

Phrase Translation Bank v1 — Early-Years Record Language

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Working public draft

Purpose: To help adults slow down common early-years record phrases before they harden into interpretation, pattern, recommendation, or record-truth.

Unseriously serious warning

This bank has been deliberately stopped at v1 before it tried to become every report-writing course, supervision manual, child-development glossary, cultural-practice guide, hearings-language handbook, social-work dictionary, foster-care log template, and moral philosophy dissertation in Scotland.

That restraint is intentional.

The bank is large enough to show the problem and useful enough to test in practice. It is not meant to solve every phrase in advance. Future additions should come from field feedback, current practice, professional testing, or real report language that shows where further precision is needed.

In other words: the tool has been put down before it started wearing a lanyard and calling itself a framework implementation programme.

Opening position

Very young children are often described in words that appear ordinary, neutral, and professionally familiar. Words such as *settled*, *distressed*, *clingy*, *resistant*, *withdrawn*, *dysregulated*, or *unsettled after contact* can look modest when first written. But in early-years records, familiar shorthand can carry more meaning than it can safely hold.

For babies, toddlers, and preverbal children, language has unusual power. The child cannot correct the wording, explain what was meant, challenge an adult interpretation, or stop a phrase becoming part of a larger pattern. That means adult record language must distinguish what was observed from what was inferred, what happened from what it might mean, and what is known from what remains uncertain.

This bank does not ban common phrases. It slows them down.

The task is not to make records longer, colder, softer, or less practical. The task is to make record language careful enough for the power it may later carry.

Status and use disclaimer

This is a working bank, not official guidance, a fixed dictionary, or a replacement for professional training, supervision, report-writing standards, legal duties, safeguarding procedures, or specialist assessment.

It is not presented as settled terminology. It is offered as a practical testing tool: a way to ask whether familiar shorthand in early-years care records, social work reports, family-time notes, supervision, review papers, and children's-hearing material may be carrying more meaning than it can safely hold.

The examples should be tested against current Scottish early-years practice, infant-voice work, foster care recording, social work methods, hearings language, corporate parenting responsibilities, and local reporting standards.

The author is not claiming authority to decide the correct wording for every professional setting. The purpose is to make the language problem visible, provide a structured first bank for discussion, and invite people already working in the field to test, adapt, correct, improve, or reject entries where necessary.

The aim is not to create a new professional dialect. The aim is to support more careful adult thinking so that records can describe babies, toddlers, and preverbal children with more humanised precision.

Important boundaries

This bank is not official guidance and has not been adopted by any public authority, council, court, panel, professional body, care organisation, or statutory agency.

This is not a list of forbidden words. Many familiar shorthand terms may still be usable where they are properly grounded in observation, context, uncertainty, and professional judgement. The concern is not that a word exists. The concern is what the word is being made to carry.

The example phrases are illustrative only. They should be adapted to the actual child, setting, observation, role, reporting standard, and professional duty.

This bank must never be used to soften, delay, or avoid action where there is concern about harm, neglect, abuse, injury, exploitation, medical risk, unsafe care, or immediate safety. Where action is required, action comes first.

The examples do not diagnose a child, assess attachment, determine trauma, decide parental capacity, set contact recommendations, assess risk, or replace specialist

assessment, supervision, legal advice, clinical judgement, or statutory decision-making.

Where AI is used to test wording, do not paste identifiable child, family, carer, professional, or case material into an AI tool unless there is a clear, lawful, professional basis for doing so. The safer use is to test the structure of the wording problem, not to upload identifiable records.

The work is informed by lived concern and public ethical reflection, but this bank is offered as a practice-facing language tool rather than as a case submission, complaint route, or attempt to influence any individual decision.

Field-testing priorities and likely gaps

This first bank is strongest where records describe visible child state, adult interpretation, family time, contact transitions, and ordinary shorthand about parents, carers, and preverbal children. It should now be tested against current Scottish practice to identify what it has missed.

Several areas need particular attention in later versions:

Cultural, linguistic, and family-practice differences. Some wording may misread difference as concern. A parent or carer may not be refusing, failing, or being unresponsive; they may be working from a different language, family routine, cultural expectation, or care practice. Humanised precision should ask what was actually communicated, what was understood, and whether the adult system has mistaken difference for deficit.

Medicalised or clinical-lite shorthand. Phrases such as *developmentally delayed*, *sensory seeking*, *low tone*, *trauma response*, or *attachment presentation* can become record-truth before appropriate assessment has occurred. Where there is a health or developmental concern, it should be named carefully and routed properly, but ordinary record language should not pretend to diagnose.

The invisible child in group settings. Nursery, early-years, and group observations often use positive shorthand such as *played well*, *joined in*, *enjoyed the session*, or *settled with peers*. These may hide the child's actual experience. A more careful record should show what the child did, who they moved towards, what they explored, how they handled sharing, noise, proximity, frustration, curiosity, or adult support.

Digital systems and checkbox language. Some records are shaped by forms, drop-down menus, status categories, or limited text boxes. Humanised precision may require using the free-text section to un-collapse whatever the required category cannot show. Where the system forces shorthand, the note should restore observation, context, uncertainty, and child visibility where possible.

Joy, curiosity, humour, and agency. A child is not only a site of distress, regulation, risk, and support need. Humanised precision must also describe delight, curiosity, playfulness, preference, discovery, humour, initiative, and ordinary becoming. Positive shorthand can also be too thin. The child should be visible not only when something is wrong.

Professional disagreement and source clarity. Different adults may read the same behaviour differently. A careful record should avoid making one interpretation silently swallow the others. Where appropriate, it should mark who observed what, in what setting, and whether different professionals, carers, or family members interpreted the same signal differently.

Moral atmosphere and interpretive pressure

Children and families are not interpreted in a vacuum. They are interpreted inside moral atmospheres: anxiety, shame, suspicion, fear of blame, professional caution, institutional pressure, family history, class judgement, cultural assumptions, stigma, risk sensitivity, and the emotional residue of previous concerns.

Humanised precision does not pretend those atmospheres are absent. It asks adults to notice when atmosphere may be shaping interpretation.

A phrase may look neutral while carrying a moral charge. *Defensive, resistant, attention-seeking, difficult, inconsistent, unsettled after contact, or lacks insight* can all carry more atmosphere than observation. The task is not to remove concern, but to separate concern from verdict.

The record should ask:

- What was seen?
- What was inferred?
- What concern was already present?
- What moral tone has entered the wording?
- What alternative explanations remain possible?
- What action is required, and what meaning is not yet settled?

This matters because moral atmosphere can make weak language feel stronger than it is. Humanised precision slows that process down.

Joy, agency, and the child who is more than a concern

A child should not only become visible in the record when there is a concern.

Early-years records often become most detailed when something is wrong: distress, risk, transition difficulty, feeding concern, sleep disruption, contact upset, regulation difficulty, or adult worry. But a preverbal child is also becoming through delight,

curiosity, recognition, humour, anticipation, exploration, preference, imitation, rhythm, social attention, and shared joy.

