with varies from person-to-person. Significantly, traumatic life events, repeated exposure to negative stressors, or unsupportive relationships can narrow an individual’s window of tolerance.

Conversely, repeated exposure to positive experiences, and supportive nurturing relationships can help widen an individual’s window, enhancing resilience and capacity to cope with challenging situations.

Irrespective of how wide an individual’s window is, inevitably, they will still encounter situations and stressors that provoke overwhelming thoughts and emotions, which they will feel unable to cope with, pushing them beyond their boundaries.

Beyond their ‘window of tolerance’, individuals may experience a state of dysregulation, in which they feel overwhelmed, unsettled, and less able to effectively manage their emotions and responses. This can significantly impact the nature and quality of their interactions with others.

The ‘window of tolerance’ is a useful concept, not only because it can support practitioners to consider what the children and families they support may be experiencing, but because it can be used personally to increase self-awareness surrounding one’s own emotional and mental state, aiding understanding regarding when to seek containment and support.

It can be extremely difficult for individuals to engage in sensitively attuned interactions or provide emotional containment for others if they do not feel securely contained or emotionally regulated themselves. To effectively support and contain others via interactions, individuals must first have the personal capacity and psychological space to do so. Remember, a dysregulated adult cannot effectively regulate a dysregulated child.

It is critical to remain aware of one’s own stress, frustration, and emotional state, recognising when this may exceed the window of tolerance, and risk negatively impacting the nature and quality of interactions.

This relates closely to the *Quality Improvement Framework’s* challenge question, which encourages reflection on the impact of staff wellbeing regarding the provision of safe, high-quality care that supports the best possible outcomes for children (2025:13).

SELF-REFLECTION & MODERATION

Reflective practice plays a vital role in supporting continuous professional growth, service improvement, and the maintenance of high-quality standards.

Through reflection, practitioners are able to evaluate the quality of their interactions and consider the impact these have upon children and their families. This process encourages the recognition of strengths, alongside identification of areas for development, providing valuable insights into the efficacy of current practice and highlighting opportunities for improvement.

Engaging in reflective practice supports the exploration of alternative approaches and the refinement of current methods to better meet the needs of children. It fosters a proactive approach to personal development, ensuring that practice remains well-informed and appropriately responsive.

Central to the reflection process is consideration of parents', carers', and children's perspectives. This helps to ensure that identified areas for improvement are relevant and meaningful to those using the service. The incorporation of these voices into planning and decision-making supports the creation of inclusive, responsive environments that effectively support the needs of children and their families.

Practitioners can engage in reflective practice through a range of approaches, including:

CPD

Engaging in Continuous Professional Development (CPD) enables practitioners to stay up-to-date with guidance, maintain compliance with mandatory frameworks and legislation, and stay informed of best practice.

As outlined in the *Quality Improvement Framework, "practitioners should make very good use of professional development opportunities that link directly to enhanced outcomes for children"* (2025:9).

Evaluation

Evaluating interactions enables practitioners to identify effective approaches, assess their impact on children's learning and development, and recognise areas for improvement.

This is a continuous and reflective process that helps to ensure practice remains responsive, purposeful, and focused on achieving positive outcomes for children and families.

The *Quality Improvement Framework* highlights the importance of gathering the views of children and families, as their perspectives provide valuable insight into the effectiveness of provision, support recognition of strengths, and inform opportunities for improvement (2025:5).

Peer Moderation

This is a collaborative process in which practitioners observe each other's practice, provide constructive feedback, and reflect together to promote consistently high-quality interactions.

The approach supports shared learning, identifies strengths, and highlights areas for development.

The Peer Moderation Audit Tool is a valuable resource, offering structured reflection points linked to key features of effective practice.

APPROACHING INTERACTIONS

The *Approaching Interactions* section outlines elements that practitioners can draw upon to ensure that their interactions are both purposeful and effective. It also provides a range of tools, techniques, and strategies that make it possible to apply the documents philosophical and theoretical principles meaningfully within everyday practice.

Naturally, when exploring a topic as broad and complex as interactions, it's important to structure the material in a way that is reader-friendly and easy to navigate. Following careful consideration, the decision was taken to spread *Approaching Interactions* over two chapters.

The first chapter focuses on equipping practitioners with the knowledge, techniques, and approaches required to engage in high-quality interactions that are attuned, nurturing, developmentally appropriate and supportive of children's engagement. It also introduces practical tools to help practitioners understand the underlying causes of children's communication or behavioural difficulties, enabling an informed and purposeful response.

The second chapter focuses on exploring the different elements of the *Communication High 5* and includes techniques that are applicable to interactions and early years more broadly. However, to avoid repetition of content, these have been incorporated within the *High 5* to effectively illustrate ways that the approach can be implemented and brought to life within early years settings.

UNDERSTANDING DEVELOPMENT

As highlighted in the *Quality Improvement Framework*, getting interactions right relies on possessing a *"clear understanding of how children learn and develop"* (2025:10), alongside an awareness of each child's individual stage within their developmental journey.

A comprehensive understanding of child development requires practitioners to consider all key areas, including: physical, social, cognitive, emotional, and language. Whilst overall development provides a holistic view of a child's abilities, each developmental area contributes to this larger picture in its own meaningful way.

Through consideration of the wider picture and its contributing elements, practitioners are well placed to recognise where children may require additional support and can respond by providing tailored, high-quality interactions that meet the child's individual needs.

When reflecting on children's progress, awareness of child development can provide understanding surrounding typical patterns of growth. Having this awareness supports practitioners to monitor learning, celebrate achievements, and identify when a child may require additional support or specialist intervention beyond their expertise.

Remember, all children are unique and develop at different rates. Some children may cultivate physical or cognitive skills more readily than communication and language, and vice-versa.

Therefore, it's important to maintain a flexible lens and remember that whilst they are useful, patterns of development refer to 'typically' or 'commonly' observed patterns, rather than rigid lines of development.

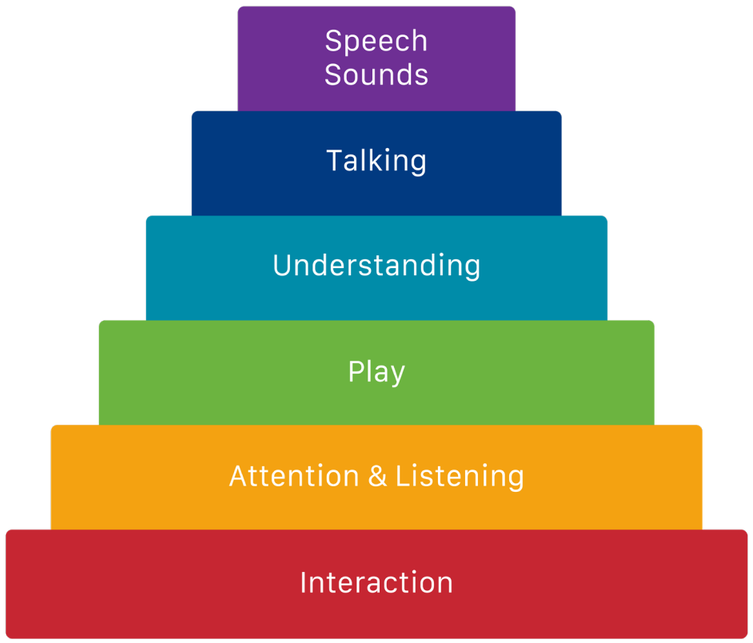
LANGUAGE TOWER

In order to effectively support children's speech, language, and communication development, it is essential that practitioners possess a strong and secure understanding of how these skills emerge and typically progress.

Language develops gradually over time, but starts right from birth. In fact, even before birth, babies are capable of recognising their parents' voices. As they become attuned to familiar voices, they listen in to their messages, songs, stories, and patterns of communication.

The *Why Interactions Matter* section introduced the metaphor of a tower to help explain how language develops. Each stage of development is represented by a brick, carefully laid to create a strong and stable foundation upon which children can build more complex language skills. Ultimately, the more securely placed and well developed each brick is, the more secure and stable a child's language tower can become.

Whilst this section only affords space for a relatively brief overview of each section of the tower, more detailed information can be found within the *NHS Fife: SALT Communication Handbook*.



Interaction	**18 Months**	Children still like the comfort of having a familiar adult nearby and enjoy playing interactive games such as 'peek-a-boo' and 'patacake'.
	30 Months	Children can become very frustrated during their interactions when they struggle to get their message across, this may be a key reason behind 'toddler tantrums. '
	3-4 Years	Most children are able to engage in interactions with familiar people, initiate and respond to them, make eye-contact, take turns, and use non-verbal language to communicate.
Attention & Listening	**18 Months**	Children typically attend to their own choice of activity and won't tolerate intervention. For example, when playing happily with a toy, if an adult interferes, they may lose interest and walk away.
	30 Months	At this stage, children typically develop the ability to switch focus between an activity and listening to an adult. However, they may still need to stop what they're doing to look and listen to the person speaking.
	3-4 Years	Children can control their focus and shift from listening to doing. They can begin to follow spoken instructions related to a task they are engaged in without needing to interrupt the task to look at the speaker.
Play	**18 Months**	Children are starting to explore their world, enjoying simple pretend play. They may recreate others' actions, such as pretending to talk on the phone. They enjoy playing with cause-and-effect toys, understanding their own ability to influence things.
	30 Months	At this stage, children use pretend action sequencing, such as putting the dolly in the cot, covering the dolly, and then rocking the dolly to sleep.
	3-4 Years	Children may begin to play more with others, choosing their own friends and games. Generally, they engage in more imaginative and complex make-believe play, adopting various imaginative roles.

