



LANGUAGE

AS A MISSING LINK & MISSED OPPORTUNITY

PART 3: HOW?

PURPOSE OF THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit is designed for **individuals, practitioners, and policymakers** to employ practices that apply language as a well-being indicator to improve educational, mental health, and well-being outcomes—and impact quality of life for children—from birth through high school.

PART 1: WHY

Language development dramatically and positively impacts life outcomes. Conversely, the failure to develop a capacity for effective communication jeopardizes emotional well-being and educational attainment. We must institute a new, proactive approach in which all who interact with caregivers and children employ the understanding that language is the primary vehicle for frequent and positive social connections. This approach will consider language as a well-being indicator that is foundational for literacy and academic success, emotional and mental health, and positive quality of life.

PART 2: WHAT

Check out steps to proactively employ language as a well-being indicator. Practical strategies are provided to enable us to **NOTICE** indicators of language development from infancy through adolescence, **MONITOR** engagement as a means to **proactively gauge language development**, **SCREEN** for difficulties with language development if indicated, and use the information gained from screening to **ENHANCE** opportunities for engagement at home, in the classroom, and in community settings. When children are engaged, their use of language is frequent, functional, socially oriented, and fluid across settings.

PART 3: HOW

Get tools to implement the “why” and “what” in a manner that’s sustainable for individuals, practitioners, and policymakers. This section is designed to help apply the understanding that language is the primary vehicle for frequent and positive social connections. It begins with how we as peers can mentor one another—parent to parent, health care provider to health care provider, educator to educator—to identify what we’re already doing to enhance engagement and opportunities to identify next steps. Several ideas are offered to apply this vision that are designed to address the gap between our knowledge of the impact of language and our universal practices and policies.

PART 3

HOW



What's working, and how can we do more of it? Sounds simple, doesn't it? Yet, this obvious question is almost never asked.



CHIP HEATH AND DAN HEATH

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

At the Individual level, using language as a well-being indicator will include the ability to:

NOTICE

MONITOR

SCREEN

ENHANCE

This toolkit provides a freely accessible tool for noticing language as a well-being indicator.

The **Language Development by Age Band** tool indicates expected language development by age level, from infancy through adolescence. This resource was developed to support individuals who interact with children in all settings, such as well-child visits, home visiting, classrooms, child welfare, and juvenile justice. Awareness and understanding of language development advances more informed decision-making and expands opportunities to guide practice and policy.

The indicators within this tool are not just related to expressive language, but also receptive and pragmatic language. This will heighten awareness about how critical language is for socially connecting, understanding the intents of others, and sharing one's emotion. With caregiver modeling, language evolves to become an "inner dialogue" that organizes one's behavior, facilitates self-regulation, and boosts development of executive functioning.

To **NOTICE** language development is an outcome of action items in the "Why" section of the toolkit, such as expanding the use of strategies in routine well-child visits to the doctor that provide families with guidance about noticing—and opportunities to enhance—language development; providing educators with tools to notice expressive, receptive, and pragmatic language; and supporting use of these tools by child welfare and juvenile justice staff, particularly upon intake into these systems.

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

At the individual level, employing language as a well-being indicator will include the ability to:

NOTICE

MONITOR

SCREEN

ENHANCE

This toolkit provides a freely accessible tool that can be used to **MONITOR** the engagement of an individual or group of children. Caregivers, educators, and health care providers, and others who interact with children on a daily basis can use the **Social Engagement Ladder** to record engagement levels. Refer to the “What” toolkit for instructions and video tutorials for use.

This information can be used to **MONITOR** whether children are socially connected, following social norms and routines, and expressing their thoughts and feelings to others. For children who frequently score **0** (not focused), **1** (emerging/fleeting), or **2** (partially engaged) in daily activities that are interactive in nature, this information can be shared with those who have been trained to complete a brief language screening, such as nurses, social workers, and counselors.

The use of a screening tool may help discern whether language difficulties might be a missing link contributing to their disengagement. Refer to the “What” toolkit for information about administering screening tools.

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

At the individual level, employing language as a well-being indicator will include the ability to:

NOTICE

MONITOR

SCREEN

ENHANCE

The “What” toolkit includes a list of brief language screening tools.

A language **SCREEN** provides information that might indicate opportunities to enhance engagement as a gauge of language development in everyday routines and activities.