Those details are not decorative. They are developmental evidence. They show what draws the child outward, what the child recognises, what they return to, what they enjoy, how they explore the world, and how they participate before speech.

Positive shorthand can also collapse the child.

Too thin:

The child enjoyed Bookbug.

More careful:

The child turned towards the adult when the familiar song began, smiled during the repeated rhythm, shook the instrument when the adult paused, and looked back towards the adult as if sharing the moment.

Too thin:

The child played well at group.

More careful:

The child sat beside two other children at the sand tray, watched one child scoop sand, copied the movement, and smiled when the other child passed her the spade.

The record should carry the child's life, not only the system's concerns. Humanised precision should make joy, agency, curiosity, and ordinary becoming visible too.

Dropdowns, checkboxes, and administrative flattening

Some systems force adults to choose from dropdowns, checkboxes, status labels, traffic-light ratings, or short category fields. These may be necessary for administration, audit, planning, or retrieval. But they are not the child.

A dropdown can record that a child was *settled*, *unsettled*, *seen*, *safe*, *engaged*, *no concern*, or *concern noted*. It cannot, by itself, show what the child did, what changed, what support was offered, what the adult inferred, or what remains uncertain.

The risk is that the administrative field becomes mistaken for the description.

Where a system forces shorthand, humanised precision should restore the child in the free-text space wherever possible.

Dropdown/category:

Settled.

Free-text restoration:

The child was quiet after arrival, stayed close to the carer for several minutes, then moved towards the toy basket and accepted a toy when offered. She looked back towards the carer twice before beginning to play.

Dropdown/category:

Contact unsettled.

Free-text restoration:

The child became upset during the transition at the end of family time. The record should distinguish the quality of the session itself from distress during handover, separation, travel, tiredness, or routine disruption.

A checkbox may be required. It should not be allowed to become the whole child.

How to use this bank

For each phrase, ask:

1. What was directly observed?
2. What happened before and after?
3. Who interpreted the behaviour, and from what position?
4. What else might explain the child's signal or state?
5. Has the phrase become too certain, too moralised, too thin, or too adult-centred?
6. What wording would keep the child visible without pretending to know more than was observed?
7. Is any immediate safeguarding, medical, legal, or professional action required?

Safety boundary

This bank must never be used to minimise risk or delay necessary action. Where there is immediate concern about a child's safety, health, care, neglect, injury, coercion, exploitation, abuse, legal duty, medical risk, or urgent uncertainty, action comes before reflection.

Safeguarding before theory.

Reflect where reflection protects the child. Act where action protects the child. Do not confuse the two.

1. Settled

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Settled is often used as if it means the child is calm, comfortable, safe, content, regulated, unaffected, or doing well. But a baby or toddler may appear settled for many reasons. They may be genuinely comfortable. They may be quiet because they are tired, watchful, overwhelmed, unsure, compliant, dissociated, or simply not expressing distress outwardly in that moment.

The risk is that *settled* turns quietness into wellbeing too quickly.

What may actually have been observed

- The child was quiet.
- The child played independently.
- The child accepted a toy or food.
- The child stayed near a familiar adult.
- The child stopped crying after support.
- The child did not show visible distress.
- The child watched the room but did not approach.
- The child returned to play after a transition.

Questions before recording it

- Settled how?
- Settled with whom?
- Settled after what?
- For how long?
- What signs showed comfort, engagement, or recovery?
- Was the child quiet, or visibly at ease?
- What support helped the child settle?
- Could quietness have another explanation?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The child was settled.

More careful:

The child sat near the toys, accepted a toy when offered, and looked towards the adult several times. There were no visible signs of distress during this period.

More careful with uncertainty:

The child was quiet and remained close to the familiar adult. This may have reflected comfort or reassurance, but the record should not treat quietness alone as proof that the child was settled.

More careful after distress:

After crying during the handover, the child became calmer when held by the familiar adult and later returned to play. The record should show both the distress and the support that helped the child recover.

2. Distressed

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Distressed may be accurate, but it is often incomplete. It can name the visible state while hiding the sequence that matters: what happened before, what the child did, what support was offered, how long distress lasted, what helped, and what adults inferred.

The risk is that distress becomes treated as evidence of cause before the cause has been established.

What may actually have been observed

- Crying.
- Screaming.
- Stiffening.
- Reaching out.
- Turning away.
- Seeking closeness.
- Pushing away an object or adult.
- Difficulty recovering after transition.
- Change in breathing, posture, attention, or movement.

Questions before recording it

- What visible signs showed distress?
- What happened immediately before?
- Was the distress during contact, separation, handover, travel, tiredness, hunger, noise, or another transition?
- How did the adult respond?
- What helped the child recover?
- How long did it last?
- Is the record assigning cause too quickly?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The child was distressed.

More careful:

The child cried loudly, reached towards the adult, and took around ten minutes to become calmer after being held quietly.

More careful with context:

The child became upset when the session ended and cried during the transition from the room. It is not clear from this observation alone whether the distress related to separation, tiredness, handover, routine disruption, or another factor.

More careful with action:

The child showed visible distress and took time to recover. This should be discussed in supervision so that future transitions can be planned with more support.

3. Clingy

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Clingy often turns comfort-seeking into a negative trait. For babies and toddlers, seeking closeness is not automatically a problem. It may be a developmentally ordinary signal of tiredness, uncertainty, fear, need for co-regulation, familiarity, or relational orientation.

The risk is that the child is written as demanding or over-attached when the observation may simply show a need for reassurance.

What may actually have been observed

- Reaching towards an adult.
- Crying when an adult moved away.
- Wanting to be held.
- Staying close to a familiar adult.
- Looking for the adult after a transition.
- Becoming calmer when held or spoken to.

Questions before recording it

- What did the child actually do?
- Was the adult familiar or unfamiliar?
- Had there been a transition, separation, handover, tiredness, or overstimulation?
- Did closeness help the child regulate?
- Is the wording treating a need for comfort as a fault?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The child was clingy.

More careful:

The child sought closeness with the familiar adult, reached towards them, and became upset when they moved away.

More careful with interpretation held open:

The child appeared to need reassurance from the familiar adult during this transition. She became calmer when held. This should be recorded as comfort-seeking rather than as a fault in the child.

4. Withdrawn

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Withdrawn can imply an internal state or stable pattern when the observation may only show quietness, caution, fatigue, unfamiliarity, overload, illness, uncertainty, or a response to the environment.

The risk is that a child's reduced engagement is treated as a settled emotional conclusion before context is understood.

What may actually have been observed

- Not approaching toys or adults.
- Looking down or away.
- Reduced vocalising.
- Sitting still.
- Watching rather than joining.
- Delayed engagement.
- Becoming more engaged after the environment changed.

Questions before recording it

- What did the child do or not do?
- Was the setting familiar?
- Was the room noisy, busy, or pressured?
- Was the child tired, unwell, hungry, or recently transitioned?
- Did engagement change over time?
- What helped the child become more available?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The child was withdrawn.

More careful:

During the first part of the session, the child did not approach the toys or adults and looked down several times.

More careful with sequence:

After the room became quieter, the child looked towards the adult and accepted a toy. The record should keep open whether the earlier quietness reflected tiredness, uncertainty, overwhelm, unfamiliarity, or something more stable.