Understanding	**18 Months**	Children understand simple words and short phrases. These are usually things they hear frequently throughout the day, such as ‘coat on’, ‘drink’, ‘shoes’, ‘bus’, ‘in your buggy.’
	30 Months	With a mental vocabulary of 200-500 words, children can now understand far more than they are capable of saying. Generally, they understand two key word sentences and basic action words, such as ‘jump’, ‘walk’, ‘sleep’.
	3-4 Years	Children can understand three to four key-word sentences, descriptive words such as “big” or “cold”, recognise position words like “in” or “under”, and are beginning to understand negatives and plurals. They comprehend longer instructions, such as “put on your coat and get your bag” and can understand simple “who”, “where”, “when”, and “why” questions.
Talking	**18 Months**	Children typically use their first words at around a year old. They start talking with a vocabulary of 10-20 words. After developing 50-100, they join words together into short sentences. Children need a variety of words, nouns, verbs, and adjectives to make a sentence.
	30 Months	Reaching a vocabulary of 200 words, children start putting together short sentences containing two or three words, such as “more juice” or “bye-bye daddy.” They also begin to use past tense, saying thing like “me falled over.”
	3-4 Years	By around age three, children typically understand around 500 words and actively use about 300. They can describe what things look like, how many there are, where they are, and what they are used for. They are now able to refer to things that happened in the past and can put together 4–6-word sentences.

CHILD’S VOICE

If you talk to us, it helps us with our words.

- Charlotte (Age 4)

Speech Sounds	**18 Months**	Given that children’s sounding system is very limited at this stage, they may say some words, but typically in a baby-like way. However, these words are usually consistent in how they sound.
	30 Months	Children begin to use sounds like sh, f, and s. Notably, they may still speak with some immaturities. Similar to 18 months, words may still be said in a baby-like way. However, those familiar with the child will likely be able to understand them.
	3-4 Years	By three, all of the vowels are usually present, and consonant sounds such as s, f, sh, z, v, ch are used in simple contexts. Approaching 4 years, children will have mostly clear speech but may continue to reduce consonant clusters due to having difficulties with some sounds such as ‘r’ in rabbit, and ‘th’ in thumb. Generally, a 3–4-year-old should be intelligible, but it can take until 7 years of age to have a complete sound system.

Remember, children don’t develop speech, language, and communication skills by chance. These skills are the result of consistently high-quality interactions and approaches that support and nurture their development.

Whilst this process may begin with parents, carers, and families, practitioners who work with children on a regular basis and possess awareness of how language develops, have plentiful opportunities to make a positive difference through their interactions.

Although the range of ‘typical language development’ can be quite wide, with some children developing certain skills earlier or later than others, it’s beneficial for practitioners to possess a strong understanding regarding what typically happens when. This will help them to effectively support speech and language development through their interactions with children.

REFLECTION POINT

When a child is experiencing challenges with talking and speech sounds, to what extent have the underlying elements of the language tower been considered? Remember, difficulties may be related to earlier developmental bricks.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Rather than simply hearing the words a person has said, 'active listening' refers to a process of purposeful communication where the listener (in this case, the practitioner) focuses their attention on the speaker, making a conscious effort to understand both the content of their message and any underlying emotions. The listener communicates this understanding back to the speaker in a way that demonstrates they have been heard, recognised, and understood.

Active listening is recognised as a fundamental communication skill that is applicable across a variety of contexts and professions, including early years.

The ability to listen truly attentively and respond in a way that communicates empathy and understanding is universally valuable and vital to building trust, reducing misunderstanding, and supporting attuned interactions across all relationships, including those with children, parents and carers, or colleagues.

Be Fully Present

At the foundation of active listening is the listener's ability to be fully present in the conversation, affording the speaker their undivided attention. This involves setting aside distractions, personal thoughts, and any preconceived ideas or responses in order to focus on hearing the speaker's message about their experiences, feelings, and perspectives.

"Ears are for listening."

"Adults listen to us with their ears."

Notice Non-Verbal Cues

An important element of active listening is the ability of the listener to pick-up-on the speaker's non-verbal cues, such as facial expression, body language, eye-contact, and tone of voice.

Non-verbal cues can reveal underlying emotions, discomfort, or anxiety. What a person communicates through their body language can either reinforce or contradict their words.

> A conscious and purposeful process of attending to, interpreting, evaluating, and responding to a speaker's verbal and non-verbal messages in order to achieve accurate understanding and empathetic communication.
>
> **(Brownell, 2012)**

Recognising these signals enables the listener to develop a more finely tuned understanding of what the speaker is conveying and respond with appropriate sensitivity and empathy.

Eye Contact

When engaging in active listening, maintaining appropriate eye contact is particularly important. It communicates that the listener is fully present and attentive to what the speaker is saying, and that they are not distracted by other people or activities in their surroundings.

At the same time, it is important that eye contact is maintained in a natural and comfortable manner, ensuring that it supports the interaction without making the conversation feel uncomfortable, forced, or intimidating.

Use Open-Ended Questions

Asking closed questions that invite only brief, non-descriptive answers do not support meaningful conversations, nor do they create ideal conditions to practise listening actively.

'Yes' or 'no' questions limit opportunities for the exploration of thoughts, feelings, or experiences, and can make a conversation feel more like an interrogation.

Open-ended questions encourage fuller, more descriptive responses, helping the speaker feel heard and valued, whilst demonstrating that the speaker has a genuine interest in their feelings, perspective, and circumstances.

Furthermore, they enable the listener to develop a deeper, more accurate understanding of the speaker's message, emotions, and situation.

Reflect Back & Clarify

Carl Rogers suggested that truly understanding a person is far more difficult than it seems, therefore, it's important to test how accurately the listener understands the perspective of the speaker (Rogers, 1957).

After a person has spoken, the listener reflects back the key themes, messages and feelings they have picked-up on. Through techniques such as 'paraphrasing' or 'summarising' what the speaker has communicated, the listener invites the speaker to confirm, correct, or clarify.

These techniques help ensure that the listener has captured the speaker's message and feelings accurately, supporting them to feel heard and understood, whilst minimising the potential for misunderstanding.

"I'm hearing that you're frustrated about this situation."

"It sounds like you're feeling really worried about Leah."

Withhold Judgement

Remaining non-judgemental is a critical aspect of active listening. It involves listening to the speaker with openness and acceptance, without criticising or forming negative assumptions about what they are communicating.

This can be challenging, however, it is important to remember that the purpose is to focus wholly on understanding the speaker's perspective, rather than evaluating whether it is right or wrong.

In order to exercise non-judgement, practitioners are encouraged to practice 'unconditional positive regard'; an attitude of respect, acceptance, and non-judgement that values the person without attaching conditions (Rogers, 1961).

Patience affords someone time to express their thoughts and feelings without the fear of interruption or pressure of being rushed. It allows them to speak without others imposing ideas and solutions, or trying to finish their sentences.

Rather than attempting to fix the speaker's problem, listeners should realise that simply providing an opportunity to be heard and receive empathy can be enough.

Listeners can often feel the need to fill silences, and begin to prepare responses in anticipation. This gives the impression that the listener is more concerned with responding than genuinely understanding the speaker.

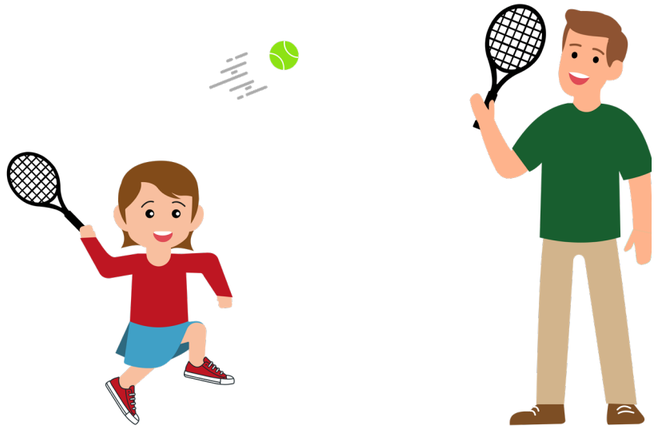
Moments of silence encourage slower-paced interactions, affording both participants the opportunity to listen, reflect, and respond in a more considered manner.

SERVE & RETURN

As mentioned in the first chapter, when considering the way that attuned interactions develop, it can be helpful to think of the similarities that they share with a tennis match. In fact, it is due to these similarities that the term ‘serve and return’ is often used interchangeably with or as a metaphor to explain attuned interactions.

Through both verbal and non-verbal communication, children attempt to ‘serve’ the ball and provoke a ‘return’ response from the other party, in this case, the practitioner. When the practitioner successfully ‘returns’ the child’s serve with a positive, well-attuned response, a reciprocal back-and-forth rally of interaction begins.

Notably, a child’s ‘serve’ may be a look, movement, sound, or behaviour. The adult’s role is to notice, interpret, and ‘return’ in a way that shows understanding and builds connection.



Just as good tennis rallies support the development of players athletic abilities, rallies of high-quality interactions between adults and children strengthen developing brain architecture, social competence, and resilience.

It’s important to hold in mind that like tennis matches, all interactions eventually reach a natural end, where participants decelerate their exchanges, withdraw, and take time to process what took place, safe in the understanding that another interactive rally can occur at some point in the future.

Brazelton (1974) recognised withdrawal as necessary for regulating the interaction and preventing a child’s developing nervous system becoming overwhelmed.

Equally, just as tennis players may miss a shot or ‘drop the ball’, practitioners – despite their effort or skill – can misinterpret a child’s emotional cues or what they’re trying to communicate. Moments of ‘mismatch’ are a normal and expected part of interactions, as we cannot always successfully interpret emotional signals. Experiencing and having these ‘ruptures’ repaired supports children to develop resilience.

