



*Where children will thrive, succeed, and lead happy and fulfilling lives.*

<b>Procedure for</b>	SCERTS Local Procedure for Ribble Autism School		
<b>Associated policy</b>	Curriculum Policy		
<b>School</b>	The Ribble Autism School	<b>Signature (Author)</b>	Natalie Woods Deputy Headteacher Charlotte Hill Occupational Therapist Amy Martin Speech and Language Therapist
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## **1. Introduction**

For Specialist settings enabling access to the curriculum and the ability to assess pupils' attainment of that curriculum can be a challenge. The Ribble Autism School is striving to develop a system which reflects the achievements of a diverse range of pupils considering the wide and varied needs that have to be addressed in order for pupils to access that curriculum and flourish academically, personally and socially. For many pupils to become "available to learn" a wide range of areas must be first addressed.

An evidence-based approach is required to target specific skills in the recognised areas of need for pupils diagnosed with Autism and inform therapeutic priorities. These areas of need, as identified in the Dyad of Impairment, involve repetitive and restrictive patterns of behaviour and social communication difficulties. These areas are broad; therefore, a framework is needed to ensure the areas to develop are defined and meaningfully targetable. Furthermore, any framework must take into account the most recent version of the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual 5 (DSM-V - TR - 2022) which recognizes the often-complex sensory needs of young people with autism.

With the above in mind, The Ribble Autism School uses the SCERTS (Social Communication, Emotional Regulation and Transactional Support) approach within the teaching and therapy offer available to the young people and their families. The SCERTS approach aims to be a "comprehensive approach for children with autism spectrum disorders" (The SCERTS Model Volume 1:- Assessment). The approach considers a young person's skills in Social Communication, Emotional Regulation and, rather uniquely, the support systems that are put in place to facilitate gains in those two areas, that is the "Transactional Support" offered by the staff team. The therapeutic team have adapted the SCERTS approach to create a bespoke assessment tool and framework, which supports the young people in achieving skills in the areas of Social Communication and Emotional Regulation underpinning their ability to access the curriculum.

## **2. Background and Rationale**

SCERTS was devised by a team of Speech and Language Pathologists and Occupational Therapists in the US with the intention of unifying some of the educational approaches advocated for young people with autism. It aims to be a comprehensive model which is based upon both developmental and autism research.

SCERTS aims to fit into a school's existing programme by integrating a range of current approaches. It is a scaffold for using a range of researched approaches rather than a singular approach itself (as found in systems such as Applied Behavioral Analysis). Therefore, a school can incorporate existing researched approaches into the SCERTS programme such as PECS, TEACCH, Team Teach, Intensive Interaction, Social Stories, Comic strip conversations, sensory integration, Alert Programme etc. when setting targets and measuring outcomes through SCERTS. SCERTS is designed to be an approach which can be pervasive throughout the curriculum e.g., delivered alongside the educational curriculum.

Each programme is individualised whilst considering the core needs of pupils with a diagnosis of autism. The language used within the system can be applied across the broad range of ability of pupils that attend The Ribble Autism School. It also considers the non-linear style of learning displayed by the pupils and the fact that pupils can find it hard to transfer and generalise skills learnt in one environment into other contexts. Thus, skills are not rated as established/achieved until they are firmly evident across several settings and a number of communicative partners. This can include the school environment, the community and the family home.

### 3. Process and Terminology

#### 3.1. Determining Communication Stage

The SCERTS framework can be applied across the range of ability of pupils within The Ribble Autism School. This is beneficial as it means that the whole staff team uses the "same language" when selecting targets which helps support communication in teams and to uphold the overall school ethos.

Each child's Communication Stage is established by the therapy team prior to carrying out assessments and observations at the relevant stage. Definitions of these stages are summarized below and highlight the diverse range of pupils that The Ribble Autism School caters for: -

Communication Stage	Explanation
<b>Social Partners</b>	Refers to those learners who are at a pre-linguistic level of language learning. Social partners communicate intentionally before language emerges using gestures and vocalisations. For the purpose of assessment these learners typically have less than 3 words or phrases that they use referentially or with communicative intent.