5. Resistant

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Resistant can give a baby or toddler more authorship, intention, or opposition than is developmentally realistic. It can make a child sound deliberately difficult when the observation may show fear, uncertainty, discomfort, sensory overload, tiredness, unfamiliarity, or a need for more time.

The risk is that adult frustration or institutional expectation enters the record as a trait of the child.

What may actually have been observed

- Turning away.
- Crying when lifted.
- Pushing away a hand, toy, bottle, food, or clothing.
- Stiffening body.
- Avoiding eye contact.
- Moving towards another adult.
- Becoming calmer when the adult slowed down.

Questions before recording it

- What was the child being asked or expected to do?
- Was the adult approach too quick?
- Was the child tired, hungry, overstimulated, sore, or unsure?
- Did the child have enough time to process the transition?
- Is the wording giving the child too much deliberate intent?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The child was resistant.

More careful:

The child turned her body away when the adult reached towards her and cried when lifted.

More careful with adult action included:

The child became calmer when the adult paused and allowed more time before trying again. The record should describe both the child's response and the adult approach rather than treating the behaviour as simple resistance.

6. Overstimulated

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Overstimulated can be useful, but it is often used as a conclusion without showing what stimulation was present or how the child responded. It may also be used to explain distress after contact, family time, handover, or a busy setting without considering other possible meanings.

The risk is that a complex child response is reduced to a convenient environmental explanation.

What may actually have been observed

- Crying or agitation after a busy period.
- Turning away from sound, light, or touch.
- Difficulty settling.
- Increased movement.
- Reduced tolerance for handling.
- Rubbing eyes, arching, pushing away, or seeking quiet.
- Becoming calmer in a quieter environment.

Questions before recording it

- What stimulation was present?
- Noise, light, people, handling, travel, transition, tiredness, hunger, emotional intensity?
- What signs suggested overload?
- What else might explain the child's state?
- What helped the child recover?
- Is the phrase being used to avoid discussing separation, contact, uncertainty, or adult discomfort?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The child was overstimulated.

More careful:

After the room became busy and noisy, the child cried, turned away from the group, and became calmer when taken to a quieter space.

More careful with uncertainty:

The child struggled to settle after the session. The room had been busy and the transition was quick, so overstimulation may have been one factor. The record should not treat this as the only possible explanation.

7. Unsettled after contact / family time

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

This is one of the most powerful and risky phrases in early-years records. *Unsettled after contact* can be used as if it tells us what contact meant, whether contact was beneficial, whether a parent is a source of distress, or whether the child is harmed by family time.

But distress after contact may reflect many things: separation, reunion, handover, tiredness, routine disruption, sensory overload, travel, hunger, confusion, emotional intensity, or the need for co-regulation.

The risk is that the phrase begins to govern the parent-child relationship without enough evidence.

What may actually have been observed

- Crying during or after handover.
- Difficulty settling in the car or home.
- Seeking closeness afterwards.
- Changes in sleep or eating.
- Quietness after transition.
- Increased need for comfort.
- Distress at separation from parent, carer, or setting.

Questions before recording it

- When exactly did the child become unsettled?
- During contact, at the end, during handover, during travel, or later?
- What happened before the distress?
- Who was present?
- How was the transition managed?
- What helped the child settle?
- Is the record treating post-contact distress as evidence against contact too quickly?
- Could the distress show the importance of the relationship rather than harm caused by it?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The child was unsettled after contact.

More careful:

After family time ended, the child cried during the transition from the contact setting and took around fifteen minutes to settle with the carer.

More careful with alternatives:

The record should distinguish between distress during contact, distress at separation,

distress during handover, tiredness, routine disruption, overstimulation, and other possible explanations.

More careful with planning:

The child appeared to need more support during the transition after family time. Future planning should consider whether handover, timing, travel, familiar objects, or co-regulation support could reduce distress.

8. Dysregulated

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Dysregulated can be clinically or developmentally useful, but it can also become cold shorthand. It may describe a child as a state-management problem rather than as a baby or toddler struggling under particular conditions.

The risk is that technical language hides the child's actual experience and the support that helped or did not help.

What may actually have been observed

- Crying for a sustained period.
- Difficulty calming.
- Stiffening, arching, flailing, pushing away.
- Rapid shifts in state.
- Difficulty returning to play or rest.
- Becoming calmer with holding, rocking, reduced noise, familiar voice, food, sleep, or space.

Questions before recording it

- What signs showed difficulty regulating?
- What happened before?
- Was the child tired, hungry, frightened, overloaded, unwell, or transitioning?
- What support was offered?
- Did the adult response help or intensify the distress?
- Is the phrase being used without enough human description?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The child was dysregulated.

More careful:

The child was struggling to recover after becoming upset. She cried loudly, stiffened her body, and pushed away the toy offered.

More careful with support:

The child returned to play only after being held quietly by a familiar adult. The record

should include what happened before this, what support was offered, and what helped her settle.

9. Calm

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Calm can be useful, but it can also confuse outward stillness with internal comfort. A baby or toddler may look calm while tired, watchful, shut down, unsure, or simply not currently distressed.

The risk is similar to *settled*: quiet presentation becomes proof of wellbeing.

What may actually have been observed

- Slow breathing.
- Relaxed posture.
- Playing or resting.
- Accepting comfort.
- Reduced crying.
- Looking around without visible distress.
- Sitting quietly.

Questions before recording it

- What signs showed calmness?
- Was the child engaged, relaxed, and responsive, or simply quiet?
- Was calmness sustained?
- What had happened before?
- Did the child recover after support?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The child was calm.

More careful:

The child stopped crying, relaxed her body while being held, and later looked towards the toys.

More careful with caution:

The child was quiet and did not show visible distress. The record should not assume from quietness alone that she was comfortable or unaffected.

10. Bonded / not bonded

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Bonded and *not bonded* are high-power phrases. They can heavily shape how relationships are understood, supported, restricted, or dismissed. Used casually, they can convert limited observation into a serious conclusion about attachment, relationship, or permanence.

The risk is that a complex relationship is reduced to a verdict.

What may actually have been observed

- The child looked towards or away from the adult.
- The child sought comfort or did not seek comfort.
- The child calmed with one adult more than another.
- The child smiled, reached, cried, froze, avoided, or became quiet.
- The adult responded sensitively, inconsistently, intrusively, warmly, or anxiously.
- The child's response changed over time or across settings.

Questions before recording it

- Who is making the claim?
- On what observations?
- Across how many contexts?
- Is this a direct relationship conclusion or a description of observed interaction?
- Has enough positive material been recorded?
- Is the phrase being used to strengthen a preferred plan?
- Should this be treated as a specialist assessment question rather than casual record language?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The child is bonded with the carer.

More careful:

The child looked towards the carer when upset, reached to be picked up, and became calmer when the carer held her.

Too thin:

The child is not bonded with the parent.

More careful:

During this session, the child did not seek physical comfort from the parent and looked towards the supervising adult several times. This should be recorded as an observation from this session, not as a settled conclusion about the relationship.