When a mismatch occurs, this can cause an interaction to breakdown or children to withdraw from it. Mismatching can cause children to feel overwhelmed. Whilst they may turn away or even cry, this type of withdrawal can help them to make sense of the interaction.

In this type of scenario, whilst the child may need time to process their feelings, it’s important to repair the rupture and become in-tune once again. The practitioner has a responsibility to restore the connection by picking-up the ball, and serving again in a way that is appropriate to the child’s needs.

Repairing relationships after mismatches or moments of difficulty is a key part of development. These experiences help children learn that relationships can be restored and that mistakes can be worked through and resolved.

CHILD’S VOICE

When I’m worried, the adults listen and help me feel better.

- Fred (Age 4)

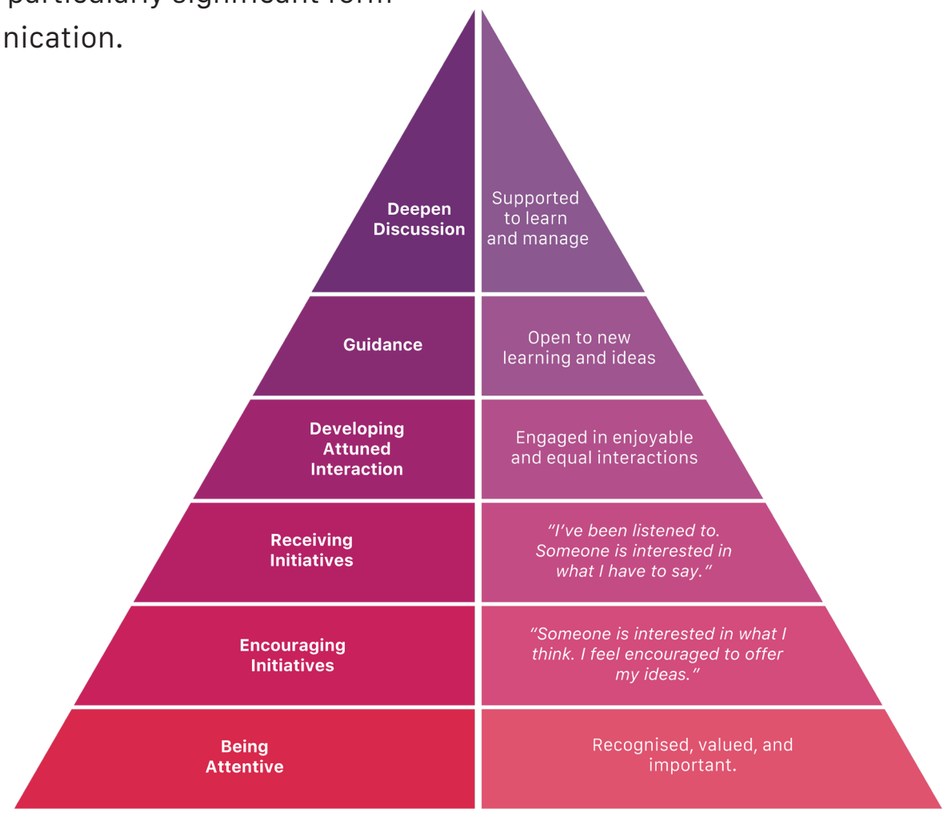
ATTUNEMENT PRINCIPLES

A key way for practitioners to successfully 'serve and return' during interactions is through applying the principles of attunement.

The principles were developed by Biemans (1990) to describe the conditions upon which sensitively attuned relationships are based and how they are structured.

Biemans believed that in order to interact with a child in a way that promotes trust, open dialogue, and enjoyment, it must be built upon particular foundational elements. These elements are the 'building blocks' of attuned interactions, with components closer to the bottom of the pyramid supporting those above it.

It is important to recognise that attunement involves noticing and responding to non-verbal and alternative forms of communication, as well as spoken language. For children who are not yet able to express themselves verbally, behaviour may serve as a particularly significant form of communication.



Level 1: Being Attentive	Being attentive involves being fully present, adopting friendly posture, warm expressions, and gentle eye contact. Central to this is watching, waiting, and responding to children's cues, as well as wondering out loud about what the child may be doing, thinking or feeling using warm intonations. These actions show that what the child is experiencing matters, helping them to feel recognised, valued, and important.
Level 2: Encouraging Initiatives	An adult's intentional effort to invite a child to communicate. This includes: watching and waiting before speaking, listening actively, and conveying warmth, playfulness, and receptiveness. Practitioners may name what they observe a child doing, thinking, or feeling, whilst describing their own actions and inviting children to join-in. Encouraging initiatives can help children feel valued and confident to share their own ideas.
Level 3: Receiving Initiatives	These are the way that practitioners respond to a child's attempts to interact. By looking at the child, exhibiting positive body language, noticing their words, and reflecting them back, it is possible to help a child realise that practitioners have a genuine interest in what they have to say.
Level 4: Developing Attuned Interactions	Characterised by co-operation, receiving and responding, giving and taking short turns, and demonstrating enjoyment through dialogue and interaction. It's important for practitioners to check that they understand the child, and equally that the child understands the practitioner. This mutual understanding supports the child to feel engaged in interactions that are enjoyable and balanced.
Level 5: Guidance	When preceding components are established, trust and mutual respect can develop. Consequently, the child becomes more receptive to language and consideration of new ideas with support. This enables practitioners to provide guidance, use scaffolding, extend and build on children's responses, give structure to thoughts and choices, and offer help where required.
Level 6: Deepen Discussion	Deepening Discussion enables the practitioner and the child to collaboratively discuss and solve problems, to share points of view, consider differences of opinion and contradictions; achieving a shared understanding. Here, practitioners are well positioned to support goal setting, and help children to manage conflict, difficulties, or challenging situations.

Attunement is built over time through increasingly attuned interactions that strengthen the overall quality of the relationship between a child and practitioner.

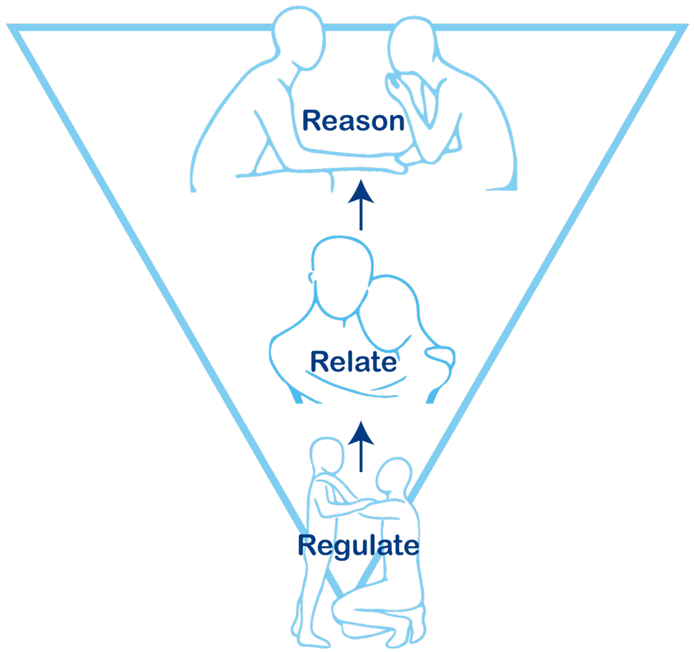
Remember, interactions become more attuned one high-quality interaction at a time.

NEURO-SEQUENTIAL MODEL

When thinking about approaches towards interactions, Perry's Neuro-Sequential Model (2006) offers a framework that supports consideration of the ways in which children's brain development may impact upon practitioner's ability to effectively engage, relate and reflect with children.

'Neuro' refers to the brain, whilst 'sequential' refers to the order in which support is provided.

As discussed within the Brain Development section of the *Why Interactions Matter* chapter, when children feel overwhelmed, stressed, or unsafe, they have less capacity to think, reason, or reflect. Instead, they operate predominantly from their 'Guard Dog' brain, drawing upon fight, flight, or freeze responses to enhance their ability to survive any perceived threat.



Perry emphasises that when an individual is dysregulated, it becomes difficult to establish any meaningful connection. In such states, supporting children to engage in rational thought or reflect on their decisions and behaviour is extremely challenging.

Indeed, trying to reason with a child before they feel suitably regulated is unlikely to work, and can potentially further increase their degree of frustration or dysregulation. In order to effectively communicate, interact, and engage with a distressed child, it is necessary to follow a particular sequence of engagement.

The model is organised around the 'Three Rs': Regulate, Relate, and Reason.

Regulate Focuses on helping the child feel physically and emotionally safe. The priority is calming the nervous system through predictable, soothing, sensory, and emotionally containing support. Being emotionally available, patient, and present helps create a sense of safety, supporting regulation of the child's nervous system. *"Help me feel safe."*

Relate Once a child is regulated, focus can shift towards building emotional connection, trust, and attunement through warm, responsive, and empathetic interactions. Consistent relational experiences help children feel secure, understood, valued, and emotionally connected to others. *"Help me feel connected."*

Reason Only once regulation and connection have been established can attempts to reason be effective. Reason involves supporting the child to think, reflect, communicate, plan, and learn. Without an underpinning foundation of safety, security, and reliable relationships, attempts to reason are unlikely to be effective. Remember, capacity for higher-order thinking is reduced under stress. *"Help me to understand, reflect, and learn."*

In summary, the model emphasises the importance of a bottom-up approach, where emotional regulation and relationships are prioritised before learning, reflection, or attempts to reason.

