



Early Language in Play Settings

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Introduction

This manual is supporting eLIPS training and accompanies the eLIPS website, which can be accessed [here](#).

The manual can be used as quick reference guide and contains all relevant information also found on the training website.

A separate document for eLIPS coaches with session details can be accessed through the training website.

We hope you will find all required information here. Should there be anything you feel is missing or you would like to make some suggestions, please reach out:

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General manual supporting eLIPS assessments in practice

eLIPS training portal

eLIPS Training: Update 2025

We have undertaken some additional work to extend eLIPS and redevelop the existing eLIPS training. You can now find all information in one place: the eLIPS training website, [here](#).

What can I find on the website?

- Introduction: Background and overview of the tool; how-to-use eLIPS
- Practice examples: Practice examples and reflection questions
- More complex examples: examples outlining more complex situations and reflection questions
- Younger children: Background on the development of eLIPS for 2-year-olds; practice examples and reflection questions
- FAQ: common questions and answers; links to further materials

Overview: eLIPS in the Early Years setting

What is eLIPS?

eLIPS is a screening tool to help you make and record observations about a child's language development. eLIPS is designed to be inclusive of every child in an early years setting aged 2 and above, including children with English as an additional language (EAL) and additional support needs (ASN). However, it is important for you to know the children you observe well, so we would suggest a settling-in time of approximately six weeks before you start eLIPS.

How to complete eLIPS

eLIPS is a tool to support your observations of an individual child. These observations will be undertaken during your usual routine and eLIPS provides guidance on what to look for.

There are two sections to complete for every child – a General Observations part plus ONE other activity part.

General Observations:	fill this in for EVERY child
ONE other activity:	choose ONE other activity from the four options (i.e. House OR Sand & Water OR Snack OR Outdoors), depending on what the child enjoys doing in the setting.

Each section asks for observations about what the child is **Doing, Understanding** and **Saying**. To help with your observations, there is a statement with a list of possible observations for every part.

- The list gives examples of what you might see in a younger child in the first part of the scale and what you might see in an older child towards the end of the scale.
- Record your selection for each statement provided. *The statement in the example below is “Plays in the sand/water area”. When you observe the child playing with sand and/or water, we would like you to consider:*

“Where would you **securely** place the child (*securely means the child shows this ability repeatedly*)?”

- Next check that the child is not yet **secure** on the next statement on the scale.

It is better to undertake new observations rather than relying on memory because the child may have progressed since the last time you saw them. Also, the child may generally seem very confident and have high abilities in many areas, but your observations might reveal that this is one skill they are still developing.

This is an example of a statement about what the child is **Doing**:

Question 1 - Plays in the sand/water area
Not yet
Reacts to voices and sounds
Looks in direction where you point
Solitary play
Watches others playing but does not join in
Parallel play
Interacting more during play (e.g. borrowing toys, imitating others)
Follows others' instructions about what to do
Increased sharing and turn taking during play
Longer periods of cooperative play
Can maintain play even after disruption (e.g. children leaving/arriving)
Awareness of effects of own actions (good or bad) on flow of play

If you are not sure about which answer to choose, continue to observe the child to find more information. You can also discuss your observations with your colleagues to ask them for advice if you find a question tricky to answer.

Don't be worried about “getting it wrong”. One answer has only a small impact on the overall score. eLIPS consists of several different observations to build a general overview of the child. If you are struggling, please talk to colleagues who also know the child or reach out to the eLIPS contacts listed on the website.

Making observations with eLIPS

Here is an example of an eLIPS scale for a child's level of **Understanding**. The aim is to find the one answer that reflects where you would securely place the child at this moment.

