

Speaking Charlotte's Language

Immediate Staff Learning Note for Early-Years Record Language

Fieldnotes.scot · Speaking Charlotte's Language

Staff learning resource

Purpose: To support practical staff learning around early-years record language, infant voice, family-time wording, and humanised precision.

Purpose of this note

This note is intended as a practical staff-learning resource for Children and Families, Education and Families, early-years, family-time, fostering, and children's-hearing-adjacent practice.

It introduces the core training value of Speaking Charlotte's Language and the Phrase Translation Bank v1.1 — Early-years Record Language.

The purpose is not to make records softer, longer, or less protective. The purpose is to make records more precise, more answerable to the child, and clearer about the difference between:

- what was directly observed;
- what an adult inferred;
- what remains uncertain;
- what needs further tracking;
- and what should or should not be concluded from the available evidence.

This is especially important for babies, toddlers, and preverbal children, because they cannot later read the record and say:

“That is not what I meant.”

What this is, and what this is not

This is a staff-learning and practice-development resource.

It is not a complaint document.

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

It is not an instruction to minimise risk, delay safeguarding action, or weaken professional judgement.

The central aim is to support better judgement by helping professional language travel with its evidence.

The core principle is:

A phrase becomes more powerful the further it travels from the child.

A short phrase in a daily note can become a summary in a report.

A summary in a report can become confidence in a meeting.

Confidence in a meeting can become a recommendation.

A recommendation can change the child's conditions.

That makes early wording a practice-safety issue.

Why this matters for staff training

Early-years records often rely on familiar professional phrases such as:

- settled;
- thriving;
- no concerns;
- avoidant;
- attached;
- bonded;
- dysregulated;
- contact is harmful;
- parenting capacity has not improved;
- refuses help;
- chaotic lifestyle.

These phrases are not automatically wrong. The problem begins when the phrase becomes stronger than the observation behind it.

For example, writing that a child was “settled” may sound clear, but it can hide several different possibilities:

- the child was calm and comfortable;
- the child was quiet but watchful;
- the child was compliant;
- the child was tired;
- the child had stopped signalling distress;
- the adult did not observe visible distress during that period.

Those are not the same thing.

Good record language does not remove professional concern. It makes concern more honest.

Immediate practice principle

Staff should be encouraged to slow down any phrase that sounds like a conclusion.

Before a high-power phrase is used, the record should answer:

1. What was actually seen or heard?
2. Who observed it?
3. When and where did it happen?
4. What was the context?
5. What else could this signal mean?
6. What remains uncertain?
7. What should not be concluded from this observation alone?

This does not require every note to become long. It requires important phrases to stay attached to evidence.

Minimum implementation that can begin today

A service does not need a full policy rewrite to begin improving record language.

The following five steps can be introduced immediately in supervision, team meetings, report checks, and staff learning.

1. Introduce a “closure word” check

A closure word is a word that appears to settle meaning too quickly.

Examples include:

- settled;
- thriving;

- fine;
- comfortable;
- independent;
- attached;
- bonded;
- resilient;
- no concerns;
- making progress;
- no progress.

Staff can still use these words where they are accurate. The training point is that they should not stand alone when the word may influence understanding, care planning, family time, permanence, or decision-making.

A simple rule can be used:

No closure word without evidence.

Instead of:

The child was settled.

Write:

The child sat on the floor for 15 minutes, accepted a snack, looked toward the carer twice, and did not cry during the observation. This suggests the child may have been comfortable in that moment, though further observation would be needed before concluding that the child is generally settled.

2. Separate observation from inference

Staff should be supported to distinguish direct evidence from adult interpretation.

Instead of:

The child was avoidant.

Write:

When the adult moved closer, the child turned their body away and looked toward the door. The child did not cry or speak. This may indicate discomfort, uncertainty, distraction, or a wish to move away. Further observation is needed before concluding avoidance.

Instead of:

The parent was aggressive.

Write:

The parent raised their voice, interrupted twice, and said they felt they were not being listened to. The worker experienced the exchange as difficult. The record should

distinguish the parent's observable behaviour from the worker's interpretation of intent.

This protects both child and professional judgement.

3. Add a supervision question before reports are finalised

Before significant summaries are used in reports, supervision, care planning, family-time review, or hearing papers, managers and senior practitioners can ask:

Is this phrase stronger than the evidence beneath it?

Follow-up questions:

- What is the original observation?
- Who directly saw or heard it?
- Has any context been lost?
- Has uncertainty been removed too early?
- Has a child's signal been treated as more settled than it really is?
- Has a parent's reaction been interpreted without considering fear, shame, confusion, trauma, poverty, disability, grief, or inconsistent professional advice?
- Are we separating genuine safety concerns from style, stress, communication difference, or route mismatch?

