

Speaking Charlotte's Language

Calibration as a Child-Knowledge Practice

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Working public practice note

Purpose: To show how early-years record language can carry a child's signal without damaging the knowledge it contains.

Working position

A preverbal child's signal is knowledge.

Adult record language is the route that carries it.

Calibration is the practice of making sure the route does not damage the signal.

Opening position

Speaking Charlotte's Language begins from a simple concern:

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

Very young children do not enter systems as written evidence. They enter systems through signal: body, face, sound, rhythm, movement, reach, withdrawal, distress, recovery, curiosity, gaze, sleep, feeding, play, recognition, refusal, and joy.

Those signals are then carried by adults.

An adult notices something.

An adult interprets it.

An adult writes it down.

Another adult reads it.

A summary is made.

A professional judgement forms.

A decision pathway opens.

The child's conditions may change.

At every stage, something can be preserved or lost.

That is why Speaking Charlotte's Language is not only about better wording. It is about calibration.

Calibration means asking whether the route carrying the child's signal is careful enough for the power it may later hold.

Status and use boundary

This is a working public practice note, not official guidance, legal advice, assessment guidance, a safeguarding procedure, or a replacement for professional training, supervision, statutory duties, specialist assessment, or clinical judgement.

It is offered as a child-centred knowledge-practice tool for discussion, staff learning, record review, and careful public-service reflection.

It is not comment on any individual family, worker, case, report, hearing, organisation, or proceeding.

Safeguarding before theory.

Where there is concern about harm, neglect, abuse, injury, exploitation, medical risk, unsafe care, coercion, or immediate safety, action comes first.

The child's signal is knowledge

A baby or toddler's signal is not less than knowledge because it is not spoken.

It is a form of early human knowledge: embodied, relational, contextual, and dependent on adults for translation.

A child may not be able to say:

- I am tired.
- I am unsure.
- I recognise this person.
- I am overwhelmed.
- I need more time.
- I am enjoying this.
- I am copying.
- I am seeking comfort.
- I am distressed by the transition, not by the whole relationship.
- I am quiet, but not necessarily settled.

- I am not the same in every room, with every adult, at every time.

The adult record therefore becomes a knowledge route.

It is not neutral.

It can carry the child more accurately.

It can flatten the child.

It can preserve uncertainty.

It can remove uncertainty too early.

It can keep the child visible.

It can turn the child into a phrase.

What calibration means in early-years records

Calibration does not mean making every record long.

It does not mean avoiding professional judgement.

It does not mean softening risk.

It does not mean treating all interpretations as equally likely.

It means making sure the language remains answerable to:

- what was actually observed;
- who observed it;
- the conditions in which it happened;
- what the adult inferred;
- what remains uncertain;
- what other explanations are possible;
- what action is required;
- and what should not be concluded from the signal alone.

A calibrated record does not pretend to know more than the child has shown.

It does not turn one moment into a verdict.

It does not let adult confidence become stronger than the evidence beneath it.

It carries the child's signal with enough context that later adults can understand what the record can safely mean.

The sequence of child-knowledge loss

In early-years systems, knowledge can be lost through a common sequence:

child signal

- adult observation
- adult interpretation
 - record wording
- professional summary
 - management view
 - report language
 - decision confidence
- changed conditions around the child

This sequence is not automatically harmful. It is necessary for care, safeguarding, planning, and decision-making.

The risk begins when the sequence becomes uncalibrated.

That happens when:

- observation and inference merge;
- context disappears;
- uncertainty is removed;
- shorthand becomes conclusion;
- senior summary becomes stronger than direct observation;
- distress is assigned a cause before the cause is known;
- quietness is treated as wellbeing;
- compliance is treated as comfort;
- parental fear is treated as hostility;
- route mismatch is treated as refusal;
- professional authority hides the loss of detail beneath it.

When that happens, the system may not only record the child inaccurately.

It may begin responding to the damaged version of the child's knowledge.

Examples of uncalibrated record language

Uncalibrated language is not always harsh. Sometimes it is warm, familiar, positive, or professionally ordinary.

A child is described as settled, but the record only shows that they were quiet.

A child is described as thriving, but the record does not show which developmental signs were observed.