Question 1 - Understands instructions
Not yet
Responds differently to different tones of voice
Understands "no"
Responds appropriately to daily routine instructions (e.g. wash hands, put on apron)
Responds appropriately to instructions like "Pick up the toy" when a toy has fallen on floor
Follows instructions with two key words (e.g. bring me the scarf and the hat)
Understands instructions like "Put all the cars in the box" when tidying up
Can mentally retrace a step (e.g. "Where did you find this toy?")
Understands instructions like "Find me something the same colour as your top"
Understands and accepts explanations like "You can't have a turn now but you can have a turn tomorrow"
Understands instructions like "Go round the other way because the floor is wet"
Understands "Find me something that is a different colour from your top"

Make sure you are familiar with the eLIPS scales and the observations of language under each question and/or statement. When you make an observation that fits to an eLIPS scale, mark the item on the list. Next check that the child is not yet secure on the next statement on the scale.

If you are not sure about which answer to choose, continue to observe the child. At times it may be useful to set up a play situation that will allow you to observe specific developments. Do this as the opportunity arises in your interactions with the child during play, taking care to extend the child's play and stay with the play situation the child initiated.

Summarising eLIPS

Once you have finished your two observation activities each for General Observations and one other activity, you would pass on the details in your setting to be added to the child's documentation. Your setting is responsible for providing you with feedback on the individual child's eLIPS results, which should be used to support learning conversations/tracking and monitoring discussions about the individual child.

Tips

- Use e-LIPS for all children (also EAL, SEND), regardless of whether or not they have a diagnosed difficulty or are in the process of being referred.
- Get involved with your colleagues to discuss findings and difficulties. We know from feedback that group discussions really helped our project schools using e-LIPS.
- Don't overestimate children by giving them the benefit of the doubt. If large numbers of children are overestimated, the necessary support is not going to be focused where it's needed.

We hope you have found all required information here. Should there be anything you feel is missing or you would like to make some suggestions, please reach out:

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Frequently Asked Questions

Questions about the administration of eLIPS scales

Q1 I've observed the child and found a point on the scale to place them on but I'm not sure they can really do everything before this point.

Don't worry. If the child can do most of the things mentioned before your chosen answer on the scale, this is not a problem. The scales show the developmental pattern many children present but there are a lot of children who will follow a slightly different order. You might want to take a note of the observations you feel the child has not shown, so you can revisit them at the end of the year.

Q2 I've filled in half of the scale and the child has been off for two weeks. Do I need to go back and do it again?

You will have to, as the child might have made a step forward and climbed ahead on the scale. We often observe children coming back from their holidays and suddenly showing off new skills. Always try to fill in the scales as close in time as possible.

Q3 Some answers on the scale don't seem to be in a relevant order.

The scales are based on general language development in cohorts of children, but there are a lot of children who will show a different order. A different sequence of development might even be typical in the local area you are working in. As long as the child can do most of the scale items, it is not a problem if the one before hasn't developed yet (see also Q1).

Q4 The child is hardly attending nursery at all. Do I have to wait until the child's attendance reaches 6 weeks in total before using e-LIPS?

No, once you start taking observations for the new intake, observe all the new children. Some will have attended more days than others.

Q5 A child joined the nursery during the year rather than at a regular intake point. Do I still have to do e-LIPS?

Yes, wait for the child to be settled in your environment (approximately 6 weeks if possible) and then start e-LIPS. As you record the dates for e-LIPS, it will be obvious to others that the child joined during the year.

Q6 Can I use some of my learning folder observations to answer the questions?

You can certainly look at your previous observations to get a refresher about the child's ability. We would like you to make new observations though, as the child might have made another step forward since you last observed them.

Difficulties with placing children on the eLIPS scale

Q7 I'm sure the child can do everything on the scale already.

Try and take an observation for the last item of the scale. Is the child able to do this on a regular basis or is this a one-off? We are looking for secure abilities - sometimes a child can do something very advanced but it takes some time for them to be able to show this repeatedly and under different circumstances. This would be what we call "secure".

Q8 The child speaks a very strong dialect, is that a problem?

Some variation in children's language is expected, it doesn't matter overall whether the child speaks Standard English or a local dialect. It certainly isn't a problem for any scales related to Doing or Understanding. There are a few questions under Saying you might struggle to answer. If the answer given shows dialect used typically in your area and you consider it correct, it's fine to accept it. This is also a great opportunity to discuss with your colleagues to see if you agree on typical answers in your area.

Q9 I can understand the child but most other people can't. How do I fill in the scale?

