Observing a Child's Speech, Language and Communication: 
Questions to Ask Yourself

How?
How did they communicate?
For example, was speech clear? Did the child use gesture, facial expression, signs? Did they change their tone of voice or pitch?

Who?
To whom did the child speak? With whom did they interact?
For example, with practitioner or peer/individual or group.

What?
What did they actually say?
For example, did they babble, use words, phrases, sentences, questions? What did they understand? For example, did they follow an instruction, answer a question or comply with a request?

Where?
Where did this take place/the context?
For example, in the home corner with two other children/outside, etc.

When?
When did they speak?
For example, were they initiating interaction, answering, talking alongside other(s) or to themselves?

Why?
What was the purpose of the interaction and were they successful in their aim? For example, were they trying to join in with another child’s play or expressing a need?

If not, why not?
What was the reason the child was unsuccessful in their communication?
For example, they were not understood or did not understand, too quiet, did not have the vocabulary, etc.

(Developing Pre-School Communication and Language, Paul Chapman Publishing © Chris Dukes and Maggie Smith, 2007)
Concerns regarding Speech and Language

Things to consider and discuss with parent/carer:

• Has the child attended a pre-school or toddler group before?
• Has the child had hearing problems, glue ear, blocked sinuses?
• Has the child had a hearing check?
• Is English the main language in the household?
• Does the child have any oral physical difficulties? - cleft palate, difficulty sucking/feeding/dribbling?
• What is the child's speech like at home?
• Are there older siblings with similar difficulties?
• Has there been any involvement from Health visitors, GP or Speech and Language Therapy service?
• Does the parent/carer have any reports/recommendations that might help you meet the child's needs more appropriately in the setting?

Things to consider/find out in the setting:

• Do you give the child a long enough time to respond?
• Is the child shy?
• Does the child talk to other children and adults or children/adults only?
• In what situations do they communicate most freely/easily - quiet times, free play, home corner?
• Do they join in with activities?
• Are they sociable?
• Do they join in with songs/rhymes?
• What means of communication do they prefer to use - pointing/gesture?
• Do they make symbolic noises?
• Do they understand what is being said?
• Can the child follow simple instructions?

General strategies to employ:

• Make sure you give enough time for response
• Do not put pressure on the child to speak
• Label the setting and have visual timetables to encourage understanding of routines and independence within the setting
- Adults can play alongside the child giving a running commentary on the play
- Do not ask the child to repeat words/phrases correctly
- Adults can repeat phrases back to the child modelling clear/correct pronunciation/grammar/order
- Provide the opportunity for the child to play with dolls, teddies, animals or puppets
- If a child has difficulty finding a specific word ask what it is for, what it looks like or what colour it is
- Ensure you have the child’s attention (use their name or touch their arm) when talking to them, reading or giving instructions
- Always ensure the child can see your face when you are talking to them

### Keep dated observations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies for children with comprehension difficulties</th>
<th>Strategies for children with expressive difficulties</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use short simple instruction</td>
<td>Work on comprehension first</td>
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<tr>
<td>Break tasks into small steps</td>
<td>Follow child’s lead</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use visual cues, books/props</td>
<td>Use topic based approach to vocabulary</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use repetition</td>
<td>Model language for the child at their level</td>
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<tr>
<td>Offer choices</td>
<td>Use ‘wh’ questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use concrete language where possible</td>
<td>Check on comprehension of</td>
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<tr>
<td>Describe objects by function, such as ‘the one we use to paint with/brush out hair with’</td>
<td>Use pictures and objects</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Encourage interaction through play</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Encourage use of gesture</td>
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<td>Use multi sensory stimuli</td>
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</tbody>
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### Unclear Speech

- React to what is said not how it is
- Develop listening/auditory discrimination skills
- Model target sounds/language
- Ask questions or get them to show you - Sometimes admit you do not understand and move the child on
- Reassure and support self esteem
- Remember speech improves with practice
Concerns regarding social skills

**Things to consider and discuss with parent/carer:**

- Has the child been to a setting before?
- Does the child live in an isolated rural area?
- Does the child have older siblings who they play with at home?
- How does the child behave at home?
- What input has there been from home?
- Have there been any recent changes at home?

**Things to consider/find out in the setting:**

- Are the activities available appropriate to the child and will they find them interesting/exciting?
- Do they use social skills most appropriately when alongside adults or children?
- Is the child aware of the groups' routines and rules?
- Is the child able to understand instructions/language used in the setting?
- Is the child shy/reserved or do they seem to have a low self esteem?
- Does the child have appropriate attention/concentration skills?
- Are your expectations realistic? 2 year olds are often not ready to sit and listen for 15-20 minutes during group time or play cooperatively.
- Is the setting offering enough opportunities for developing sharing, turn taking and co-operative play?

**General Strategies to employ:**

- Do not put pressure on the child to join in or participate
- Adults to play gently alongside the child
- Adults to model appropriate social skills/language
- Adults to model a range of resources and play possibilities to engage, maintain and extend child's play
- Adults to support turn taking activities with other children
- Adults to support and activity the child likes as part of a small group
- Offer activities and problem solving sessions where children have to share, co-operate and work together
- Ensure that you are offering resources which are appropriate both to the child's level of understanding/ability and to their areas of interest.
- Ensure the child is aware of the group's routines and rules through group discussion and use of visual clues/timetables
Concerns regarding physical difficulties

Things to consider and discuss with parents carer:

- How does the child get on at home? Does the child fall over - have difficulty with coordination?
- Are there physical difficulties?
- Are other professionals involved with the child's family?
- Is there any specific equipment the child needs to use, such as Piedro boots?
- Does the parent have any reports/recommendations that might help you meet the child's needs more appropriately in the setting?
- What opportunities are there for the child to use/develop fine/gross motor skills at home?
- Is there a garden/play area where the child can climb/pedal?

Things to consider/find out in the setting:

- Observe the child during specific activities, such as ball rolling, balancing, cutting ... and make dated observations of strengths and weaknesses
- Does the continuous provision allow enough opportunity for the child to practice fine/gross motor activities/skills?
- Provide the opportunity to practice motor skills in a variety of interesting and different ways
- Are all the opportunities provided accessible to the child?
- Does the setting need to adapt any equipment to enable access?
- Will the setting need to acquire any resources to support the child's development and enable inclusive opportunities, such as springy/training scissors, chucky paint brushes/crayons, captain's chairs (Child Development Centre - CDC; INNEX funding - Early Year's Inclusion Team)

General strategies to employ:

- Provide the opportunity to practice motor skills in a variety of interesting and different ways (Gym trail approach)
- Make use of any advice from other agencies
- Do not force a child to do things they find difficult or as nervous about
- Offer activities that provide success
- Organise staff so support if available when needed, enabling child to use equipment/access opportunities successfully
- Know when to withdraw the support and encourage the child to become independent
- Keep up to dates observations of developing skills