A child is described as distressed after contact, but the record does not separate the session, the ending, the handover, the travel, tiredness, separation, and recovery.

A parent is described as refusing help, but the record does not ask whether the support route was slow, inaccessible, patronising, confusing, badly timed, or unsuitable.

A senior view is recorded as professional judgement, but the record does not show whether the senior worker directly observed the child and parent together.

In each case, the issue is not that concern should disappear.

The issue is that the route has not carried the knowledge carefully enough.

What calibrated record language asks

Calibrated record language slows the movement from signal to conclusion.

It asks:

- What did the child do?
- What happened before?
- What happened after?
- Who was present?
- What was the setting like?
- How long did it last?
- What support was offered?
- What helped?
- What did not help?
- What might this suggest?
- What else might explain it?
- What is not yet known?
- What should be tracked over time?
- What action is needed now?

This makes the record stronger, not weaker.

It allows professional judgement to be clearer about its own basis.

It allows concern to be named without pretending that uncertainty has disappeared.

It allows the child to remain visible inside the record.

Calibration protects safeguarding

Calibration must never be used to minimise risk or delay necessary action.

Where there is immediate concern about harm, neglect, abuse, medical risk, unsafe care, coercion, exploitation, injury, or serious danger, action comes first.

Safeguarding before theory.

But safeguarding is not weakened by precision. It is strengthened by it.

A vague concern can be challenged, misunderstood, overstated, understated, or applied unevenly. A precise concern is easier to test, supervise, act on, review, and explain.

The question is not: How do we make this sound less serious?

The question is: What exactly is the concern, what evidence supports it, what remains uncertain, and what action is required?

That is calibrated safeguarding.

Calibration protects the child from adult shorthand

A very young child cannot correct adult language.

They cannot say:

- That was not the whole of me.
- That was only one moment.
- That was because I was tired.
- That was because the room was loud.
- That was because the transition was too quick.
- That was because I needed help to recover.
- That was because I recognised someone and then had to leave.
- That word has become bigger than what I showed.

Because the child cannot correct the record, the adult system must correct itself earlier.

That is the ethical duty.

The closer an adult is to the child's signal, the more carefully they must record it.

The further the phrase travels from the child, the more powerful it can become.

Calibration protects practitioners and systems

This practice is not an attack on workers.

Many workers are already trying to carry complex child knowledge under pressure: limited time, high responsibility, emotional difficulty, digital systems, supervision demands, legal processes, local templates, and the need to summarise.

Calibration helps practitioners because it stops vague words being forced to carry impossible meaning.

It makes the record clearer.

It makes supervision more useful.

It helps managers see what is observation, what is interpretation, and what remains uncertain.

It reduces the risk of later readers turning a careful moment into a stronger conclusion than the worker intended.

It also helps organisations learn, because it shows where the route itself may be damaging knowledge.

Calibration as a staff-learning practice

A service can begin using calibration immediately by asking four questions in supervision and report review:

1. What is the child's original signal?
2. What has the adult record made of it?
3. What may have been lost as the signal travelled?
4. What would make the wording more answerable to the child?

These questions can be used in:

- family-time records;
- foster care notes;
- nursery observations;
- social work summaries;
- supervision discussions;
- report drafting;
- children's-hearing material;
- staff learning;
- quality assurance;
- Promise implementation work.

The aim is not to create a new bureaucratic layer.

The aim is to create a more careful knowledge route.

Working rule

A child's signal should not become a stronger conclusion than the evidence can safely carry.

If a phrase may influence understanding, planning, contact, permanence, support, risk, or decision-making, it should remain connected to:

- what was seen;
- what was heard;
- who observed it;
- where and when it happened;
- what happened before and after;
- what adults inferred;
- what remains uncertain;
- and what should not be concluded from that phrase alone.

This is calibration as child-centred practice.

Core principle

Speaking Charlotte's Language is not only about changing words.

It is about changing how child knowledge is carried.

A baby's signal is not raw material for adult certainty.

A toddler's behaviour is not a shortcut to institutional confidence.

A child who cannot answer back should not be made smaller by the route that claims to understand them.

Calibration means carrying the child's signal well enough that it remains alive, contextual, honest, and answerable to the child.

Precision is not an attack on care.

Precision is one of the ways care becomes safer.