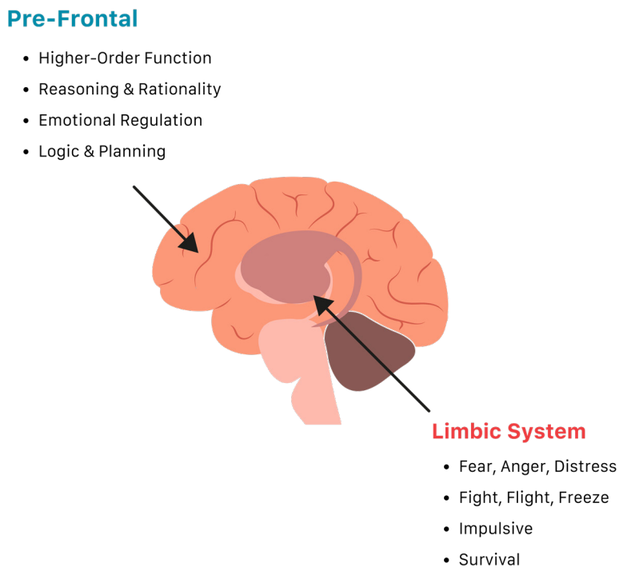
Consistent, attuned interactions, emotional availability, and sensitive responses are necessary to enable children to move from reliance on survival responses towards reflection, self-regulation, and reason.

The Neuro-Sequential model can support practitioners to ensure their interactions are appropriately responsive, attuned, and more effective in promoting children's engagement and wellbeing.

NAME IT TO TAME IT

The ‘name it to tame it’ approach is a simple, evidence-based strategy used to support emotional regulation through the noticing and labelling of emotions.

Coined by psychiatrist, Dan Siegel, the concept emerges from research into interpersonal neurobiology, which explores how the brain, mind, and relationships interact to influence behaviour and emotional development. Siegel proposes that identifying and verbally naming an emotion can reduce the intensity of emotional responses and help individuals regain control.



In relation to the ‘Upstairs’ and ‘Downstairs’ brains discussed earlier, the approach considers the interaction between the brain’s limbic system (Downstairs/Guard Dog) and pre-frontal cortex (Upstairs/Wise Owl). The limbic system is responsible for generating strong emotions such as fear, anger, or distress, whilst the pre-frontal cortex is involved in higher-order functions, including reasoning, reflection, and emotional regulation.

Consciously labelling an emotion increases activity in the pre-frontal cortex, helping to calm the limbic system, reduce emotional intensity, and enable a more thoughtful, proportionate, and less impulsive response.

Young children frequently experience powerful emotions, but may lack the language or cognitive development required to understand and articulate their feelings. When emotions remain unnamed, children may communicate distress through crying, withdrawal, or aggression.

Through supporting children to identify, label and understand emotions, practitioners help them to link their feelings to language and meaning. This process supports activation of rational brain processes, enabling children to move from a ‘reactive’ state to a more reflective and regulated one.

Step 1: Recognise Emotions	The first step is for the practitioner to notice signs that a child may be experiencing a strong emotion, such as frustration, sadness, or fear.
Step 2: Verbalise the Emotion	Practitioners model emotional language by naming the emotions they believe the child is experiencing: *“I can see that you’re feeling quite angry about that.”*
Step 3: Validate the Feeling	Acknowledging the emotion shows empathy and helps the child feel understood. Validation does not mean agreeing with the behaviour, but recognising the emotional experience they are going through.
Step 4: Support Regulation	Once the child feels understood, adults can guide them towards coping strategies such as deep breathing, problem-solving, or discussing possible solutions.

Over time, children begin to internalise the process. Instead of relying solely on adults to label emotions, they gradually learn to say things like *“I feel angry”* or *“I’m sad”*, which is a key step toward independent self-regulation.

Significantly, it’s important to remember *“connection before correction.”* As outlined in the Neuro-Sequential model, attempting to resolve emotions or correct behaviour before connecting with a child to help them feel emotionally safe can heighten distress and reduce capacity for reasoning.

Likewise, it’s critical to *“engage, don’t enrage.”* When a child is highly distressed, the priority is not ‘reasoning’, but supporting them to feel safe and calm. During peak distress, children cannot effectively process language, follow instructions, or reflect on their behaviour.

STORIES

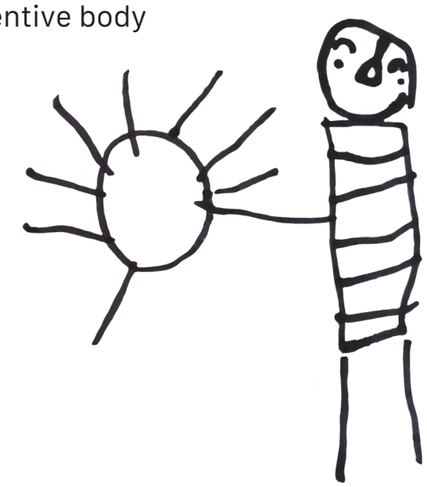
Stories are a powerful tool for facilitating rich, meaningful interactions. They help create a sense of safety and security, supporting the development of trusting relationships between children and practitioners, while also providing opportunities for conversation and learning across all areas of the curriculum, particularly in early literacy development.

When practitioners model enjoyment and enthusiasm during storytelling, they strengthen emotional and relational bonds with children, enhancing interactions and fostering a life-long interest in reading, language, and storytelling. Books also expose children to diverse experiences and ideas, deepening their understanding of the world and supporting more inclusive, thoughtful interactions with others.

Storytelling creates valuable opportunities for meaningful 'serve and return' exchanges. Practitioners can respond to children's cues, comments, and questions, supporting their communication and engagement.

It's equally important to listen and engage with children as they tell their own stories. This supports the development of confidence, self-esteem, conversational and oratory skills. Showing genuine interest, asking thoughtful questions, offering encouragement, and using attentive body language can help children to feel heard, valued, and respected.

"I like it when Majella reads us stories. It makes me laugh and smile."



Through stories, children can experience, explore, and develop key elements of communication, including: pace, rhythm, volume, tone, pitch, pauses, gestures and expression. Learning about and developing these skills enhances self-expression, strengthening children's ability to interact meaningfully.

Pace & Rhythm

Pace refers to the tempo and rhythm at which a story unfolds. Storytellers should reflect on how pace can complement a story's evolving scenarios. Increasing pace builds energy, momentum, and excitement. Slowing down can generate intrigue or a sense of calm.

Volume

Use volume in a way that meets the demand of the story or character being portrayed. Volume is a powerful tool for provoking curiosity. When the storyteller drops the volume and speaks quietly, children become intrigued and lean into the story.

Tone

Tone influences how a statement or message will be perceived and understood. It is central to conveying emotion, allowing children to connect with characters, empathise with them, and become invested in the story. Effective use of tone enhances emotional impact.

Pitch

Pitch describes the highness or lowness of the storyteller's voice. Varying pitch can differentiate between characters and bring them to life. Pitch conveys the emotional context of events. Higher pitch may portray excitement, fun, and energy. Lower pitch can convey seriousness or sadness.

Pauses

Pauses can help build suspense. Pausing on the cusp of an exciting point can encourage children to anticipate, imagine and predict what might happen next. Also, pauses provide an opportunity to process, reflect on events, and react emotionally.

Gesture & Expression

These bring stories and characters to life. Facial expressions help children engage with characters and themes, enhancing comprehension and developing their capacity to recognise and understand emotions.

PACE

Developed by psychologist, Dr Dan Hughes, PACE (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, Empathy) supports adults to build safe and trusting relationships with children.

PACE is a valuable strategy to use when children feel insecure, frustrated, or upset. The approach emphasises the importance of the way in which practitioners communicate and convey their messages, guiding practitioners to respond to children in ways that build trust, understanding and positive connection.

Rather than being a set of fixed steps, PACE's elements are applied flexibly and responsively, depending on the needs of the child and the situation.

The approach also helps adults regulate their own emotions when supporting children through their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. It enables practitioners to slow down, stay calm, and better understand the child, strengthening relationships, fostering connection, and encouraging more thoughtful, regulated responses.

Playfulness

The purpose of playfulness is to create a fun, light-hearted atmosphere that encourages positive engagement. Practitioners should use a gentle, playful tone, similar to storytelling, whilst avoiding causing irritation or frustration.

This supports engaging interactions, reduces the likelihood of angry responses, and diminishes feelings of shame, making it easier to address challenges and communicate difficult messages.

"It's fun when we play together."

Acceptance

Unconditional acceptance is essential for helping children feel safe and secure. It involves acknowledging and accepting children's thoughts, feelings and perspectives without judgement, whilst avoiding minimising or dismissing what a child communicates. Instead, practitioners use curiosity and empathy to demonstrate understanding.

This does not imply condoning unwanted behaviour, rather, it ensures that children feel seen and understood beyond their actions. Practitioners convey this through appropriate use of words, tone, body language and non-verbal cues.

Curiosity

Curiosity involves exploring and responding to a child's behaviour with genuine interest. The choice of tone and language is critical to conveying curiosity and helps foster a child's sense of security.

Phrases such as *"I wonder..."* or *"why do you think..."* signal to a child that the practitioner is attentive to their thoughts and feelings, and is committed to supporting them.

Expressing curiosity in a calm, accepting tone communicates a desire to understand the child's perspective. This doesn't imply agreement with their interpretation of events, but demonstrates interest in understanding their experience and emotions.

Empathy

Demonstration of empathy communicates to a child that they have been heard and understood, which is essential for fostering a sense of security. Empathy does not involve resolving the issue or removing the problem; it is about being present with the child in the moment.

Through empathetic responses, practitioners provide emotional support, comfort, and reassurance, helping children to navigate and manage strong emotions.

FISH BONE TECHNIQUE

The Fishbone technique is a valuable tool that can support practitioners in identifying the root causes of challenges, such as a child's behaviour or communication difficulties.