How difficult is it to understand the child? If only you and the parents understand them, it's probably a good idea to monitor their language development to see if the child is moving forward within a few months' time. With regard to the scales: note what you can observe. If you think a child uses certain words, but other people wouldn't understand them, take a note. This can be a prompt for discussions you might want to have with others involved in the care of the child.

Q10 One of my key children doesn't speak any English yet. Do I have to do the assessment if they don't speak at all?

You will be able to observe the child's play and interactions with other children. This should enable you to answer questions about *Doing*. Next try answering the *Understanding* questions to find out how much English the child understands so far. Don't worry if it isn't much, by the end of the year there should be visible progress. Finally, see if some of the *Saying* questions can be answered, for example, does the child use simple English words like "no"? It will be really interesting for you to look back at the assessment at the end of the year and see how much progress the child has made!

Q11 I'm sure the child can usually do this but when I observed them today, they wouldn't do it. What now?

If you just started taking observation and think that the child is very different from usual, why not wait a few days and try to start observing again? If something else is going on in the child's life that has a temporary effect on behaviour in the setting, it might be worth waiting. But if this applies to only one or two of all the questions, don't worry too much. This has only a small influence on the total score and won't affect the outcome significantly.

Difficulties around observations

Q12 I haven't been able to observe the right situation to answer a scale.

Is the child not doing anything on the scale or have you been unable to take an observation about the relevant answers yet? Try engaging with the child in a play situation, like you might do to take observations for the child's learning file. It's fine to engage with the child in a child-centred way in order to understand their abilities better.

Q13 I can see the child doing things at the start of the scale but can't make an observation about any of the more difficult items.

Try inviting the child to a play situation appropriate for the higher end of the scale. You will underestimate the child's abilities if you only use items from the start of the scale without being sure that this is the best the child can do.

Q14 Can I engage in the child's play to answer questions? Or do I have to observe everything from afar?

Please do engage with the child you are observing. You interact with the child when doing observations to identify their learning alongside the curriculum, just do the same here. If you need to find out if a child can do something specific and were unable to find out in conversation, try and invite the child to a related game or play situation.

Q15 Two children I observed are quite different in ability but the scales don't reflect that.

Do the children maybe have strikingly different personalities and temperaments? One child might present their abilities in a very outgoing way, whereas the other might be more reserved, but both may still be able to do similar things. Also, different activities will allow children to show other abilities as well as language skills. The measure will give you an indication of where a child stands in relation to their language and help in deciding whether you should take further action.

Q16 Can I get help with filling in the observations?

Absolutely. Try and speak to co-workers first and see what they think about the child you are observing. You can also speak to your manager, who will know more about the assessment. We have trained peer-supporters, so ask for Principal Teachers or Educational Psychologists who look after e-LIPS in your area. Or get in touch with us directly, details below.

I haven't managed to find out the answer to my question, I'd like to speak to someone else about this.

You can get in touch with one of our researchers by email: info@e-lips.org

Or:

For any general eLIPS questions, please reach out to: l.g.duncan@dundee.ac.uk

For any training related questions, please get in touch with: conny.gollek@uws.ac.uk

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Example: Video “At the drawing table”– Scale SAYING

Question 1 - When speaking
Not yet
Squeals/shouts to get attention
Consistent use of gestures as a signal (e.g. "Stop!" signalled with a hand)
May miss out some sounds but word used is consistent and recognisable
Learning to say no (e.g. no bed, no milk)
Partial use of -ing (e.g. "teddy sleeping" not "teddy is sleeping")
Secure use of "-s" (e.g. cups, spoons)
Secure use of "'s" to show ownership (Mummy's keys, Daddy's car)
Secure use of plurals that don't involve "-s" (e.g. child-children, tooth-teeth, foot-feet)
Secure use of fastest, biggest in relation to toys
Secure ability to make comparisons between objects using smaller, bigger etc.
Able to make a comparison sequence (e.g. this horse is big, this one bigger, this one is the biggest!)

