



# LANGUAGE AS A MISSING LINK & MISSED OPPORTUNITY

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PART 2: WHAT

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# 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

Follow these 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 potential 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 2

# WHAT



When a flower doesn't bloom,  
you fix the environment in which it grows,  
not the flower.

ALEXANDER DEN HEIJER



# WHAT are our next steps and opportunities?

In an attempt to employ language as a well-being indicator, opportunities exist for individuals, practitioners, and policymakers to integrate the following practices into everyday settings:

## NOTICE

When we view language as a well-being indicator similar to others such as vision, hearing, and oral health, those who interact with children will **NOTICE** that children’s language development meets the expectations for activities or settings that would be typical for their age level.

## MONITOR

A simple tool can be used to **MONITOR** whether an individual or group of children is actively engaged, socially connected, following social norms and routines, and expressing thoughts and feelings to others. This helps those who interact with children discern where the missing link hasn’t yet been discovered. By monitoring engagement as a gauge of language development, we can observe children who may need an initial screening, since universally screening language development isn’t feasible, cost effective, or necessary.

## SCREEN

A brief, standardized screening tool such as CCC-2 should then be administered to **SCREEN** children observed during monitoring. Screening results should be used to inform how interactive routines can be enhanced to benefit all children.

## ENHANCE

Implement a comprehensive approach to **ENHANCE** language by supporting the knowledge of all those who interact with children to identify opportunities to fuel engagement. This begins by modifying the environment to enhance elements of engagement such as a child’s social connectedness (investment), understanding (independence), and opportunities to share what they know (initiation).

## NOTICE indicators of language development by increasing awareness that:

- language and social development milestones follow a predictable pattern from childhood through adolescence;
- if we view language as a well-being indicator similar to others like vision, hearing, and oral health, caregivers, educators, and health care providers will become aware of expectations proactively so they can **NOTICE** language across developmental stages;
- if the concept of language development milestones is already part of your work with families, educators, and other caregivers, review this document to ensure that expressive, receptive, and pragmatic language is being considered; and
- by recognizing language as a well-being indicator, the foundation will be laid to encourage those who interact with children to provide opportunities for frequent, language-rich, social interactions vital for social and emotional development, self-regulation, and executive functioning.

**Language Development by Age Band (Birth to 18 Years)**

Birth - 6 Months	6 - 12 Months	12 - 18 Months	18 - 24 Months	24 - 36 Months
<p><b>The child is able to...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Show a preference for looking toward people's eyes and faces</li> <li>Respond to a caregiver's voice by looking and listening</li> <li>Smile in response to caregiver</li> <li>Vocalize and babble in a back and forth manner</li> </ul>	<p><b>The child is able to...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Shift their eye gaze between people and objects</li> <li>Share emotions by looking at others, smiling, and using facial expressions</li> <li>Use their sounds and babbles to gain attention</li> <li>Pair gestures with eye contact</li> <li>Communicate frequently with others to request and protest</li> <li>Share what interests them with gestures, sounds and eye contact</li> <li>Participate in social routines such as peek-a-boo</li> <li>Imitate simple sounds and actions demonstrated by others (e.g. clapping, waving, silly sounds)</li> <li>Look up and/or turn towards the sound of their name being called</li> </ul>	<p><b>The child is able to...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Respond to others by looking and listening</li> <li>Pair gestures with sounds and words to direct communication</li> <li>Communicate nonverbally for many reasons (e.g. requesting, protesting, and starting social games)</li> <li>Use a range of gestures such as giving, showing, waving, pointing, and shaking one's head</li> <li>Recognize a caregiver's emotion (e.g. mirroring sadness, happiness)</li> <li>Imitate sounds and simple words</li> <li>Use early ritualized words such as "bye" and "no"</li> <li>Imitate and show off simple play actions (push a car, building with blocks)</li> </ul>	<p><b>The child is able to...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use a variety of gestures, facial expressions and sounds across people and settings</li> <li>Use single words for not only object labels, but also people's names, action words, modifiers, and relational words (e.g. up, down, in)</li> <li>Take turns within interactions with others</li> <li>Communicate for many reasons (e.g., seeking comfort, greeting others, showing off)</li> <li>Share their enjoyment and interests with eye contact, smiles and sounds</li> <li>Demonstrate play actions with toys (e.g. pour a drink, feed a doll, put baby to bed)</li> </ul>	<p><b>The child is able to...</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use and understand combinations of words (e.g., Mommy go outside)</li> <li>Express and share simple emotions with words (e.g., Mommy is happy, I am mad)</li> <li>Request a soothing activity when distressed</li> <li>Request assistance from others</li> <li>Use simple self-regulatory language to maintain engagement within an activity (e.g., "first, then")</li> </ul>

This table was developed by Pillay, Rubin, Fagan & Waldron (2018) based on information from Gard, Gilman, & Gorman (1993), Prizant, Wetherby, Rubin, Laurent & Rydell (2006), and Russell (2007). Updated: September 2021

## Language Development by Age Band

This freely accessible tool can be shared with individuals, practitioners, and policymakers to generate awareness of language development from infancy through adolescence.