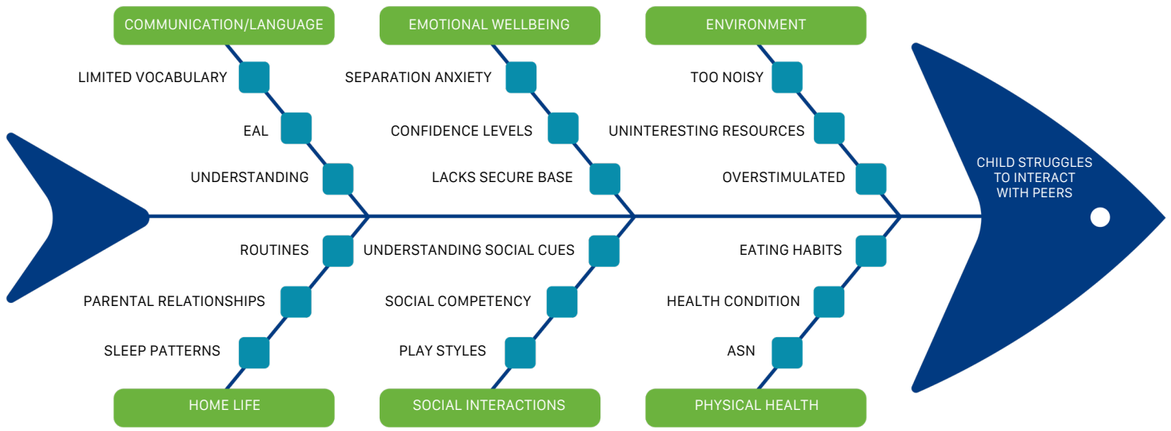
As a visual aid, it helps to map and reveal the relationships between different factors in a child's life that may be contributing to a particular issue.

Recognising and understanding these underlying causes can enable practitioners to respond more effectively and provide appropriate support.

When using this technique, practitioners focus on the root cause of the issue rather than the symptoms or observable behaviours surrounding it.

The technique enables practitioners to work together collaboratively to deliver a consistent and coordinated strategy that effectively supports the child, meeting their individual needs.

FISH BONE TECHNIQUE EXAMPLE

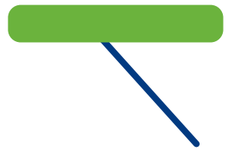


Head

The head is where the problem is defined. Write the specific issue at the head of the diagram to clearly identify what is trying to be understood or resolved.

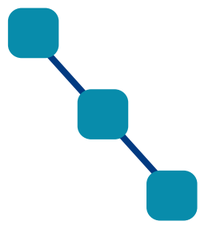
Major Bones

These represent the main categories of possible causes contributing to the problem. They branch off from the spine, helping organise thinking into broad areas. Common categories in relation to early years interactions could include: environment, emotional wellbeing, physical health, communication & language, social interactions, and home life.



Small Bones

These are specific causes or factors within each major category. They branch-off the major bones, breaking the problem down into more detailed factors. For example, under 'environment', sub-causes may include noise levels or being overstimulated.



The 5 Why's

Smaller bones or sub-causes are often identified by repeatedly asking *"why?"*, typically five times, to uncover root causes. For example, if a child is struggling to engage in a group activity, practitioners might ask:

Questions	Answers
1. Why is the child disengaged?	They feel anxious
2. Why do they feel anxious?	They are unsure of the routine
3. Why are they unsure of the routine?	Changes are not clearly explained
4. Why are changes not clearly explained?	Visual supports are inconsistent
5. Why are visual supports inconsistent?	Staff lack confidence using visuals

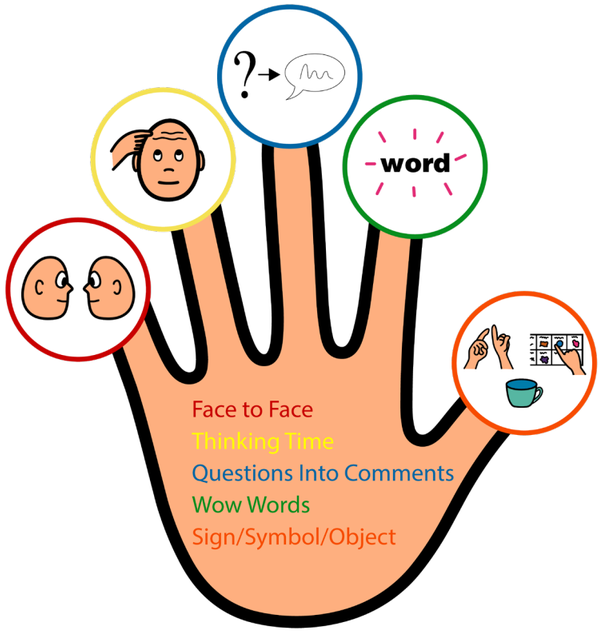
Analyse Connections

Review the diagram to identify patterns and relationships between different causes. This helps to pinpoint root causes rather than simply addressing surface-level symptoms.

Plan Actions

Use the insights from the diagram to develop targeted strategies, involve families, and collaborate with other professionals as required. This method ensures a holistic view of the factors affecting a child, supporting identification of agreed areas for development, and the application of consistent, evidence-informed responses.

COMMUNICATION HIGH FIVE



Perhaps the most valuable and consistently applied tool for supporting high-quality interactions across Fife early years settings is the *Communication High 5*.

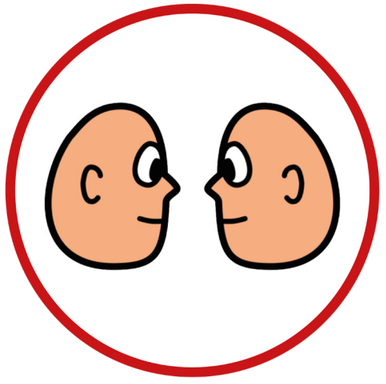
Developed collaboratively between NHS Fife's Speech & Language Therapy Service and the Fife Council Early Years Team, the *High 5* consists of five simple, memorable strategies designed to promote effective communication, foster high-quality interactions, and support children's language and communication development.

Practitioners are encouraged to use this tool consistently throughout daily practice, integrating its elements into all interactions, so that the strategies become a natural part of their approach.

This chapter defines and explores each of the High 5 elements, providing useful techniques, alongside examples of ways that these can be effectively integrated into practice within early learning environments.

Notably, some of these techniques and approaches can be applied independently of the High 5, however, have been included in this section because they complement it effectively and when used alongside it can have a powerful impact on the overall quality of interactions.

FACE-TO-FACE



While face-to-face may be the most basic element of the High 5, it is arguably the most important, as it forms the foundation for building effective communication, engagement, and meaningful connections with children.

Face-to-face basically means being positioned at the child's level, directly in front of them. This is essential for an equal, well-balanced, and reciprocal interaction to take place.

Not only does being face-to-face encourage eye-contact, but it ensures that the child has an awareness of the practitioner's presence, and is therefore more likely to pay attention, engage, recognise and understand what is being communicated.

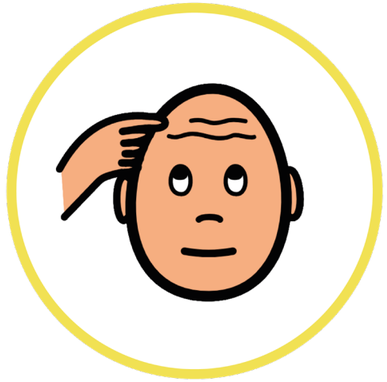
REFLECTION POINT

Can you remember a time when a child struggled to hear or understand you from a distance? How mindful are you of your positioning? Does it effectively support clear communication and high-quality, reciprocal interactions?

Although face-to-face interaction may appear to be a simple strategy, at times, it can be challenging to achieve in the context of a busy and demanding early learning environment. Nevertheless, children are more likely to engage and interact when adults meet them at their level, therefore, practitioners must remain mindful of their positioning during interactions.

Remember, in order to communicate effectively and promote two-way, reciprocal interactions, practitioners should avoid attempting to communicate from more than a few feet away and avoid standing above the child.

THINKING TIME



After posing a question or making a comment to a child, it is essential that practitioners allow sufficient time for the child to respond. The length of time can vary depending on the child's developmental stage, with some children taking longer to absorb and process words than others.

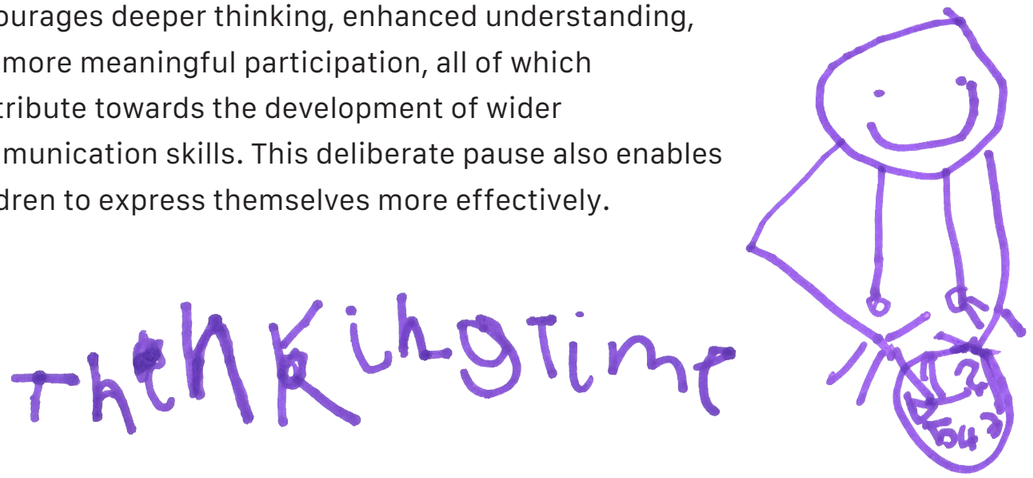
'Thinking time' refers to the intentional pause that a practitioner affords a child. Often described in early years as "the power of the pause", this strategy gives the child the necessary space to process what they have heard, organise their thoughts, and respond in their own way.