Boundary wording:

Any conclusion about attachment or bonding should be made cautiously, across sufficient

observations, and with appropriate professional assessment. Ordinary record language should not overstate what one moment can show.

11. Resilient

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Resilient can sound positive, but it may hide unmet need. A child who appears to cope may still require support. In records, resilience can become a reason to expect a child to tolerate disruption, distress, loss, or adult failure without adequate recognition.

The risk is that the child's capacity is overstated and their need is understated.

What may actually have been observed

- The child recovered after distress.
- The child returned to play.
- The child tolerated a transition.
- The child accepted support.
- The child adapted to change.
- The child appeared outwardly unaffected.

Questions before recording it

- What exactly showed recovery or coping?
- What support made that possible?
- Is the child being praised for tolerating something difficult?
- Does the phrase hide the cost to the child?
- Is resilience being used to justify less support?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The child was resilient.

More careful:

After becoming upset during the transition, the child accepted comfort from the adult and returned to play after around ten minutes.

More careful with support visible:

The child recovered with support. The record should not treat this as evidence that the transition was easy for her or that less support is needed.

12. Seeking attention

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Seeking attention is often moralised. For a baby or toddler, seeking attention may simply mean seeking connection, help, comfort, stimulation, safety, co-regulation, or adult response. Attention-seeking is not automatically manipulation. In early years, attention is often a developmental need.

The risk is that the child is written as performative or demanding when they may be signalling need.

What may actually have been observed

- Crying when adults looked away.
- Reaching or vocalising towards an adult.
- Repeating an action after adult response.
- Moving closer to an adult.
- Becoming calmer when spoken to or held.
- Escalating when ignored.

Questions before recording it

- What kind of attention was the child seeking?
- Was the child seeking comfort, help, play, food, safety, co-regulation, or connection?
- Is the phrase importing adult judgement?
- What happened when the adult responded sensitively?
- Is this developmentally ordinary for the child's age and context?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The child was attention-seeking.

More careful:

The child vocalised and reached towards the adult several times. She became calmer when the adult came closer and spoke to her.

More careful with development visible:

The child appeared to be seeking adult response and reassurance. This should be described as a signal for connection or co-regulation rather than as manipulation.

13. Quiet / good baby

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

A baby who is described as *quiet*, *good*, or *no bother* may be genuinely content. But those phrases can also hide reduced signal-sending, tiredness, watchfulness, uncertainty, illness, overwhelm, or a child who has stopped expecting adult response.

The risk is that adults mistake low demand for wellbeing.

What may actually have been observed

- The baby did not cry.
- The baby lay or sat quietly.
- The baby did not seek adult attention.
- The baby watched the room without approaching.
- The baby accepted care without protest.
- The baby showed limited vocalising, reaching, or visible expression.

Questions before recording it

- Was the baby visibly relaxed, or simply quiet?
- Did the baby seek comfort, play, food, eye contact, or adult response?
- Was the baby tired, unwell, overstimulated, or watchful?
- Is the wording praising the child for not needing anything?
- Has the child's low signal-output been noticed as possible information?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The baby was good and quiet.

More careful:

The baby was quiet during this period and did not cry or seek adult attention. The record should not assume from quietness alone that she was comfortable or settled.

More careful with positive evidence:

The baby was quiet, looked towards the adult several times, accepted a toy, and relaxed her body while being held. These signs may suggest comfort during this period.

More careful with concern held open:

The baby showed limited signal-sending during this period. Staff should continue to observe whether this reflects tiredness, comfort, uncertainty, illness, or reduced expectation of adult response.

14. Fretful / difficult

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Fretful may describe visible unsettledness, but *difficult* moves quickly into judgement. A baby or toddler who cries, squirms, rejects food, resists sleep, or needs repeated comfort is not being difficult in the adult sense. They are showing that something in their body, environment, relationship, or state requires attention.

The risk is that the adult system records the child as the problem rather than asking what the child is signalling.

What may actually have been observed

- Repeated crying or whimpering.
- Difficulty settling.
- Squirming, arching, or stiffening.
- Rejecting food, sleep, touch, or a toy.
- Seeking comfort repeatedly.
- Becoming calmer only after a specific form of support.

Questions before recording it

- What exactly did the child do?
- What was happening around the child?
- Could the child be hungry, tired, sore, ill, overstimulated, under-stimulated, uncertain, or needing co-regulation?
- What support was tried?
- What helped, even briefly?
- Is the phrase carrying adult frustration?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The baby was difficult today.

More careful:

The baby cried repeatedly during the morning, pushed away the bottle twice, and became calmer when held in a quieter room.

More careful with uncertainty:

The baby appeared unsettled and difficult to soothe. Possible factors include tiredness, feeding discomfort, noise in the room, or a need for closer co-regulation. This should be observed further rather than treated as a trait.

15. Avoidant eye contact

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Avoidant can sound like a settled relational conclusion. A baby or toddler may look away for many reasons: tiredness, sensory load, uncertainty, shyness, developmental stage, fear, distraction, or an attempt to regulate intensity.

The risk is that looking away becomes interpreted as rejection, attachment difficulty, or relationship evidence too quickly.

What may actually have been observed

- Looking away when an adult moved close.
- Turning head away during face-to-face interaction.
- Looking towards toys, door, floor, or another adult.
- Brief eye contact followed by turning away.
- More eye contact after the adult softened voice, slowed approach, or gave space.

Questions before recording it

- When did the child look away?
- How close was the adult?
- Was the interaction intense, noisy, unfamiliar, or prolonged?
- Did the child look back later?
- Did the child respond in other ways, such as reaching, vocalising, relaxing, or moving closer?
- Is the word *avoidant* stronger than the observation supports?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The child was avoidant of eye contact.

More careful:

The child looked away when the adult moved close and spoke directly to her. She later looked towards the adult when the adult sat back and used a quieter voice.

More careful with uncertainty:

The child's reduced eye contact may have reflected tiredness, uncertainty, sensory load, or a need for more space. This should not be recorded as a settled relationship conclusion from this observation alone.

16. Hypervigilant / watchful

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Hypervigilant may be clinically meaningful, but it can be overused. A child who watches the room, startles, or tracks adult movement may be showing concern, curiosity, uncertainty, unfamiliarity, or threat-detection. The word can become too clinical unless tied to what was actually seen.

The risk is that a technical term replaces visible description.

What may actually have been observed

- Frequent scanning of the room.
- Startling at noise or movement.
- Watching adults closely.

- Difficulty returning to play.
- Freezing or becoming still when someone entered.
- Becoming calmer when held, reassured, or moved to a quieter space.

Questions before recording it

- What did the child look at or track?
- Did scanning interrupt play, feeding, rest, or interaction?
- What changed in the room before the child became watchful?
- Did the child recover when supported?
- Is *hypervigilant* necessary, or would *watchful and easily startled* be more accurate?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The child was hypervigilant.

More careful:

The child watched the adults closely, startled when the door opened, and did not return to play until the room became quieter.

More careful with interpretation marked:

The child appeared watchful and easily startled during this period. This may suggest she was finding the environment difficult to read or manage, but the record should remain tied to the observed signs.