Appendix 2

Example: Video "Child brushing the floor" - Scale DOING

Question 2 - Conversations with others

Not yet

Notices when being spoken to

Plays peek-a-boo

Reacts non-verbally to others when spoken to

Responds verbally to questions

Active use of speech for requests

Has 'conversations' with self (or toys)

Turn-taking emerging in conversation

Conversations start more frequently but often break up suddenly

Comfortable in conversation with peers

Can resolve conflict verbally without adult intervention

Shows more abstract ideas "What if..." or "I hope.." in conversations over longer periods

Appendix 3

Example: Conversations – Scale SAYING – Statement “Has conversations”

Question 1 - Has conversations

Not yet

Babbles to adults

Uses a range of gestures for requesting objects/toys (e.g. gaze, pointing, giving gestures)

Gestures used to share attention with adult (e.g. showing/giving objects, drawing attention to object by pointing)

Responds to others verbally

Initiates conversations

Learning to recognise when not understood

Longer dialogue and learning to clarify when misunderstood

Tries to tell stories, but order of events is often mixed up and central theme missing

Can tell stories in order of events, with introduction and ending

Can answer questions at story time showing understanding of characters' feelings and motivations

Understands longer conversational stories without pictures and reflects on the topic

Appendix 4

Example: Sand & Water – Scale DOING – Statement “Conversations with others”

Question 2 - Conversations with others

Not yet

Notices when being spoken to

Plays peek-a-boo

Reacts non-verbally to others when spoken to

Responds verbally to questions

Active use of speech for requests

Has 'conversations' with self (or toys)

Turn-taking emerging in conversation

Conversations start more frequently but often break up suddenly

Comfortable in conversation with peers

Can resolve conflict verbally without adult intervention

Shows more abstract ideas “What if...” or “I hope..” in conversations over longer periods

Appendix 5

Example: Lunchtime - Scale Understanding - Statement "Understands instructions & social rules"

Question 1 - Understands instructions & social rules

Not yet

Responds differently to different tones of voice

Understands 'no'

Understands at least three words connected with snack area (e.g. cup, spoon, milk, apple, etc.)

Understands one-step instructions (e.g. "wash-up", "wipe face")

Understands two-step instructions (e.g. "get a cup and a plate")

Emerging ability to wait after explanations like "soon" or "later"

Secure understanding of what to do to get ready for snack

Can deliver a message ("ask Laura if she wants to come for snack")

Secure understanding of biggest, smallest at snack

Secure understanding of "first....then"

Understands pairs of opposites like "empty/full" or "nearest/furthest"

Appendix 6

Example II: Lunchtime - Scale Saying - Statement "Uses"

Question 1 - Uses
Not yet
Expresses likes and dislikes non-verbally
Tries to imitate words or sounds made by adult
Uses single words and familiar phrases (e.g. "water", "all gone")
Learning to say no (e.g. no toast no milk)
Partial use of -ing (e.g. "teddy eating" not "teddy is eating")
Secure use of "-s" (e.g. cups, spoons)
Secure use of "'s" to show ownership (Mummy's keys, Daddy's car)
Secure use of plurals that don't involve "-s" (e.g. child-children, tooth-teeth, foot-feet)
Secure use of fastest, biggest in relation to toys
Secure ability to make comparisons between objects using smaller, bigger etc.
Able to make a comparison sequence (e.g. this horse is big, this one bigger, this one is the biggest!)

Appendix 7

Doing 1

Question 1 - Conversations with others
Not yet
Notifies when being spoken to
Plays peek-a-boo
Reacts non-verbally to others when spoken to
Responds verbally to questions
Active use of speech for requests
Has 'conversations' with self (or toys)
Turn-taking emerging in conversation
Conversations start more frequently but often break up suddenly
Comfortable in conversation with peers
Can resolve conflict verbally without adult intervention
Shows more abstract ideas "What if..." or "I hope..." in conversations over longer periods