DID YOU KNOW?

If it's necessary to repeat something, practitioners should use the same words. Rephrasing a question differently requires the child to start the interpretation process all over again!

The *Quality Improvement Framework* emphasises the importance of children being afforded the necessary time, space and support they need to think, make decisions and use their voice. (2025:26).

Allowing children adequate time to think during interactions encourages deeper thinking, enhanced understanding, and more meaningful participation, all of which contribute towards the development of wider communication skills. This deliberate pause also enables children to express themselves more effectively.



Practitioners should patiently provide thinking time by positioning themselves at the child's level and demonstrating attentive, active listening through body language and facial expression. It's important to resist the urge to interrupt, suggest an answer, or reword a question too quickly.

Approaches such as 'wait, watch, and wonder' encourage practitioners to slow down, pause, and observe the children carefully, remaining curious to what they may be thinking.

Thinking Time also involves following the child's lead and allowing them to set the pace of the interaction. When developing communication skills, children need opportunities to listen, respond and initiate interactions. If practitioners dominate the conversation, it can restrict the child's ability to process information, express their own ideas, and develop essential communication skills.

CHILD'S VOICE

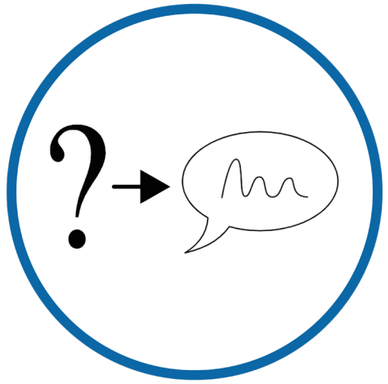
When Sacha asks questions, I have to have a think.

- Ava (Age 4)

When using the Thinking Time strategy, practitioners should be prepared to simplify and reduce language. Through thorough understanding of a child's developmental stage, practitioners can make necessary adjustments to the conversational approach.

Some children may communicate using single words or brief phrases, while others may respond best to concise sentences. As a child's language skills develop, practitioners can gradually increase the complexity of their language to align with the child's growing abilities.

QUESTIONS INTO COMMENTS



Whilst questions can help practitioners find out information and demonstrate to a child that they are interested or curious about what they're doing, it's important to remember that questions can also add pressure to a situation, which can cause interactions to break-down.

Alternatively, 'commenting' can be used as a gentler approach towards supporting the development of children's thinking skills.

When commenting, practitioners remove the pressure for children to respond verbally, whilst still providing valuable opportunities for them to listen to and absorb the language used by others. Through this exposure, children can build their vocabulary and begin to use new language independently as their confidence develops.

Through the use of commenting, practitioners enable children to hear the use of clear and appropriate models of speech and language. Over time, this supports children to gain the confidence to join-in, communicate, and engage actively with peers and practitioners.

This section provides insight into a range of tools, ideas, and approaches that practitioners can use to effectively turn their questions into comments. Additionally, it highlights important considerations for instances where asking a question is necessary or more appropriate, reflecting on ways to make questioning as interaction-friendly as possible.

Labelling

Labelling refers to the use of language by practitioners to name and describe objects, actions, and qualities. This includes the use of nouns, verbs, and adjectives to model vocabulary in context.

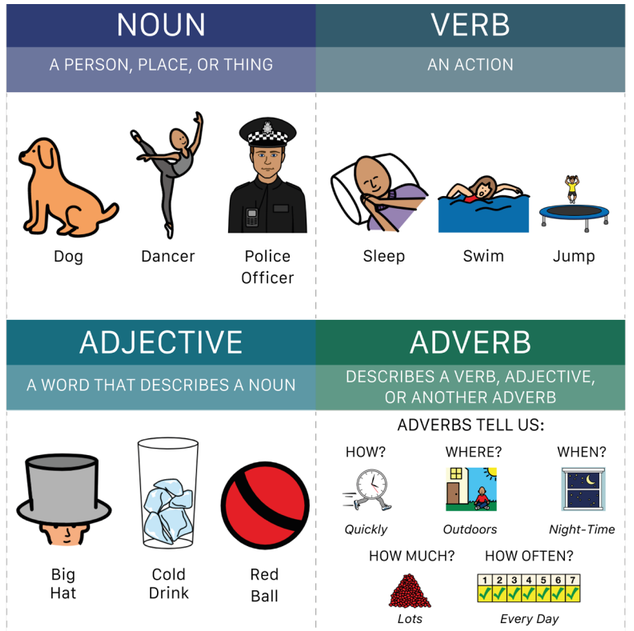
Examples include:

"There is a cow in the field."

"He is jumping high."

"She is building a tall tower."

"The teddy is very soft."



Exclamatory Words

Exclamatory words are used to express strong emotional responses and reactions, helping children understand how feelings can be communicated through language.

Examples include:

"Wow!" to show amazement or surprise.

"Ouch" to indicate pain.

"Hurray" to celebrate success or good news.

"Phew" to convey relief.

When used within comments, alongside strategies such as labelling, and adapted to suit a child's age and stage of development, these words can effectively support children's understanding of language and emotional expression.

Self-Talk

Self-talk refers to when practitioners verbalise their own actions and thoughts as they occur. This involves describing what they are doing in real time, such as saying *"I am tidying away the blocks"* or, when using technology, "*I need to enter my username and password."*

This approach provides children with a clear model of language in context, supporting their understanding of vocabulary, sequencing, and everyday processes.

REFLECTION POINT

The opportunities for self-talk are almost endless. To what extent do you use self-talk as part of your everyday practice? Consider the potential benefits and vocabulary that children may gain from this.

Wondering Out Loud

Through 'wondering out loud', practitioners can ask questions non-directly in a way that doesn't apply any pressure to answer, but openly invites children to offer their own thoughts, comments, and suggestions.

"I wonder what will happen if..."	"I wonder why that happened?"	"I wonder why that didn't work?"
"I wonder how we could make..."	"I wonder how many we will need?"	"I wonder who we could ask to help us?"

Higher-Order Questions

Whilst making a comment rather than posing a question can often create greater opportunities for engagement, there are times when asking a question will be necessary or more appropriate.

In such instances, practitioners must carefully consider how their questions are phrased, ensuring that the level of complexity is appropriate for the child's age, stage, and understanding of language.

Higher-order questions are open-ended enquiries that move beyond asking children to simply remember or respond with yes/no answers. They are designed to encourage critical thinking, problem-solving, and reasoning, inviting children to speculate, hypothesise, and offer opinions.

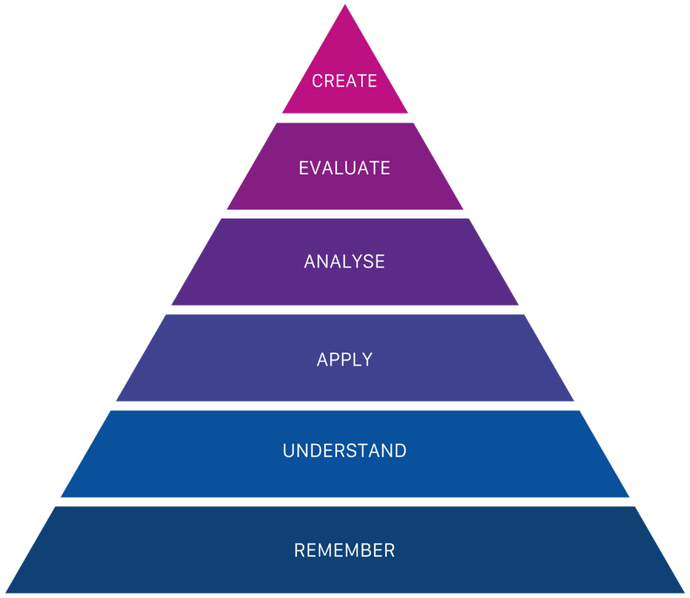
Bloom's Taxonomy

A useful way to foster appropriate and effective use of higher-order questioning is through consideration of Bloom's Taxonomy; a framework that provides a structured way of understanding how cognitive skills develop.

The taxonomy can be used to promote higher-order thinking, encouraging the development of children's critical thinking skills through targeted questioning. In practice, it helps practitioners to ask questions in a purposeful and developmentally appropriate way.

Furthermore, Bloom's Taxonomy provides a clear structure for reflection on the level of thinking that questions promote, enabling practitioners to adapt their language and expectations accordingly.

At the lower levels of the taxonomy, questions focus on a child's capacity to recall information and ability to understand and explain ideas and concepts.



Questions such as *"what is this?"* or *"can you tell me what happened"* support children to name, remember, describe, and show understanding. However, relying solely on these types of questions can limit opportunities for deeper thinking.

As children develop, practitioners can begin to incorporate questions linked to higher levels of the taxonomy. At the level of application, children might be encouraged to apply their knowledge during play when asked *"what could we use to build a taller tower?"*

Moving into the analysis stage, questions may invite comparison or exploration, for instance *"what is different about these objects?"* These types of questions encourage children to think in greater detail and make connections between ideas.

Higher-order questioning becomes more evident at the 'evaluating' and 'creating' levels. Here, children are supported to express preferences, justify their thinking, and generate new ideas.