17. Inconsolable

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Inconsolable can make the child's distress sound unreachable or final. It may be accurate in ordinary speech, but records should show what was tried, for how long, what changed, and whether the child needed a different kind of support or urgent attention.

The risk is that the word becomes a dead end instead of a prompt to examine state, context, support, and possible health or safety concerns.

What may actually have been observed

- Sustained crying.
- Difficulty calming after repeated comfort attempts.
- Arching, stiffening, or pushing away.
- No response to usual soothing.
- Brief calming followed by renewed distress.
- Signs of pain, illness, hunger, tiredness, fear, or overload.

Questions before recording it

- How long did the distress last?
- What comfort was offered?
- Did anything help, even briefly?
- Were there signs of pain, injury, illness, hunger, tiredness, or fear?
- Was medical or safeguarding advice needed?
- Is *inconsolable* being used without enough detail?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The baby was inconsolable.

More careful:

The baby cried for around twenty minutes. Holding, rocking, and offering a bottle did not settle her. She briefly became quieter when moved to a darker room but began crying again.

More careful with action boundary:

Because the baby's distress continued despite usual soothing, staff should consider whether health advice, additional observation, or supervisory discussion is needed.

18. Poor feeder / feeding difficulty

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Poor feeder can turn a feeding difficulty into a label on the child. Feeding is affected by state, health, comfort, sensory tolerance, timing, adult handling, environment, familiarity, and medical factors.

The risk is that the child is described as the problem while context and possible health needs disappear.

What may actually have been observed

- Turning away from bottle, breast, spoon, or cup.
- Taking only small amounts.
- Coughing, gagging, arching, crying, or falling asleep during feeding.
- Feeding better with a familiar adult or quieter setting.
- Feeding differently at different times of day.

Questions before recording it

- What exactly happened during feeding?
- Was the child hungry, tired, upset, unwell, distracted, or overstimulated?
- Was the pace, position, bottle, food, or environment suitable?
- Is there any health concern requiring professional advice?

- Does the record blame the child or describe the feeding interaction?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The baby is a poor feeder.

More careful:

The baby took a small amount of milk, turned her head away several times, and became upset when the bottle was offered again.

More careful with context:

The baby fed for longer when held by the familiar adult in a quieter room. Further observation should consider timing, position, tiredness, health, and environmental factors.

Health boundary:

Any ongoing feeding concern should be discussed with the appropriate health professional. Record language should not replace medical advice.

19. Disturbed sleep / poor sleeper

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Poor sleeper can make disrupted sleep sound like a child trait. Sleep may be affected by stress, routine change, hunger, discomfort, illness, sensory environment, separation, nightmares, developmental stage, or lack of felt safety.

The risk is that sleep disruption is treated as a behaviour problem rather than a signal requiring context.

What may actually have been observed

- Waking frequently.
- Difficulty falling asleep.
- Crying during the night.
- Needing adult presence to settle.
- Sleeping better after routine, comfort, or environmental changes.
- Changes in sleep after contact, transition, illness, or placement movement.

Questions before recording it

- What was the sleep pattern?
- What changed recently?
- What helped the child settle?
- Was there pain, illness, hunger, fear, separation, or routine disruption?
- Is the phrase treating sleep difficulty as a fixed trait?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The child is a poor sleeper.

More careful:

The child woke three times during the night and cried until the carer sat beside the cot and spoke quietly.

More careful with context:

Sleep was more disrupted after the change in routine. The record should keep open whether this relates to transition, tiredness, illness, separation, or another factor.

20. Passive

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Passive can imply temperament, compliance, or lack of interest. In a preverbal child, low activity or low protest may also reflect tiredness, illness, uncertainty, overwhelm, fear, reduced expectation of response, or conservation of energy.

The risk is that adults mistake low outward resistance for acceptance or wellbeing.

What may actually have been observed

- Little movement or vocalising.
- Accepting handling without protest.
- Not reaching for toys or adults.
- Watching without joining.
- Not seeking comfort when upset.
- Becoming more active after rest, food, quiet, or familiar adult contact.

Questions before recording it

- Passive in what situation?
- Was the child relaxed, tired, unwell, watchful, overwhelmed, or shut down?
- Did the child show interest in any way?
- Did adult support change the child's availability?
- Is passivity being read as agreement?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The child was passive.

More careful:

The child remained still while being changed and did not vocalise or reach towards the adult. Later, after sleep, she reached for a toy and smiled briefly.

More careful with caution:

The child showed low outward response during this period. The record should not treat this as agreement or comfort without further signs.

21. Rigid / stiff

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Physical stiffness can be an important signal, but the record should avoid jumping too quickly to emotional meaning. Stiffening may reflect fear, discomfort, pain, startle, sensory overload, medical factors, tiredness, or resistance to handling.

The risk is either over-interpreting the body or failing to treat it as meaningful.

What may actually have been observed

- Arching back.
- Stiffening arms or legs.
- Clenching fists.
- Pulling away when lifted.
- Becoming physically still when approached.
- Relaxing after a pause, slower handling, or familiar adult support.

Questions before recording it

- When did the child stiffen?
- Who was present?
- What handling or transition was happening?
- Did the child show signs of pain or illness?
- Did the child relax when the adult slowed down or changed approach?
- Is health advice needed?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The child was stiff and resistant.

More careful:

The child stiffened her body when lifted and cried when the adult continued the movement. She relaxed slightly when the adult paused and spoke quietly.

Health boundary:

Where stiffness, pain, or unusual movement is repeated or concerning, it should be discussed with an appropriate health professional.

Adult and carer response language

The same care is needed when writing about adults. Parents, foster carers, kinship carers, and professionals should not be reduced to moral shorthand either. The focus should be on how adults read, respond to, and support the child's signals.

This does not mean avoiding concern. It means making concern more accurate.

22. Good bond / no bond

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Good bond and *no bond* are high-power phrases. They can influence contact, care planning, permanence, and how relationships are valued. Used casually, they turn complex interaction into a verdict.

The risk is that the adult-child relationship is described as a conclusion without showing the observations beneath it.

What may actually have been observed

- The child sought or accepted comfort from the adult.
- The child looked towards the adult.
- The child smiled, reached, cried, froze, avoided, or relaxed.
- The adult noticed and responded to the child's cues.
- The adult missed, misread, or responded inconsistently to signals.
- The interaction changed over time.

Questions before recording it

- What did the child do?
- What did the adult do?
- How did the child respond to the adult's response?
- Has enough positive and difficult material been recorded?
- Is this a specialist assessment conclusion or an ordinary observation?
- Is the phrase being used to support a preferred plan too quickly?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

There is a good bond.

More careful:

The child looked towards the adult when upset, reached to be picked up, and became calmer when the adult held her and spoke quietly.

Too thin:

There is no bond.

More careful:

During this session, the child did not seek comfort from the adult and looked towards the supervising adult several times. This should be recorded as an observation from this session, not as a settled conclusion about the relationship.

23. Coping well

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Coping well can hide pressure. An adult who does not complain may still be under strain. A carer or parent may appear calm while suppressing difficulty because they fear judgement, loss of trust, or consequences.