This is not about making records defensive. It is about making them accountable.

4. Use the Phrase Translation Bank as a training exercise

The Phrase Translation Bank can be used in a short staff-learning session.

A simple exercise:

1. Choose one common phrase from the bank.
2. Ask staff what the phrase usually means in practice.
3. Ask what direct observations should sit underneath it.
4. Ask what the phrase might accidentally hide.
5. Ask what a more precise version would look like.
6. Ask what should not be concluded from the phrase alone.

Example phrases for training:

- settled;
- thriving;
- no concerns;
- refuses help;
- chaotic lifestyle;

- parenting capacity has not improved;
- contact is harmful;
- not safe.

This can be done using fictional or fully anonymised examples only.

5. Protect the safeguarding boundary

This training must never be used to soften or delay necessary protective action.

Where there is evidence of immediate harm, neglect, abuse, medical risk, coercion, violence, or serious danger, safeguarding action comes first.

The language principle is not:

Be less concerned.

The language principle is:

Be precise about what the concern is, what evidence supports it, what remains uncertain, and what action is required.

Precision strengthens safeguarding when safeguarding is needed.

Particular relevance to family-time and contact language

Family-time records can carry especially high consequences.

Phrases such as:

- contact is harmful;
- the child was distressed after contact;
- the child was unsettled;
- the child struggled with transitions;
- the parent failed to attune;
- the child showed no bond;
- the child was happier with the carer;

can become powerful very quickly if context is not preserved.

Staff should be trained to separate:

- what happened during family time;
- what happened during handover;
- what happened during travel;
- what happened before the session;

- what happened after the session;
- what the child usually does at that time of day;
- what is known about fatigue, hunger, illness, routine change, separation anxiety, or environmental stress.

A child's distress after a session does not automatically prove that the session itself was harmful. It may be evidence of harm, but it may also be evidence of transition stress, attachment distress, fatigue, confusion, poor handover planning, or the ordinary emotional difficulty of separation.

The record should not collapse those possibilities too early.

Particular relevance to parental engagement language

Decision-level phrases about parents also need careful handling.

Phrases such as:

- refuses help;
- lacks insight;
- non-compliant;
- hostile;
- aggressive;
- chaotic lifestyle;
- parenting capacity has not improved;

can carry moral weight if they are not carefully evidenced.

Staff should ask:

- Was support actually refused, or was the route inaccessible?
- Was the parent unwilling, or was the offer too slow, confusing, patronising, poorly timed, or unsuitable?
- Was the parent defensive because of risk, fear, shame, grief, trauma, power imbalance, or previous experience of not being heard?
- Was the parent given a realistic route to demonstrate learning?
- Were barriers such as poverty, transport, health, literacy, digital access, disability, childcare, or housing instability recorded separately from character judgement?

A refused route is not always refused help. Sometimes it is evidence that the route was wrong.

Manager-level implementation questions

For managers, senior practitioners, reviewing officers, and staff involved in training or quality assurance, the following questions can be used immediately:

1. Are our records clear about observation versus inference?
2. Do high-power phrases remain attached to evidence?
3. Are staff using closure words without context?
4. Do summaries become stronger as they move upward through the system?
5. Are direct observers being overwritten by later summary language?
6. Are we preserving uncertainty where uncertainty is honest?
7. Are we recording the child's joy, curiosity, preference, humour, agency, and ordinary development, not only risk and distress?
8. Are we distinguishing safety concerns from adult discomfort, professional preference, or communication style?
9. Are family-time records separating session quality from travel, handover, fatigue, separation, and transition effects?
10. Are parents being described in ways that distinguish behaviour, context, capacity, barriers, and willingness to engage?

Suggested 10-minute staff briefing

This can be introduced in a short team setting:

Today we are looking at early-years record language. This is not about making records softer or avoiding professional judgement. It is about making sure our judgement travels with its evidence.

Babies and very young children cannot correct the record. That means our wording carries extra responsibility.

When we write words like “settled”, “thriving”, “avoidant”, “attached”, “no concerns”, “refuses help”, or “contact is harmful”, we need to ask whether the word is supported by direct observation.

The basic rule is: no high-power phrase without evidence.

We should be clear about what was seen, what was heard, who observed it, what the context was, what else it could mean, and what remains uncertain.

This does not weaken safeguarding. It strengthens safeguarding by making the concern more accurate.

The aim is simple: better records, better summaries, better decisions, and better protection for children whose meaning has to travel through adult language.

Core principle

Speaking Charlotte's Language is not about replacing professional judgement.

It is about helping professional judgement stay answerable to the child.

A child who cannot answer back should not be made smaller by adult shorthand.

Precision is not an attack on care.

Precision is one of the ways care becomes safer.