Understanding 2

Question 2 - Understands questions
Not yet
Understands context based on routine/gesture, rather than spoken word
Responds to own name
Responds appropriately to simple yes/no questions
Understands "Where...?" questions
Understands "What's on your plate?"
Understands "Whose turn is it?" "Whose plate is that?"
Understands simple "why" questions (e.g. "Why is there food on the floor?")
Understands "If you feel hungry, what do you do?"
Understands the concept behind "how many" but might not answer correctly
Understands "when" questions
Secure knowledge of sequence of days of the week, knows what day comes after Monday

Doing 2

Question 2 - Can do
Not yet
Picks up objects with one hand
Picks up small objects, using thumb and finger grasp
Can drink from a cup
Can use a spoon
Puts food on plate and eats independently
Can lift and open containers
Can pour out milk/water
Secure understanding of turn-taking and passing objects to others
Can spread butter on a cracker
Can wash own dishes to a good standard
Can be relied on to do more detailed tasks (e.g. use a knife safely to cut fruit)

Saying 2

Question 2 - When speaking
Not yet
Vowel sounds or repeat of same simple syllable (e.g. aaa, ba-ba-ba)
Consistent use of gestures that have a meaning for the child
Single words emerging
Many single words used which are recognisable and sometimes combined
Secure use of 2-word combinations
3 words
4 words
5 words
6 words
Occasional sentence can have complex structure
Often uses several long complex sentences at a time

Appendix 8

Example: Outdoors - Scale Saying - Statement "Communicates"

Question 1 - Communicates

Not yet

Expresses likes and dislikes non-verbally

Uses mostly gestures to communicate (e.g. raises arms to be lifted up)

Uses single words and familiar phrases (e.g. look, bye-bye, ta-ta)

Many single words used which are recognisable and sometimes combined

Using own name or "me" to express preference/desires (e.g. "me want...")

Understood by familiar adults

Understood by unfamiliar adults

Understood by most of the other children

Emerging ability to adapt speech to different listener's needs (e.g. speaks up when further away)

Can tell complex stories that are easily followed

Shows an increasing ability to talk about complicated things (e.g. intentions, motivations)

Appendix 9

Example 1: Child playing in the sand and water area – Scale Doing – Statement “Plays in the sand/water area”

Question 1 - Plays in the sand/water area

Not yet

Reacts to voices and sounds

Looks in direction where you point

Solitary play

Watches others playing but does not join in

Parallel play

Interacting more during play (e.g. borrowing toys, imitating others)

Follows others' instructions about what to do

Increased sharing and turn taking during play

Longer periods of cooperative play

Can maintain play even after disruption (e.g. children leaving/arriving)

Awareness of effects of own actions (good or bad) on flow of play

Appendix 10

Example 2: Children playing outside – Scale Saying – Statement “Has conversations”

Question 1 - Has conversations

Not yet

Babbles to adults

Uses a range of gestures for requesting objects/toys (e.g. gaze, pointing, giving gestures)

Gestures used to share attention with adult (e.g. showing/giving objects, drawing attention to object by pointing)

Responds to others verbally

Initiates conversations

Learning to recognise when not understood

Longer dialogue and learning to clarify when misunderstood

Tries to tell stories, but order of events is often mixed up and central theme missing

Can tell stories in order of events, with introduction and ending

Can answer questions at story time showing understanding of characters' feelings and motivations

Understands longer conversational stories without pictures and reflects on the topic

Appendix 11

Example 3: Children painting with water – Scale Understanding – Statement “Understands instructions & social rules”

Question 1 - Understands instructions & social rules
Not yet
Responds differently to different tones of voice
Follows one simple instruction (e.g. look at, give me, sit down)
Understands at least three words connected with outdoors (e.g. boots, tree, stone, grass, bug, worm etc.)
Shows an understanding of simple adjectives (e.g. cold/hot/loud/wet)
Understands two-step instructions (e.g. “get the brush and the shovel”)
Emerging ability to wait after explanations like “soon” or “later”
Secure understanding of how to get ready for activities (e.g. change shoes to go outside, helmet for bikes)
Can bring an item s/he was sent inside for (e.g. get tissues from the room)
Secure understanding of biggest, smallest outdoors
Secure understanding of “first....then”
Understands pairs of opposites like “empty/full” or “nearest/furthest”