The risk is that the system mistakes silence for capacity.

What may actually have been observed

- The adult completed routines.
- The adult did not ask for help.
- The adult gave positive accounts only.
- The adult remained calm during a visit.
- The adult reported difficulty honestly and accepted support.
- The adult's stress affected responsiveness to the child.

Questions before recording it

- What shows coping?
- Is the adult able to be honest about difficulty?
- What support is available?
- Is the child's need still being met under pressure?
- Is the phrase being used to avoid asking about load?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The carer is coping well.

More careful:

The carer is maintaining the child's routines and responded calmly during the visit. They also described tiredness and asked for advice about settling at night.

More careful with support visible:

The adult appears to be managing current routines, but the level of sleep disruption is placing pressure on their capacity. Support should be considered before this affects responsiveness to the child.

24. Overwhelmed

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Overwhelmed can be true, but vague. It may describe feeling, load, reduced capacity, lack of support, crisis, or temporary stress. It can also become a judgement that the adult is failing.

The risk is that adult strain is moralised instead of understood as a support and capacity issue.

What may actually have been observed

- The adult became tearful, frustrated, quiet, or agitated.
- The adult struggled to respond calmly to the child.
- The adult asked for help.
- The adult missed cues or responded late.
- The adult described exhaustion, fear, confusion, or pressure.

Questions before recording it

- What showed overwhelm?
- What load is the adult carrying?
- Is the child's care affected?
- What support has been offered?
- Is there immediate safety concern?
- Is the wording blaming the adult or identifying what needs to change?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The parent was overwhelmed.

More careful:

The parent became tearful when the baby continued crying and said they did not know what to try next. With support, they were able to pause, hold the baby safely, and speak more softly.

More careful with action:

The adult's current stress appears to be reducing their ability to read and respond to the child's signals consistently. This should be addressed through supervision/support planning, and any immediate safety concern should be acted on without delay.

25. Defensive

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Defensive is often used as a moral shortcut. It may mean the adult disagreed, felt accused, feared consequences, misunderstood the concern, was ashamed, or struggled to stay regulated during professional challenge.

The risk is that the adult's reaction to the system is recorded as a character flaw, while the actual issue needing discussion becomes less clear.

What may actually have been observed

- The adult disagreed with a concern.
- The adult gave explanations quickly.
- The adult raised their voice.
- The adult avoided a topic.
- The adult became upset or shut down.
- The adult later engaged after the concern was explained differently.

Questions before recording it

- What did the adult actually say or do?
- What concern was being discussed?
- Was the adult refusing to consider the issue, or reacting to how it was raised?
- Did they become more able to reflect later?
- Is the word *defensive* replacing a clearer description?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The parent was defensive.

More careful:

When the concern was raised, the parent responded quickly with explanations and appeared upset. After the concern was restated more clearly, they were able to discuss what support might help.

More careful where concern remains:

The parent did not appear able at that point to consider the concern being raised. This should be recorded alongside the context of the discussion, what was said, and whether further support or supervision is needed.

26. Lacks insight

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Lacks insight is a high-power administrative phrase. It can influence assessment, risk, contact, and permanence. It often hides what the adult does or does not understand,

what they can or cannot apply, and whether shame, fear, learning difficulty, trauma, language, or distrust is affecting the discussion.

The risk is that a complex support or understanding issue becomes a blunt verdict.

What may actually have been observed

- The adult did not recognise a child cue.
- The adult gave a different explanation for the child's distress.
- The adult repeated a behaviour after advice.
- The adult understood the concern in conversation but struggled to apply it in the moment.
- The adult became more reflective when supported.

Questions before recording it

- Insight into what, exactly?
- Did the adult understand the concern intellectually?
- Could they apply it while stressed?
- What support or explanation was offered?
- Is shame, fear, cognitive load, communication, or distrust affecting the response?
- What change would show improved understanding?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The parent lacks insight.

More careful:

The parent did not appear to recognise that the baby's crying increased when the room became louder. They interpreted the crying as rejection of them personally.

More careful with support route:

The parent may need support to separate the baby's distress signals from their own feelings of rejection or failure. This should be explored in supervision or parenting support rather than recorded only as lack of insight.

27. Warm / nurturing

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Warm and *nurturing* can be positive but vague. They may describe tone, touch, facial expression, responsiveness, consistency, or the child's response to the adult. Without visible detail, the phrase does not show what the adult did or how the child received it.

The risk is that positive language becomes too soft to be useful.

What may actually have been observed

- The adult used a gentle voice.

- The adult noticed signs of tiredness, hunger, distress, or interest.
- The adult adjusted pace or handling.
- The adult comforted the child safely.
- The child relaxed, reached, smiled, vocalised, or returned to play.

Questions before recording it

- What did warmth look like?
- How did the adult respond to the child's cues?
- How did the child respond?
- Was the adult consistent across the session?
- Does the wording show behaviour, not just approval?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The carer was warm and nurturing.

More careful:

The carer noticed the child rubbing her eyes, lowered their voice, picked her up gently, and rocked her until her body relaxed.

More careful with child response:

The child became calmer when the adult held her and spoke softly. This suggests the adult's response supported the child's regulation during this moment.

28. Parent was appropriate

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Appropriate is common but thin. It can mean safe, polite, affectionate, boundaried, responsive, compliant with rules, emotionally attuned, or simply not concerning. It often tells the reader very little.

The risk is that an important interaction becomes administratively acceptable but developmentally invisible.

What may actually have been observed

- The parent followed contact expectations.
- The parent responded to the child's cues.
- The parent used safe handling.
- The parent noticed tiredness or distress.
- The parent played, spoke, fed, changed, comforted, or paused appropriately.
- The child responded with interest, calm, avoidance, distress, or mixed signals.

Questions before recording it

- Appropriate in what way?

- Was the parent safe, responsive, affectionate, calm, boundaried, or observant?
- How did the child respond?
- What should be strengthened or supported?
- Is the word hiding positive evidence that should be visible?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The parent was appropriate throughout contact.

More careful:

The parent followed the contact plan, spoke gently to the child, noticed when she became tired, and paused play so she could be held quietly.

More careful with limits:

The parent was calm and safe in their handling. They noticed some signs of tiredness but needed prompting to slow the pace of play when the child began turning away.

Cultural, family-practice, and professional-preference differences

Some record language does not only describe the child. It also describes whether an adult fitted the expectations of the professional observing them. That can be necessary where safety, care, or child need is affected. But it can also become unfair where professional preference, local habit, cultural assumption, or one worker's view is recorded as if it were settled best practice.

Humanised precision should distinguish:

- a safety concern;
- a child-development concern;
- a professional recommendation;
- a cultural or family-practice difference;
- a difference of style;
- a worker preference;
- and a repeated pattern that genuinely affects the child.

The more power the record may carry, the more important this distinction becomes.

29. Non-compliant with routine / did not follow advice

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Non-compliant or *did not follow advice* can make an adult sound careless, resistant, or unwilling to learn. Sometimes that may be a serious issue. But sometimes the adult may be following a different family routine, cultural practice, care habit, or understanding of the child's needs. They may also have received inconsistent advice from different professionals.