Questions such as *"which one do you like best, and why?"* or *"what else could we try?"* promote open-ended thinking and give children the opportunity to lead their own learning.

Importantly, these questions should remain accessible, using clear and simple language, and supported by context, visuals, or modelling where required.

Below are some example of higher-order questions that correspond to each level of Bloom's Taxonomy.

REMEMBERING	UNDERSTANDING
"What colour is the car?"	"What is happening in the picture?"
"Can you find the big block?"	"How do you think Tom feels?"
"Who was in the story that we read?"	"Can you tell me what happened?
APPLYING	**ANALYSING**
"What can we use to fix this?"	"Which of these will sink and which will float?"
"How can we make the tower strong?"	"Why do you think the red paint turned orange?"
"What can we use to make the dough thicker?"	"What's different about these two objects?
EVALUATING	**CREATING**
"Was that a fair way to share the playdough?"	"What else could we use this box for?"
"Which character had the best idea?"	"How else can we join these together?"
"Why do you think that was the best idea?"	"Where do you think they went next in the story?"

Questions Hierarchy

Speech and Language therapists often use a hierarchy of questions, which can be ordered in terms of how difficult they are for a child to understand and answer.

The simplest of these are yes/no questions which only require a child to choose between two options.

This progresses to the use of questions that ask for specific information, such as "what", "where" and "who?"

More challenging questions include "when", "why" and "how", as these require the child to think more deeply to explain and justify their answers.

Notably, in order to best support children's understanding, it can be beneficial to use sign-along with the question word.

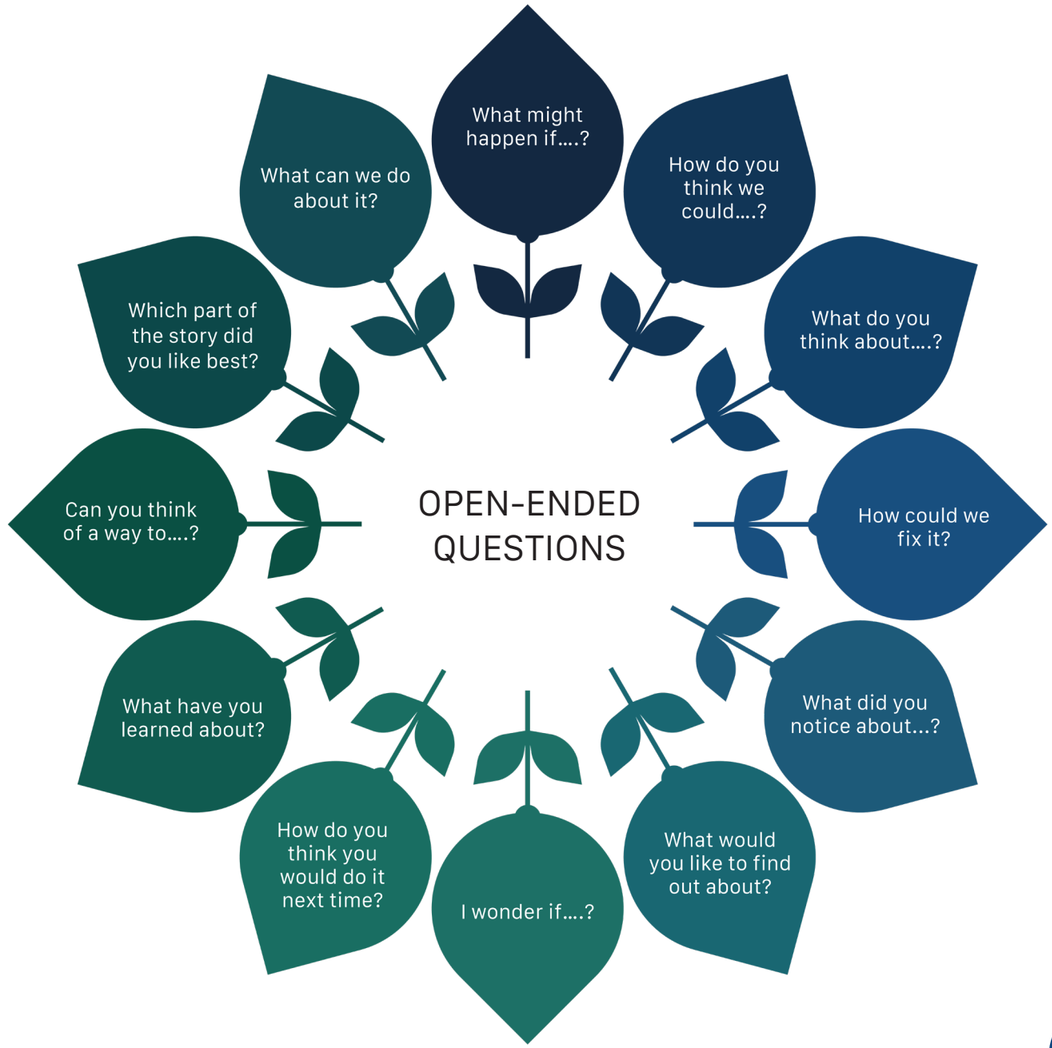
The *Quality Improvement Framework* states that *"staff should skilfully engage in high-quality, child-led interactions, using a balance of comments and developmentally appropriate questions to enhance and extend their thinking"* (2025:26).

Summary

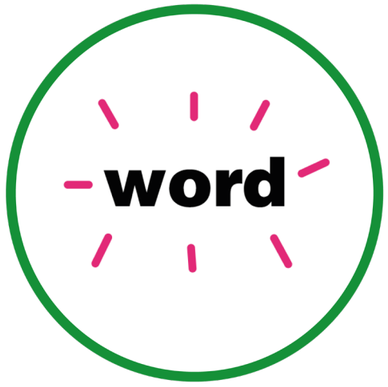
When using questioning, it's important that these remain open-ended where possible. Practitioners should avoid unnecessary complexity or overly-complicated language that may risk hindering a child's understanding.

Remember, the emphasis behind the use of questions should be to help extend children's thinking, rather than simply testing their existing knowledge.

Additionally, practitioners should maintain a balance between commenting and questioning. This helps to ensure that children are not overwhelmed and do not feel pressured to respond.



WOW WORDS



Meaningful interactions with children provide valuable opportunities for practitioners to introduce an extensive range of words that can enhance children's vocabulary and understanding of concepts.

'Wow words' refer to the intentional use of descriptive, engaging, and sometimes less familiar language during everyday interactions and play. This approach can support the development of vocabulary whilst fostering rich interactions between the child and practitioner.

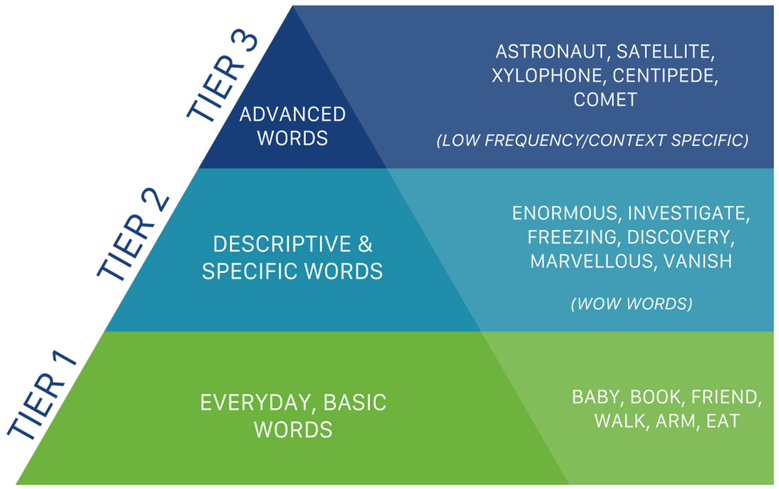
Within the Communication High 5, words are categorised into tiers according to their complexity and frequency of use in different contexts.

Tier 1 – Everyday Words

These are basic vocabulary words that children will generally pick-up through everyday interactions, conversations, and play. Given that children will encounter these frequently, they are typically easy to understand and require little instruction.

Children with English as an Additional Language or those who have had limited exposure to language may need more support to understand and use these words in context.

Examples of Everyday Words include: baby, book, friend, arm, chair, dog, run, walk, eat, happy, sad, crying.



Tier 2 - Wow Words

'Wow words' are high-frequency, sophisticated words, used by mature language users.

Practitioners can use these to support children to become more descriptive and specific in their use of vocabulary. These words are considered to have 'mileage' because they can be used frequently across a range of situations and contexts throughout the day.

Furthermore, 'wow words' can be used to make language adventurous, exciting, and capable of capturing attention. These include various unusual or less common verbs and words that children may not typically use as part of everyday language. However, through hearing these words regularly, children can become familiar with them, increasing the likelihood that they will use them independently.

Using 'wow words' in different contexts and encouraging their repeated use during interactions or stories, supports the development of children's vocabulary and language skills. Words such as "wriggle" are more easily understood when observing insects moving. Children can see and experience the concepts being described directly.

Examples include: enormous, glance, investigate, discover, vanish, and suddenly.

"The caterpillar wriggles when it walks."

"The centipede scurries along the ground."

Tier 3 – More Advanced Words

These are lower-frequency words generally used within specific contexts or linked to particular areas of interest. For example, if a child shows an interest in space, the practitioner may introduce words such as *"astronaut"*, *"comet"*, or *"satellite."*

Introducing advanced words helps to extend children's vocabulary and language skills, deepening their understanding surrounding topics of interest. In addition to interactions, the use of fact books, diagrams, and reliable online sources can help develop a more meaningful understanding of these words.

Stories & Wow Words

Engaging in interactions through stories provides excellent opportunities to introduce 'wow words' using context, emotion, and repetition.