<b>Language Partners</b>	<p>Refers to those learners who have emergent language skills.</p> <p>Language Partners acquire and begin to use symbolic means to communicate shared meanings such as oral language, sign language, picture symbols etc.</p> <p>For the purpose of assessment these learners typically have less than 100 words or phrases that are used referentially. They use less than 20 word-combinations in a creative way.</p>
<b>Conversational Partners</b>	<p>Refers to those learners who have more advanced language abilities and social awareness of others which allows for extended sequences of communicative exchange and greater sensitivity to other's perspectives and emotions.</p> <p>For the purpose of assessment these learners are able to use more than 100 words or phrases referentially and with communicative intent. They are able to use more than 20 word-combinations in creative discourse.</p>

### 3.2. Assessment

The SCERTS assessment process (SAP) measures "...a child's level of performance, degree of mastery on specific tasks or expected developmental skills within a domain" (The SCERTS Model: Volume 1 Assessment p. 133).

Following the establishment of the child's Communication Stage, The SAP-O (SCERTS Assessment Process Observation Form) is completed by a team of staff who know the pupil well, who have conducted observations of the child across a range of situations and settings with a range of communication partners. As pupils with autism often have difficulty generalizing skills across different environments or contexts, considering the attainment of a skill across settings is crucial.

The SAP-O form within the SCERTS model is based upon a 3-point assessment scale (0=never, 1=sometimes, 2=always). It was recognised by the therapy team that this scale was not comprehensive enough to reflect the level of complexity of pupils at The Ribble Autism School and the learning steps that each child requires in working towards achievement of a target.

Therefore a 6-point scale, bespoke to The Ribble Autism School was developed by

the therapy team as a tool to capture how the targeted skills have been generalised across environments and consider the level of staff (partner) support and prompting (scale shown below). This level of assessment has been clinically reasoned as necessary to ensure that the skills that are involved within each target area are effectively measurable and progress can be accurately captured.

New Scale Value	Description
0	The skill is not reported or observed in any environments and may not be expected at this stage of the individual's development.
1	The skill is only evident in <b>one activity</b> and its use is <b>heavily dependent on assistance /prompting</b> by staff. <b>Prompts</b> may be verbal, gestural, physical, situational, facial expression, gaze or tone. There may be a combination of <u>prompts</u> but they are all very overt such as hand over hand.
2	The skill is evident across <b>1 or 2 different activities or contexts</b> with <b>minimal prompting</b> needed from staff. <b>Staff give small prompts</b> and then stand back for the child to complete the action independently. The individual will largely show the skill with one key person.
3	The skill is evident in <b>3 different</b> activities or contexts. The individual can show the skill being used with at least <b>2 different people</b> . The individual shows the skill with <b>minimal prompting</b> .
4	The skill is evident in at least <b>4 different activities</b> or contexts. The individual can show the skill being used with at least <b>3 different people</b> . The individual uses the skill independently. <b>The individual is now rarely prompted to use the skill.</b>
5	<b>The skill is firmly established.</b> The individual can use it spontaneously across <b>a range of environments (5 or more)</b> including school, home and within the community. The individual needs <b>no prompting</b> to use the skill. The individual will show the skill <b>with a range of adults (at least 5)</b> – both familiar and unfamiliar. Whilst you may continue to work on this skill in order to consolidate and generalise – it will no longer be a named target area unless the individual begins to show regression in an area.

The SAP-O form selected is dependent upon the **communication stage of the child** (See above). There are three main areas within the SCERTS Assessment Process (SAP-O). These include:

- **Social Communication**
- **Emotional Regulation**
- **Transactional Support**

At The Ribble Autism School data is collected, and targets are set in the first two areas (Social Communication and Emotional Regulation). In initial phases of running the programme, Transactional Support was also measured but it was found that it was hard to establish reliable data within this subsection because:

- a. It made the process unnecessarily complex
- b. It depended on self-assessment of staff which was not always reliable.

The Transactional Support aspect continues to be of use in terms of supporting staff development in how they can support the young people they work with. The therapy team deliver pupil specific training and provide ongoing advice and recommendations

on the appropriate Transactional Supports that are required for the pupil to develop and generalise skills in the target area.

The main domains for observation (**Social Communication and Emotional Regulation**) and their definitions are summarized in the table below. An explanation of Transactional Support is maintained for information purposes.