The risk is that difference becomes recorded as failure.

What may actually have been observed

- The adult fed, held, soothed, played, or settled the child differently from the suggested method.
- The adult questioned the advice given.
- The adult followed one worker's previous advice rather than another worker's current advice.
- The adult used a home routine that differed from the contact setting or placement routine.
- The child responded positively, negatively, or differently to the adult's approach.

Questions before recording it

- Was the advice about safety, development, routine, preference, or professional style?
- Was the adult clearly told why the advice mattered?
- Had they received different advice from someone else?
- Did the adult's approach affect the child's safety, comfort, regulation, feeding, sleep, or distress?
- Is this a cultural, family-practice, or personal-style difference rather than a care concern?
- Is the word *non-compliant* stronger than the observation supports?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The parent was non-compliant with advice.

More careful:

The parent did not follow the suggested settling approach during this session. They said they usually settle the child by walking with her rather than sitting still. The child became calmer after being walked for several minutes.

More careful where concern remains:

The parent did not follow the advice to pause feeding when the baby began coughing. The reason for the advice should be explained clearly again, and any ongoing feeding or safety concern should be discussed with the appropriate professional.

More careful where advice has differed:

The parent appeared to have received different advice from different adults about how

to manage the routine. The record should clarify what advice was given, by whom, and whether there is an agreed approach.

30. Needed prompting / required guidance

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Needed prompting or *required guidance* may be accurate, but it can also hide the type of support given and whether the adult used it. It can make the adult sound incapable when the reality may be uncertainty, inconsistent instruction, anxiety under observation, unfamiliar routine, or a need for clearer explanation.

The risk is that support offered in a supervised or artificial setting becomes recorded as evidence of poor capacity without enough context.

What may actually have been observed

- The adult paused and looked to the supervisor.
- The adult asked what to do.
- The adult followed a prompt successfully.
- The adult needed repeated reminders about the same issue.
- The adult responded differently once the child's cue was explained.
- The adult became less confident because multiple adults gave different advice.

Questions before recording it

- What prompt was given?
- Why was it needed?
- Did the adult understand and apply it?
- Was the prompt about safety, routine, developmental sensitivity, or worker preference?
- Was the setting unusually pressured or observed?
- Did different supervisors give different advice?
- Is the record treating ordinary learning as failure?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The parent needed prompting throughout.

More careful:

The parent needed two prompts during the session: once to slow the pace of play when the child turned away, and once to check the child's nappy after she became unsettled. The parent followed both prompts.

More careful with context:

The parent appeared uncertain about the expected routine and looked to the supervisor before feeding. Once the routine was explained, they fed the child safely and responded when she turned away.

More careful where concern remains:

The parent required repeated prompts to notice the child turning away and becoming upset. This may indicate a need for further support in reading the child's signals, and should be discussed in supervision rather than recorded only as a failure.

31. Professional advice / worker preference

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

In supervised contact, family-time, foster care, and early-years settings, adults may receive guidance from several professionals. Advice can be helpful and necessary, but different workers may bring different expectations, styles, and opinions. If each opinion is recorded as if it were settled authority, the parent or carer can be made to look inconsistent even when the system itself has been inconsistent.

The risk is that professional disagreement or preference becomes displaced onto the adult being observed.

What may actually have been observed

- Different workers gave different advice about feeding, soothing, play, pacing, holding, or routine.
- The adult changed approach depending on who was supervising.
- The adult appeared anxious about getting the interaction "right."
- The child responded differently to different approaches.
- There was no clearly agreed plan for how the adult should respond to the child.

Questions before recording it

- Is the advice grounded in safety, child need, developmental evidence, or professional preference?
- Has the advice been consistent across workers?
- Is the adult being judged against an expectation that was never clearly agreed?
- Has the child's actual response been recorded?
- Does the record distinguish worker opinion from agreed plan?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The parent did not follow staff advice.

More careful:

The parent followed the approach suggested in previous sessions, but today received different advice about how quickly to respond when the child cried. The record should clarify the agreed approach so the parent is not judged against inconsistent expectations.

More careful with child visible:

When the parent picked the child up quickly, the child stopped crying and rested her head

on the parent's shoulder. The supervisor later suggested waiting longer before lifting her. The record should distinguish the supervisor's advice from the child's observed response.

More careful where a plan is needed:

There appears to be variation in the advice given to the parent about this routine. An agreed plan would help future observations focus on the child's response rather than on differing worker preferences.

Professional hierarchy, authority distance, and second-order interpretation

Some early-years records are not shaped only by the adult who directly saw the child. They may be shaped later by a senior worker, manager, reviewer, panel reader, or report author who was not present for the interaction. That can be necessary where supervision, oversight, and accountability are required. But it becomes risky when a senior conclusion gains more authority than the direct observation it is based on.

Humanised precision should distinguish:

- what was directly observed;
- who observed it;
- who interpreted it;
- who summarised it;
- who gave it authority;
- whether the final judgement is grounded in direct child-parent observation;
- and whether social status, education, professional confidence, class, communication style, or institutional familiarity is affecting how parental capacity is being read.

A parent should not be treated as less entitled to parent because they lack professional vocabulary, academic confidence, social status, or institutional ease. Most parents are not academically trained in child development, report language, attachment theory, or social-work systems. That is not, by itself, evidence of poor care.

The question is not whether the parent can speak the system's language. The question is whether the child is safe, seen, responded to, and supported in real interaction.

32. Senior view / management view / professional judgement

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Senior view, management view, or professional judgement can carry strong authority. Sometimes that authority is appropriate. But if the person forming the view has not

directly observed the child and parent together, the record should show what the view is based on. Otherwise, second-order interpretation can harden into official truth.

The risk is that a person who was not in the room becomes more decisive than the actual interaction.

What may actually have been observed

- A front-line worker observed the child and parent.
- A supervisor gave an account to a senior worker.
- A report author summarised several observations.
- A senior worker interpreted the summaries.
- A conclusion was reached without direct observation of the child-parent interaction.
- The final wording sounded more certain than the underlying observations allowed.

Questions before recording it

- Who directly observed the child and parent together?
- How many observations is the conclusion based on?
- Has the senior worker directly seen the interaction?
- What part is observation, what part is summary, and what part is professional judgement?
- Does the final conclusion preserve uncertainty?
- Has the parent had a fair chance to understand and respond to the concern?
- Is the authority of the role making the interpretation sound stronger than the evidence?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

Management view is that the parent lacks capacity.

More careful:

The management view is based on summaries from supervised sessions rather than direct observation by the manager. The underlying observations should be clearly identified before any conclusion is treated as settled.

More careful with source clarity:

The contact supervisor observed X during the session. The senior worker later interpreted this as Y. The record should distinguish the direct observation from the later professional interpretation.

More careful where concern remains:

Although the senior worker has not directly observed the child and parent together, they remain concerned based on repeated reports from staff. The record should identify the specific observations supporting that concern and what would need to be seen to test it fairly.

