

FIELDNOTES.SCOT

# The Missing Language for Development

*A revised development note on becoming, preverbal children, and the language through which development is recognised or overwritten by the system.*

PROJECT	DOCUMENT TYPE	STATUS	PREPARED
Speaking Charlotte's Language	Foundational development note	Working public draft	29 April 2026

## A language gap that was always real now lands most sharply where the person affected cannot yet answer back.

This note revises an earlier canonical Fieldnotes document in light of a deeper recognition: the missing language for development is not only needed for emerging adults, systems, sectors, and contribution. It is needed most urgently where development is still embodied, relational, and pre-linguistic. The preverbal child now stands at the centre of the problem because where development is least speakable, adult language carries the most power.

### Document standard

This updated note uses the same stable project-document grammar as the Scottish interface note: a clear title field, concise standfirst, numbered substantive sections, restrained callouts, and a reusable visual structure for core published work.

## Document metadata

DOCUMENT TYPE	Foundational development note
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<b>PROJECT</b>	Speaking Charlotte's Language
<b>STATUS</b>	Working public draft
<b>PURPOSE</b>	Development, preverbal child, institutional language

**Standfirst.** The original development note was already right in principle: institutions have language for safety, wellbeing, risk, support, rights, and outcomes, but not for development as becoming. What is clearer now is that this gap becomes most morally serious where the child is preverbal and adult interpretation carries unusual power. Before development is misread in adults, it is often misread in infants. This revised note brings that recognition to the centre without abandoning the original conceptual claim.

Opening position

# 1. What is missing

Institutions know how to describe safety, wellbeing, risk, vulnerability, support, rights, and outcomes. What is missing is a language for development.

Development is not safety. Development is not treatment. Development is not independence. Development is not self-sufficiency. Development is not recovery. Development is not achievement.

**Development is becoming.**

Becoming is what happens between signal and meaning, regulation and identity, identity and craft, craft and contribution. Without a language for becoming, institutions misclassify development as compliance, disorder, fragility, or chaos. All are too blunt.

The development problem

# 2. How systems misclassify the middle

When development lacks language, systems default to what they do have language for: risk if movement is unpredictable, support if movement is fragile, achievement if movement is complete, and concern if movement is hard to explain.

This produces false binaries: either vulnerable or successful; either settled or distressed; either safe or failing. Development is none of these by itself. It is the process that connects them.

Institutions see the start and the end. They do not see the middle. The middle is where development lives, where becoming happens, where futures are constructed, and where signal becomes pattern and pattern becomes possibility. Without a language for the middle, the system assumes nothing is happening. When the system assumes nothing is happening, it intervenes unnecessarily, withdraws prematurely, or misclassifies what it cannot yet recognise.

The preverbal problem

# 3. Where the gap becomes most morally serious

The deepest version of this problem appears before language. A preverbal child is developing constantly: through gaze, rhythm, orientation, comfort-seeking,

transition, co-regulation, sleep disruption, delight, protest, and embodied familiarity.

But where there is no language for development, these are easily misread as behaviour, symptom, disturbance, dependency, concern, or evidence of a preferred adult interpretation. The child is not yet speaking in words, so adults speak for her. If adult language is too collapsed, too moralised, or too summary-driven, the child's development is not properly described. It is overwritten.

**Before development is misread in adults, it is often misread in infants.**

The Scottish context

## **4. What Scotland has strengthened, and what still remains**

Scotland has developed stronger language around trauma, stigma, belonging, relationships, rights, infant participation, and care. That is serious progress.

But Scotland still lacks a sufficiently precise language for development, especially where the child is preverbal and adult interpretation carries unusual power. The next gap is not only developmental in the broad sense. It is developmental where becoming is still embodied, relational, and pre-linguistic.

The Promise, GIRFEC, SHANARRI, and the Voice of the Infant all move toward more humane and child-centred practice. What remains underdeveloped is the language needed to describe development before it can explain itself.

The missing set

## **5. The words that still need building**

The missing set includes words for direction, calibration, refinement, capability, iteration, contribution, and generativity; but now also for signal, transition, co-regulation, embodied recognition, developmental strain, relational orientation, settling without flattening, and becoming before speech.

Without these words, development appears chaotic from the outside and unrecognised from the inside. For preverbal children, it may also appear as concern when it is actually development under pressure.

Recognition

## 6. Recognition as mechanism

Development does not require permission. It requires recognition. Recognition is not validation. Recognition is accurate seeing.

For adults, recognition allows collaboration. For children, recognition protects against imposed meaning. Once development is recognised, systems can work with it rather than merely reacting to it.

Why language matters

## 7. Language as the bridge

Systems operate on descriptions. Budgets operate on categories. Policy operates on definitions. Practice operates on roles. Rights operate on claims. And records operate on shorthand.

If development cannot be described, it cannot be protected, carried forward, distinguished from concern, recognised in time, or acted on honestly. For preverbal children, this means something even more serious: if development cannot be described, the child may be known through adult interpretation alone.

**Language is not decoration. It is the bridge between signal and institution.**

### Important shift

The original document already named the gap between institutional language and development. The revision does not abandon that claim. It intensifies it by showing that the preverbal child is where the absence of development language becomes most ethically dangerous.

What this enables

## 8. Practical and generative gains

A language of development allows cultural alignment, sector interoperability, institutional legitimacy, non-coercive collaboration, cross-disciplinary work, and future construction; but also more honest infant recording, better distinction between observation and inference, cleaner contact and care language, stronger protection against the written child overtaking the actual child, and more developmentally adequate support for families.

**This is not ideological. It is infrastructural.**

Who needs this language

## 9. The centre of gravity has shifted

Not only youth. Not only professionals. Not only academics. Not only artists. Not only parents. Not only social work.

All of them.

But the need is most morally urgent where the person most affected cannot yet defend themselves. The preverbal child now stands at the centre of the problem. Because where development is least speakable, adult language carries the most power.

Closing recognition

## 10. The next frontier

Scotland has strengthened the language of care. Scotland has strengthened the language of rights. Scotland has begun strengthening the language of relationships and infant participation.

The next frontier is the language of development.

Without it, futures are misread, vulnerability is flattened, support is mistimed, relationships are mistranslated, and the child may be replaced by the record.

With it, development becomes visible, signal becomes more honestly describable, institutional response becomes less blunt, and the child who cannot yet answer back stands a better chance of remaining visible inside the language used about her.