Term	Explanation
<b>Social Communication</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Joint Attention</b></li> <li>- <b>Symbol Use</b></li> </ul>	<p>Social Communication is divided into two areas of need:</p> <p><b>Joint Attention</b> examines the skills required for an individual to engage with another person – to see them as a communication partner.</p> <p><b>Symbol Use</b> examines how somebody represents their thoughts feelings and ideas to others – be it through the spoken word/symbols/writing/gesture/non-verbal communication</p>
<b>Emotional Regulation</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Mutual Regulation</b></li> <li>- <b>Self-Regulation</b></li> </ul>	<p>Emotional Regulation is divided into two areas of need:</p> <p><b>Mutual Regulation</b> – examines how a child is able to remain in a well-regulated, available to learn state with the support of other people.</p> <p><b>Self-Regulation</b> – examines how a child is able to remain in a well-regulated, available to learn state through the use of their own strategies.</p> <p>Both areas explore a child's ability to recover from extreme dysregulation either with or without the help of other people.</p>
<b>Transactional Support</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Interpersonal Supports</b></li> <li>- <b>Learning Supports</b></li> </ul>	<p>This section of the programme examines how we support our young people in achieving gains in Social Communication and Emotional Regulation. It considers:</p> <p><b>Interpersonal Supports</b> – targets are included in terms of interaction and communication styles. The focus is on how we engage with our pupils and establish the right balance between being supportive and developing independence.</p> <p><b>Learning Supports</b> – These are the specific resources and tools that we need to give our pupils in order for them to learn, engage and develop independence e.g. visual supports, sensory regulators, break strategies etc.</p>
<p>The above skills are developmentally referenced across each of the partner stages; as an example, an individual's capacity for joint attention can be considered at their developmental level and targets can be set appropriately.</p>	

**In summary this programme supports setting of goals and monitoring**

**progress in: -**

- a. The social interaction and communication aspects of the curriculum**
- b. The part of our curriculum where we support pupils in being available to learn and assist them in managing their sensory needs and regulation.**

### **3.3. Intervals of Assessment**

All current pupils are base-lined using the 6-point scale adapted SAP-O (SCERTS Assessment Process Observation form). To embed a fully holistic process, the language used within the framework has been further adapted by the therapy team to support staff understanding. The therapy team complete their own therapeutic assessment but rely on input from the teaching staff; therefore, the SCERTS assessment forms have been revised to remove jargon, ensuring the SCERTS approach is a meaningful and accessible framework the whole educational team are able to engage in.

Each criterion within the two main domains (Social Communication and Emotional Regulation) is assessed for each individual pupil through observations and discussions between the Speech and Language Therapist, the Occupational Therapist and the class teacher for inter-rater reliability. When necessary, additional Speech and Language Therapy, Occupational Therapy or teacher-based assessments are carried out if there are issues regarding reliability or if a criterion is unknown.

For new pupils, baseline assessment is completed for each young person within the first term of attending The Ribble Autism School. Assessment is carried out by a member of the therapy team alongside the pupil's key member of staff for inter-rater reliability. Where further assessment is needed to establish a score on a specific criterion, this is highlighted and raised with the relevant professional e.g. Occupational Therapist, Speech and Language Therapist.

All pupils are re-assessed in the Summer term of each academic year and data is graphed and used to inform future target setting. If targets are achieved within the academic year, they are re-set accordingly.

### **3.4. Setting Objectives – Goal Based Outcomes**

As aforementioned, the ability to assess all the key areas which are worked upon throughout the school day with the young people at The Ribble Autism School is challenging. Progress is not always linear, and skills are often not generalised spontaneously. Furthermore, many standardised assessments rely upon the co-operation of the young person, who due to level and complexity of need, high anxiety

or demand avoidance may be difficult to engage in the process. SCERTS is therefore a system which forms a valuable part of the overall assessment and goal setting process at The Ribble Autism School.

One of the key outcomes intended for pupils at The Ribble Autism School is to improve quality of life – an outcome difficult to measure but essential as a focus for our pupils. Many of our pupils have profound anxiety and as such can display behaviour that restricts their opportunities within society e.g. being able to cope with the sensory overstimulation of crowded places or the interaction required to function within a neurotypical society. Many will struggle to understand the transitions throughout their day – due to receptive language and/or memory difficulties, difficulties with executive function (planning and organisation), inflexibility of thinking and behaviour, sensory needs and high anxiety. For these pupils their goals will center around movement around the school or within the community setting to broaden their experiences and develop their coping strategies. Through its focus on Social Communication and Emotional Regulation, SCERTS reflects the importance of these goals for our young people and gives us a means to measure progression in otherwise hard to record areas.

As such, SCERTS offers a Goal Based Outcomes Approach whereby professionals, parents/carers and, when possible, the young person can select and focus upon individual priorities.