33. Lacks understanding / does not understand child development

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

A parent may not use professional or academic language about development. That does not automatically mean they do not understand their child. Many parents understand through rhythm, familiarity, touch, routine, timing, humour, food, sleep, comfort, and ordinary responsiveness rather than through formal vocabulary.

The risk is that professional language becomes a gatekeeping test for parental legitimacy.

What may actually have been observed

- The parent could not explain a developmental concept in professional terms.
- The parent used ordinary language rather than assessment language.
- The parent responded appropriately in practice but struggled to describe why.
- The parent misunderstood a professional concern.
- The parent needed clearer explanation or modelling.
- The parent dismissed or did not apply important advice.

Questions before recording it

- Does the parent lack understanding, or lack professional vocabulary?
- Did the parent respond to the child's actual signal?
- Can the parent learn through modelling, demonstration, or plain explanation?
- Is the concern about knowledge, application, safety, or communication style?
- Is academic confidence being mistaken for care capacity?
- What would show improved understanding in practice?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The parent lacks understanding of child development.

More careful:

The parent did not use developmental language to explain the child's tiredness, but did notice the child rubbing her eyes and reduced the pace of play.

More careful where support is needed:

The parent appeared unsure why the child became upset when the room became noisy. They may benefit from support to recognise signs of sensory overload and tiredness.

More careful where concern remains:

The parent was given advice about the child's need for slower transitions but did not apply this during the session. The record should state what advice was given, how the parent responded, and what further support or assessment is needed.

34. Not engaging / difficult to work with

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Not engaging or *difficult to work with* can become a judgement on a parent's attitude. Sometimes a parent may genuinely avoid necessary work. But sometimes the adult is frightened, ashamed, overwhelmed, distrustful, confused by inconsistent advice, or responding to a system that has already made them feel judged.

The risk is that institutional discomfort with a parent's communication style becomes recorded as lack of care or lack of commitment.

What may actually have been observed

- The parent missed meetings, avoided calls, or did not respond.
- The parent attended but said little.
- The parent challenged professional views.
- The parent became upset, angry, or shut down.
- The parent engaged better with one worker than another.
- The parent responded when information was given clearly and respectfully.

Questions before recording it

- What does engagement mean in this context?
- Did the parent understand what was being asked of them?
- Were expectations clear and consistent?
- Has the parent's distrust or fear been acknowledged without excusing harm?
- Are they avoiding responsibility, or struggling with the conditions of engagement?
- What support, communication adjustment, or advocacy would make engagement more possible?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The parent is difficult to engage.

More careful:

The parent attended the meeting but spoke very little after concerns were raised. They later responded by email and asked for the expectations to be clarified.

More careful with conditions:

The parent engaged more fully when the concern was explained in plain language and when the discussion focused on what the child needed rather than on general criticism of the parent.

More careful where concern remains:

The parent has missed two planned meetings and has not responded to recent calls. The impact on planning for the child should be recorded, while also clarifying whether there are barriers to communication or support needs.

35. Accepted advice / did not accept advice

Why the phrase can collapse meaning

Accepted advice and *did not accept advice* can sound straightforward, but they often hide what kind of advice was given, whether it was clearly explained, whether it was consistent with previous advice, whether it was grounded in child need or worker preference, and whether the adult had a fair chance to test it in practice.

Sometimes not accepting advice is a serious concern, especially where safety, health, care, or the child's distress is affected. But sometimes the phrase can become a compliance test: the adult is judged not by whether the child was safe, seen, and responded to, but by whether they accepted the professional framing immediately and without question.

The risk is that disagreement, confusion, cultural difference, ordinary parental judgement, or resistance to inconsistent advice is recorded as lack of capacity.

What may actually have been observed

- The adult listened to advice and applied it.
- The adult questioned the advice.
- The adult appeared unsure what was expected.
- The adult followed different advice given by another worker.
- The adult accepted the advice verbally but struggled to apply it during the interaction.
- The adult disagreed with advice because their own experience of the child differed.
- The child responded positively or negatively to the advised approach.

Questions before recording it

- What advice was given, exactly?
- Was it about safety, health, development, routine, contact rules, or worker preference?
- Was the reason for the advice explained clearly?
- Was the advice consistent with previous advice?
- Did the adult understand it?
- Did the adult apply it?
- How did the child respond?
- Was the adult refusing necessary guidance, or questioning something that needed clarification?
- Is "accepting advice" being used as a test of compliance rather than a test of child-centred care?

More careful wording options

Too thin:

The parent did not accept advice.

More careful:

The parent questioned the advice to wait before picking the child up when she cried. They said the child usually settles when lifted and held. During this session, the child became calmer after being picked up. The record should distinguish the worker's advice, the parent's reasoning, and the child's observed response.

More careful where concern remains:

The parent was advised to stop feeding when the baby began coughing. They continued feeding despite the advice. The safety reason for the advice should be clearly explained again, and any ongoing concern should be discussed with the appropriate professional.

More careful where advice was applied:

The parent was prompted to slow the pace of play when the child turned away. They paused, lowered their voice, and the child returned to the toy after a short period. The record should note that the parent used the advice in the moment.

More careful where advice is inconsistent:

The parent appeared confused by different advice from different workers about when to comfort the child. An agreed approach should be clarified so future records can assess the parent's response to the child rather than their ability to navigate inconsistent professional expectations.

Guardrail: humanised precision must not become new shorthand

The aim of this bank is not to replace old shorthand with more impressive technical shorthand.

Words such as *signal*, *state*, *co-regulation*, *regulation*, *capacity*, *authorship*, and *interpretation* can help adults think more carefully. But if they are used too quickly, they can become another cold layer of professional language. They may sound more advanced while still failing to show the child.

Humanised precision requires discipline. It asks the adult to stay close to the child's visible reality before reaching for theory.

The test

A phrase is not better just because it is more technical.

A phrase is better if it:

- shows what the child did;
- shows what happened before and after;
- shows what support was offered;
- shows how the child responded;

- marks adult interpretation as interpretation;
- keeps uncertainty honest;
- avoids turning a moment into a verdict;
- keeps the child visible inside the record.

Poor replacement

Old shorthand:

The child was clingy.

Cold technical replacement:

The child displayed a co-regulatory dependency response.

This may sound more precise, but it risks making the child disappear into technical language.

Humanised precision

More careful:

The child reached towards the familiar adult, became upset when the adult moved away, and became calmer when held. This may suggest a need for reassurance or co-regulation during the transition, but the record should not treat that as a fault in the child.

The technical understanding sits underneath the wording. It should not replace the child.

Working discipline

Use technical language to slow adult thinking.

Use human language to describe the child.

Use professional judgement only after the observation is clear.

Working rule for all phrases

A phrase is not safe because it is common.

A phrase is safer when it shows:

- what was observed;
- what happened before and after;
- what support was offered;
- how the child responded;
- what adults inferred;
- what remains uncertain;
- what may require action.

The point is not to remove judgement from professional work. The point is to make clear when judgement has entered, and to stop adult meaning replacing the child before the child has had any chance to be understood.

Closing line

Some children are turned into record language before they can answer back.

This bank exists to slow that process down.