**MONITOR** whether an individual or group of children are socially connected, following social norms and routines, and expressing their thoughts and feelings to others with the free and easy to use the Social Engagement Ladder. Discover potential missed opportunities to boost language development.

## 3 I'S: ELEMENTS OF ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

Get a gauge of language competence in everyday settings that involve social interaction.

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### INVESTMENT

**Are children motivated to engage and staying connected?**

Investment is the “why” of language use, such as our social connectedness. We use language when we have something to say; we learn more language when we have many opportunities and reasons to communicate with others; and we engage with our caregivers, educators, and peers when we feel connected.

### INDEPENDENCE

**Do children know what to do and what is being taught?**

“Knowing what to do”—following social norms and routines, listening to others, anticipating others’ actions, problem-solving on one’s own—is a result of language comprehension and supports independence. We engage in everyday activities and follow social norms when we understand conventional forms of non-verbal language like gestures and facial expressions and have access to previously modeled language and tools that remind us of the meaning of language such as multimedia, graphics, role play, and hands-on materials. This helps develop our inner dialogue to self-regulate and problem solve in social situations—also known as executive functioning.

### INITIATION

**Are children sharing what they know?**

We initiate when we communicate with others in different ways—both verbally and nonverbally—when we have opportunities and options, and when we interact with those who respond to our many forms of communication, including facial expressions, gestures, words, and writing.

## The Social Engagement Ladder

When children display all “3 I’s” of engagement, communication is frequent, functional, socially oriented, and fluid across settings. This typically indicates that language development meets expectations for activities or settings that would be anticipated by different age levels.

Children who experience subtle to significant disengagement will likely have difficulties with language development that will be discerned using these indicators and in later screening. In contrast, if difficulties aren’t found in later screening, the tool might have discovered opportunities to enhance engagement in the setting itself.

The Social Engagement Ladder monitors whether children are actively engaged in everyday activities that involve social interaction. This tool measures rates of investment, independence, and initiation when engaging in everyday activities.

**Learn how to use the Social Engagement Ladder as a tool to measure engagement:**

- [Finding the Fuel for Learning—Infant-Toddler Settings](#)
- [Finding the Fuel for Learning—Early Childhood Settings](#)
- [Finding the Fuel for Learning—Elementary Settings](#)
- [Finding the Fuel for Learning—Teenagers & Secondary School-Aged Settings](#)

**SEE-KS**  
Social Engagement Ladder

Location: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Activity: \_\_\_\_\_ Time of Day: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Educator(s): \_\_\_\_\_ Data Collector(s): \_\_\_\_\_

**Fully Engaged (4)**  
Frequent spontaneous initiation, consistent independent engagement with materials, frequent expression of positive emotional investment

**Mostly Engaged (3)**  
Consistent spontaneous initiation, occasional independent engagement with materials, occasional expression of positive emotional investment

**Partially Engaged (2)**  
Responsive or non-spontaneous initiation, compliant with directions, seldom shares expression of positive emotional investment

**Emerging/Fluctuating (1)**  
Intermittently responsive without initiation, dependent on direction, minimal expression of positive emotional investment

**No Focus (0)**  
Non-responsive, not engaging with targeted materials, and not sharing any emotion or expression, possibly out of the room

Leaves	Initiated by	Spans	Level of Investment
4%			High
3%			Medium
2%			Low
1%			Minimal
0%			None

Learning Environment Sketch Space

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## Group Version

The use of the [whole group Social Engagement Ladder](#) is relevant when monitoring whether a group of children are actively engaged within large group settings such as classrooms, social and therapeutic environments, and court proceedings.