When practitioners emphasise, highlight, share, and describe 'wow words' within context, children are more likely to understand and retain their meaning.

REFLECTION POINT

How often do you use stories to promote wow words? When selecting stories to read with children, do you read the book first to consider ways that wow words can be incorporated and brought to life?

Significantly, stories provide valuable opportunities to explore feelings and emotions through characters. Vocabulary linked to a character's experiences and feelings is often more memorable, helping children to develop their language skills, emotional literacy, and understanding.

Repetition performs an important role in helping children learn new words and sentence structures. Listening to familiar stories provides valuable opportunities for children to hear 'wow words' multiple times in context. Repeated exposure supports children's understanding, helping to embed the words into their vocabulary, whilst encouraging appropriate use in their own speech.

Learning Walls & Floorbooks

Learning Walls & Floorbooks are excellent ways to introduce 'wow words' whilst building on children's interests. Given that learning is responsive to their interests, children are more likely to engage and be receptive to new language.

Practitioners should use these moments to identify and introduce relevant vocabulary, clearly explaining meanings. Learning words in this context supports children's understanding and increases the likelihood of using them independently.

Summary

Interactions play a vital role in creating natural and engaging opportunities for practitioners to introduce both familiar everyday language and less commonly heard vocabulary.

It is important to recognise that children often need to hear new words repeated multiple times before they can begin to understand them and use them independently.

Practitioners can introduce 'wow words' by tuning into a child's interests. If a child is fascinated by light, the practitioner may describe it as a *"shining light"*, introducing descriptive language.

It is also possible to build on a child's existing vocabulary. For instance, if a child says *"the car is fast"*, the practitioner may respond with *"yes, the car is speeding along,"* extending language in a naturally supportive way.

SIGNS, SYMBOLS & OBJECTS

The use of signs, symbols, and objects can support children's understanding, maintain their attention, enable them to make choices, and promote positive behaviour.

When these strategies are used consistently, they enhance communication, making interactions more inclusive, accessible, and of higher-quality. This supports children to engage, understand, and express themselves with greater confidence.

Visual support systems that use objects, photos, or symbols can help children understand daily routines, follow instructions, and negotiate transitional events by breaking things down into smaller, more manageable steps. These systems can also promote greater independence by helping children to navigate a wide range of sequences and experiences.

Objects

Objects of Reference are the first stage of supporting children's understanding of signs and symbols. These are physical items that can represent a person, place, event, or experience, helping to make meaning more concrete and accessible. Typically, these are used when a child is not yet ready to engage with more abstract photos, images, or symbols.

Using real objects as visual and tactile cues can support children's understanding of routines and activities. For example, a cup from the snack area may represent 'snack time', or a coat and shoes may indicate going outdoors.

To be effective, objects should be consistent and relevant to the individual child, enabling them to make a clear connection between the object and what it represents.

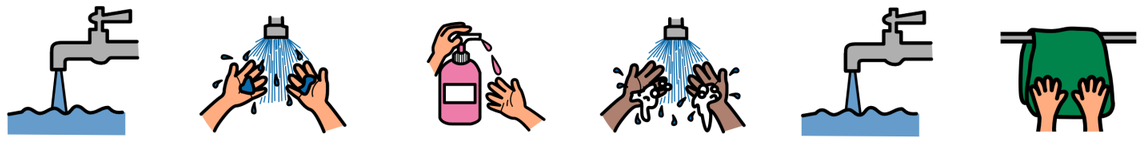
Visual Aids

Visual aids play an important role in supporting children's understanding and communication, particularly for learners with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and those with additional support needs. They reinforce spoken language by providing clear, accessible visual representations of routines, expectations, and experiences.

In practice, visual supports take the form of photographs or symbol-based images that can be used to label the environment, create visual timetables, and establish routines and sequences.

Making routines visible and predictable supports children to understand what is happening and what is expected of them. These can include everyday activities, such as: snack time, handwashing, using the bathroom, or accessing the computer.

The use of visuals and symbols can support children to make choices, develop independence, understand rules, and engage in restorative approaches. Likewise, they can help them to understand transitions, both within settings and between stages or environments.



Visual support strategies can also incorporate 'Now & Next', which is an approach designed to help children understand current and upcoming events, promoting predictability, communication, emotional regulation, and smooth transitions.

Signalong

Signalong is a key word sign-supported communication system based on British sign language and is used in spoken word order. It uses speech, sign, body language, facial expression and tone of voice to reference the link between sign and word.

It offers several important benefits in supporting communication and language development, enhancing understanding by linking gestures with actions, and helping to reinforce meaning in a clear and accessible way.

Additionally, it encourages practitioners to regulate their language use, promoting simplicity and clarity by pairing key words with corresponding signs rather than relying on overly verbose speech. When used consistently with children, Signalong becomes second nature and deeply embedded within everyday practice.

Using Signs, Symbols & Objects in Practice

While some examples of incorporating Signs, Symbols, and Objects into practice to support interactions have already been outlined throughout the chapter, additional effective methods that can further enhance this approach include Tap-Tap Boxes and Fix-It Folders.

Tap-Tap Boxes

Tap-Tap Boxes promote the use and repetition of single words, supporting children's understanding through engaging interactions that spark curiosity and excitement.

Boxes are essentially a container with a lid, filled with everyday objects linked to children's current interests.

Activities are introduced with a simple, repetitive song, such as *"tap, tap, tap, what's in the box?"* or by creating anticipation through a drum-roll on the lid.

Children and practitioners take turns reaching into the box and naming the object they discover, encouraging active participation and language use. The experience can be enriched further by discussing the features and purpose of the object, grouping items into categories, or using objects as prompts for simple stories.

Fix-It Folders

Fix-It Folders promote restorative conversations and support children to manage and express their emotions through visual supports that represent a range of feelings and potential areas of conflict.

The approach encourages children to engage in meaningful dialogue that helps them to consider different perspectives and develop an understanding surrounding the impact of their own and others' actions.

Through this process, children can identify appropriate ways to manage situations, find solutions, and take steps to repair relationships.

Examples of restorative questions include:

"What happened?"	"How do you feel?"	"How did you show this emotion?"
"Who was involved?"	"What will you do next?"	"How will you make yourself feel better?"

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ainsworth M. & Bell M. (1970). Attachment, Exploration, & Separation: Illustrated by Behaviour of One-Year-Olds in a Strange Situation. *Child Development*. 41(1), pp.49-67.

Biemans, H. (1990). Video Home Training: Theory, Method, & Organisation of SPIN. In: Kool, J. (Ed). *International Seminar for Innovative Institutions*. Ministry of Welfare Health and Culture: Rijswijk.

Bion, W. (1962). *Learning from Experience*. London: Heinemann.

Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment & Loss: Volume 1. Attachment*. London: Hogarth Press.

Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment & Loss: Volume 2. Separation*. New York: Basic Books.

Bowlby, J. (1988). *A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment & Healthy Human Development*. New York: Basic Books.

Brazelton, T., Koslowski, B., & Main, M. (1974). The Origins of Reciprocity: Early Mother-Infant Interaction. In: Lewis, M. & Rosenblum, L. (Eds). *The Effect of the Infant on its Caregiver*. New York: Wiley Inter-Science. pp.49-76.

Brownell, J. (2012). *Listening: Attitudes, Principles, and Skills*. Pearson: Boston.

Denham, S., Blair, K., DeMulder, E., Levitas, J., Sawyer, K., & Auerbach-Major, S. (2003). Preschool Emotional Competence: Pathway to Social Competence. *Child Development*. 74(1), pp.238-256.

Ekman, P. (1972). Universals and Cultural Differences in Facial Expressions of Emotions. In: Cole, J. (Ed). *Nebraska Symposium of Motivation*. Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press. pp.207-282.

Perry, B. (2006). The Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics: Applying Principles of Neuroscience to Clinical Work with Traumatised Children. In: Webb, N. (Ed). Working with Traumatised Youth in Child Welfare. Guilford Press: New York. pp.27-52.

Rogers, C. (1957). The Necessary & Sufficient Conditions of Therapeutic Personality Change. *Journal of Consulting Psychology*. 21(2), pp.95-103.

Rogers, C. (1961). *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*. Houghton Mifflin: Boston.

Siegel, D. (2012). *The Developing Mind: How Relationships and the Brain Interact to Shape Who We Are*. The Guilford Press: London.

Sorin, R. (2004). Understanding Children's Feelings: Emotional Literacy in Early Childhood. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*. 11(4), pp.1-18.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Vygotsky, L. (1986). *Thought & Language*. MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Winnicott, D. (1953). Transitional Objects & Transitional Phenomena: A Study of the First Not-Me Possession. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 34, pp.89–97.

National Practice Documentation & Guidance

Communication Handbook - NHS Fife. (2020). *Speech & Language Therapy – Communication Handbook*. NHS Fife: Fife.

Quality Improvement Framework - Care Inspectorate & Education Scotland. (2025). *Quality Improvement Framework for Early Learning & Childcare Sectors*. Care Inspectorate: Dundee.

Realising the Ambition - Crichton, V., Carwood-Edwards, J., Ryan, J., McTaggart, J., Collins, J., MacConnell, M. P., Wallace, L., Diamond, C., Grogan, D., Carey, J., MacAulay, L., Shaw, N., Gill, C., & Johnston, K. (2020). *Realising the Ambition - Being Me: National Practice Guidance for Early Years in Scotland*. Livingston: Education Scotland.

SSSC Codes of Practice - Scottish Social Services Council. (2024). *Codes of Practice for Social Service Workers and Employers*. SSSC: Dundee.

Early Years Team
Fife Council
Published: May 2026
First Edition

Early Years in Fife