While the results occasionally may warrant a deeper and more comprehensive assessment conducted by a licensed speech-language pathologist, the screening itself can often generate an awareness of difficulties with language development, indicating the need to **ENHANCE** opportunities for engagement in universal settings.

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

At the individual level, employing practices that apply language as a well-being indicator will include the ability to:

NOTICE

MONITOR

SCREEN

ENHANCE

In this toolkit, freely accessible tools are provided for individuals to mentor one another to enhance the environment to foster engagement and boost language development.

An appreciative inquiry method is embedded in our mentorship format and mentorship materials. Appreciative inquiry refers to a process of change that begins by identifying what is already working, and then supporting the mentee by inquiring where they see opportunities for next steps.

Mentorship might involve having an educator mentor—another educator, a parent mentor—another parent, or a health care professional mentor—another health care professional. This peer-to-peer format is ideal as we're simply noticing what interactive strategies appear to foster engagement, rather than critiquing or evaluating. If the mentorship is used by an instructional coach with an educator or a social worker with a parent, it will be important that one's role as a mentor during this process be identified upfront so the mentee is comfortable being observed and supported.

The Social Emotional Engagement—Knowledge and Skills (SEE-KS) approach offers a [Six-Step Mentorship](#) process that is easy to follow and can be implemented by all who interact with children to mentor one another to appreciate what's working to foster engagement and brainstorm additional strategies to enhance engagement.

SIX-STEP MENTORSHIP

The SEE-KS Six-Step Mentorship process is designed to align with adult learning techniques by building upon what the mentees are already doing to facilitate interactions and following their curiosity about where there may be opportunities for next steps.

The approach's affirmative nature provides an appeal that generates continued and sustained interest in having these conversations, which reinforces the use of language as a well-being indicator.

Step 1

Clarify one's role by pointing out or noticing what is already working to foster engagement. Then provide an opportunity for the mentee to identify an aspect of engagement where there may be opportunities to enhance one of the "3 I's" of engagement—Investment, Independence, and Initiation.

Step 2

Provide an opportunity for mentees to share what they know about a given activity, what they hope the children do with respect to their communication and language development, what is already working, and where there might be opportunities to enhance engagement.

Step 3

Have a mentor observe the mentee engaging with an individual or group of children, noticing what they're doing that appears to foster investment, independence, and initiation.

In appreciative inquiry, the focus is on what is enhancing—not interfering. So, look for those moments that are successful and share those observations.

Step 4

Mentees are asked where they believe opportunities might exist to enhance engagement within this activity in one of the "3 I's" of engagement.

Step 5

Once an "I" of engagement is selected, mentors may ask if the mentees have a sense of what they might do to enhance this element or if they want to collaborate. When collaborating, the mentor reads with the mentee the section of the [Quick Reference Tool](#) that aligns with the child's language level* and the selected "I" of engagement. This tool provides ideas to enhance investment, independence, and initiation. The mentor can, once again, inquire, "Do you have a sense of where you might go next to enhance engagement, or would you like to collaborate?" to see if additional brainstorming would be helpful.

Step 6

Create an action plan of next steps that identifies opportunities to enhance engagement. This step provides an opportunity to check in to ensure whether next steps are realistic and resources are available—asking questions like "Can you make it fast? Can you make it last?"

*Before words, emerging language, developing language competence, or fully conversational.

PRACTICE and POLICY LEVELS

At the practice and policy levels, employing practices that apply language as a well-being indicator will include:

- reviewing and updating existing policies, procedures, and practices so that we create the conditions for our children to communicate effectively and be actively engaged.
- providing ongoing training using the toolkit tools to strengthen the capacity of practitioners across all sectors to **NOTICE** language development with the **Language Development by Age Band** tool.
- equipping one or more individuals to train the toolkit strategies to **MONITOR** engagement within whole group and individual settings. This will prevent the need for universal screening, while enhancing awareness of children who do not indicate language development typically expected for their age.
- identifying responsible individuals and providing training and access to tools to **SCREEN** language development, when indicated.
- supporting practitioners to **ENHANCE** opportunities for engagement by prioritizing mentorship that aligns with adult learning styles using the SEE-KS **Six-Step Mentorship** framework and equipping them to mentor one another. When an individual is supported in this mentorship framework, they will have the knowledge and skills to support their peers to engage in this process. This sustainability is essential for creating a culture where discussing engagement and language development is part of the ethos of a given setting.

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