**SEE-KS**  
Social Engagement Ladder (Individual Child)

Child's Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Mentor: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Parent / Care Provider: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Criterion	Natural Activity	Engagement Rating
4 <b>Fully engaged.</b> The child is a spontaneously (200000) high frequency through movement or verbal means, is demonstrating (200000) in engaging with targeted materials, and a highly (200000) on evidence by frequent expression of shared positive emotion.	Parent/Care Provider: _____ Activity: _____	_____
3 <b>Mostly engaged.</b> The child is a spontaneously (200000) to moderate frequency through movement or verbal means, is demonstrating (200000) in engaging with targeted materials, and is (200000) on evidence by occasional expression of shared positive emotion.	Parent/Care Provider: _____ Activity: _____	_____
2 <b>Partially engaged.</b> The child is a predominantly (200000) in which a parent/mentor, is demonstrating (200000) or verbal means, is (200000) or peer directions to engage with targeted materials, and only (200000) shared positive emotion.	Parent/Care Provider: _____ Activity: _____	_____
1 <b>Emerging/Fluctuating.</b> The child is a only intermittently (200000) to parent/mentor, is demonstrating (200000) or verbal means, and shows (200000) in which a parent/mentor or peer directions to engage with targeted materials, and does not (200000) shared positive emotion.	Parent/Care Provider: _____ Activity: _____	_____
0 <b>No Focus.</b> The child is (200000) to adult or peer bids for interaction through movement or verbal means, and shows (200000) to target materials, and does not (200000) or peer directions to engage with targeted materials, and does not (200000) shared positive emotion.	Parent/Care Provider: _____ Activity: _____	_____

Please indicate what "was working" in activities that yield a 2 or higher. This refers to supports that fostered the child's engagement (e.g., embedding movement, music and hands-on materials, visuals, choices offered, etc.).

Average Daily Score: \_\_\_\_\_

SEE-KS - Rubin, E., Townsend, J. & Wilson, L. (2010). Permission granted for use of materials for educational purposes.

## Individual Version

An [individual version of the Social Engagement Ladder](#) is used to provide additional information about children, illustrating levels of engagement of that individual in daily interactive routines.

# MONITOR

Children who are at **0** (not focused) or **1** (emerging/fleeting) may be those whose engagement is either not evident or inconsistent, while a **2** (partially engaged) represents a child who is responsive and present. Children who are at **3** (mostly engaged) or **4** (fully engaged) are displaying positive emotion, participating in routines, and communicating their thoughts and feelings in an effective and sustained manner.

For children who frequently score **0**, **1**, or **2**, complete a brief language screening to discern whether difficulties with language development might be a missing link contributing to their disengagement would be the next step.

If a child is at **0** (not focused) or **1** (emerging/fleeting) in the whole group version, it would then be recommended that an individual Social Engagement Ladder be used to determine if those engagement ladders are consistent across settings. If a child is at **0**, **1**, or **2** in several activities, this highlights a potential need to **SCREEN** and **ENHANCE**.

Photo source: Tronick, E. Still Face Experiment, UMass Boston



**0**

**No Focus**

Child is not engaged, looking away



**1**

**Emerging/  
Fleeting**

Child engagement is not evident or consistent



**2**

**Partially Engaged**

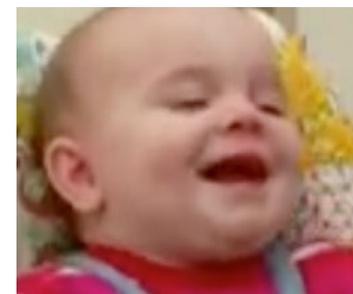
Child is responsive and present



**3**

**Mostly Engaged**

Displaying positive emotion, participating in routines



**4**

**Fully Engaged**

Communicating thoughts and feelings in an effective and sustained manner

We can administer a brief screening tool with children who consistently score **0**, **1**, or **2** on the **Social Engagement Ladder** during typical interactive daily activities. Using a standardized screening tool can help discern the presence of difficulties with language development, and these results inform how daily routines in the environment can be enhanced with strategies that benefit all children.

- These screening tools can be administered in brief periods of time (10 – 20 minutes) and compare the child to the performance of same-aged peers.
- A screening test identifies opportunities to enhance the learning setting for children who may have difficulties with language development, and determine the need for additional language assessment for children with significant language difficulties.
- Screening is too often used only to identify significant difficulties. However, even simple differences in language competency are worthy of attention. Observing differences among same-aged peers should be used by adults to enhance the environment.
- A screening tool can be used to discern differences in levels of language development from same-aged peers that are notable, but not significant—a finding that yields immediate implications for those who interact with the child.
- Screening tools that consider expressive, receptive, and pragmatic language that are relevant for infancy through adolescence include:
  - **Communication and Symbolic Behavior Scales Developmental Profile™ Infant-Toddler Checklist** (6 months to 2 years)
  - **Preschool Language Scales—5-Screener** (Birth to 8 years)
  - **Childhood Communication Checklist—2 (CCC-2)** (4 to 17 years)
  - **Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals—Preschool—3-Screener** (3 to 7 years)
  - **Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals—5-Screener** (5 to 21 years)
- While results may warrant a deeper and more comprehensive assessment conducted by a licensed speech language pathologist, this initial screening can be conducted by those who interact with the child in health, education, social, and therapeutic settings, such as nurses, social workers, and counselors.
- The next step is to **ENHANCE** active engagement by addressing language understanding, expression, and use within everyday activities and creating an environment that’s supportive at a more universal level.

We can enhance active engagement by supporting knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy of individuals and practitioners who interact with children, such as families and other caregivers, educators, and health care providers, to enhance the environment when there are opportunities to strengthen one of the “3 I’s” of engagement.

## INVESTMENT

When a child is withdrawn, distracted, depressed, or showing a lack of sustained attention, it may be due to difficulties with language development. Therefore, we can strengthen investment by embedding more hands-on, movement-based, and relevant materials.

## INDEPENDENCE

When a child has difficulties knowing what to do or what to expect, it may be due to a limited understanding of language concepts, social norms, and routines. We can strengthen independence by embedding more visuals, hands-on, movement-based, and relevant materials.

## INITIATION

When a child uses behavior instead of language to communicate, shows limited or no remorse/empathy, and/or displays limited social interactions, this may be due to difficulties with language development. This is an opportunity to strengthen the options provided for expressing ideas using multimodal strategies, such as visuals and hands-on materials.

SEE-KS Quick Reference Tool for the “3 I’s” of Engagement Investment – Independence – Initiation		
INVESTMENT For learners to be “hooked” or motivated to engage, we can provide an environment that stimulates interest and supports the learner to sustain their connection. Ask yourself: Is this individual “hooked” and staying “connected”?		
	Initial Skills	Targeting Strategy
<b>A. Fostering Investment:</b>	<p><b>Providing meaningful activities</b> to stimulate interest by creating consistent routines that involve exploring sensory properties. This might include: manipulating, sensory play, water play, art and movement.</p> <p><b>Providing hands-on, movement-based activities</b> that stimulate interest through engaging sensory activities for the learner (consider exploring objects for how they feel, sound, smell, or provide cause-effect).</p> <p><b>Providing opportunities for social connections</b> with preferred partners (siblings and grandmothers/other partners). This might include: games involving face-to-face play and object rotation.</p>	<p><b>Providing meaningful activities</b> to stimulate interest by creating consistent routines that are social, playful, relevant and include with “hooks of interest” to maintain objects as well as opportunities to ask out the meaning of those concepts. This might include: playing with play with a goal about creating a shared experience through projects, art, music, or play.</p> <p><b>Providing hands-on, movement-based activities</b> to stimulate interest through which focus movement (consider objects and activities that are familiar to the learner or as well as those that are novel). This might include: opportunities to use sensory play props and familiar materials related to routine daily experiences.</p> <p><b>Providing opportunities for social connections</b> with preferred partners (siblings and grandmothers/other partners). This might include: arranging or initiating an interaction with the same family or individuals who performing the same action at the same time, to provide opportunities for parallel play.</p>
<b>B. Supporting the Learner to Gain Access to Materials:</b>	<p><b>Adjusting the environment</b> based on the unique needs of the learner (including the type and amount of visual, auditory, and movement stimulation) to support the learner’s energy level and adjusting one’s tone of voice, proximity and touch, opportunities for movement (being aware of when there is being in excess, conflict, or sensory) or adjusting the level of sensory stimulation (being aware from a small group to a 1:1).</p> <p><b>Providing access to self-regulation supports</b> using sensory input strategies and/or tangible objects. This might include: providing a sensory bin and/or access to a preferred movement pattern and/or handling or stress balls and/or materials.</p>	<p><b>Adjusting the environment</b> based on the unique needs of the learner (including the type and amount of visual, auditory, and movement stimulation) to support the learner’s energy level and adjusting one’s tone of voice, proximity, touch, and the amount of sensory stimulation (being aware of when there is being in excess, conflict, or sensory) or adjusting the level of sensory stimulation (being aware from a small group to a 1:1).</p> <p><b>Providing access to self-regulation supports</b> using visual choices for learners to identify energy level or sensory stimulation (such as three, empty) or sensory. This might include: making a learner’s energy level and handling a visual to identify and manage energy level or sensory (such as three, empty) or sensory. This might include: making a learner’s energy level and handling a visual to identify and manage energy level or sensory (such as three, empty) or sensory.</p>

## SEE-KS Quick Reference Tool

Results of screening can be shared with the child, family members, educators, health care providers, and other caregivers, using the [SEE-KS Quick Reference Tool for the “3 I’s” of Engagement](#).

This freely accessible resource provides guidance on enhancing everyday routines with strategies to foster engagement for children who are not yet using words, emerging language, developing language competence, or fully conversational. (Refer to the “How” section of the toolkit to learn how to use this tool when mentoring others.)

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