It should be noted that whilst some of the targets within the SCERTS framework are SMART, many of the targets cover a very broad range of skills and it is the responsibility of the team around the child to clearly define these targets and highlight achievable goals. As a result, there may be times when a pupil is working on a larger SCERTS target across more than one year.

An example of a broad target is at the Language Partner stage, in which one key goal is to:

*“Uses a variety of relational meaning in word combination (Symbol Use 5.6)”.*

Within this goal, the pupil must spontaneously use at least 20 different word combinations with at least 5 different utterances in each of the following categories:

**a. modifier + object**

- recurrence + object (more cookie, jump again)
- attribute + object (big shoe, nice cat, dirty hand, one book)
- possessor + possession (mummy shoe, my cup, daddy hair)
- demonstrative + object (this cup, this ball)

- location + object (on table, in box)

**b. negation + object**

- nonexistence (no juice, water gone)
- disappearance (bubbles bye-bye, milk gone)
- rejection (no night-night)
- denial (no baby, not shoe)

**c. agent + action + object**

- action + object (eat cookie, throw ball, drink juice, put table)
- agent + action (mummy go bye-bye, baby sleep, daddy throw, dog sit)
- agent + object (daddy cookie, mummy bottle, dog ball, dolly chair)
- agent + action + object (daddy throw ball, daddy push car, mummy get bottle)

The broadness of some targets means that at the time of assessment a pupil may appear to have made little quantitative gains, though the associated skills gained within this area are substantial.

### **3.5. What does learning look like for young people at The Ribble Autism School?**

This section gives a summary of **some of the main themes** that may be worked upon within each communication stage to provide examples of what learning may involve for our pupils and the achievable goals they may be targeting to support their personalised curriculum. The lists below are by no means exhaustive. The actual targets within these themes can be found within the SCERTS manuals.

**Social Partners are learning to: -**

- Enjoy spending time interacting with another person.
- Make choices of food or activities.
- Make noises which have communicative intent.
- Show another person when they need comfort or support.
- Take turns.
- Communicate their emotions using facial expression, vocalisations and body language.

**Language Partners are learning to: -**

- Spend time with a greater range of people for extended periods with

- increasing numbers of meaningful exchanges.
- Make increasing choices throughout the day – expressing likes and dislikes across a greater range of contexts.
- Name (through oral language, sign language or picture symbols) a wider range of items, people and actions).
- To use language in a creative way.
- Engage in a wider range of play sequences e.g. construction, imaginative, turn-taking games.
- Understand and use symbols or words to express a range of emotions.
- Respond positively to regulatory strategies offered by communication partners (i.e. staff, family).
- To use some appropriate self-regulating strategies.
- Ask for help.
- Ask for a break.

### **Conversational Partners are learning to: -**

- Use conventional communication strategies (verbal and non-verbal) to secure attention and engage with a wide range of partners for increasing periods of time.
- To understand and use a wide range of early and advanced emotions vocabulary to describe and understand the state of themselves and others.
- Sustain appropriate conversations taking into account the rules of discourse and interaction such as, initiation and termination (i.e. how to start and stop a conversation), topic maintenance and shifting (i.e. how to stay on topic and then transition smoothly) awareness of listener knowledge and interests (i.e. being able to sift through information and read cues from others) and awareness of audience stature.
- Engage with peers in play, joint activities and projects bringing in skills of negotiation, compromise and the ability to follow rules.
- Understand and use increasingly complex language structures.
- Respond positively to regulatory strategies offered by communication partners (i.e. staff, family).
- To identify and use appropriate self-regulating strategies.

## **4. Professional Development**

The Transactional Support (the partner support given by staff for pupils to fulfil their objectives) forms an integral part of SCERTS and can also be used to identify training needs and develop staff skill sets. For example, for a pupil who is a social partner, the target for staff may be to:

*“Use visual supports for smooth transition (Learning Support 3.3)”.*

This in turn may prompt further training in the use of visual supports such as schedules, objects of reference, now and next boards etc. for identified staff ensuring

that the team remains skilled in the relevant areas. In addition, staff receive regular training and updates in the use of SCERTS including team workshops to review how targets are being routinely addressed. These are supported by the therapy team.

## **5. Conclusion**

Improving quality of life for young people at The Ribble Autism School is a core, but often difficult to assess, part of the daily curriculum. The SCERTS approach identifies these essential skills and translates them into measurable goals, which can then be defined by the teacher within the pupils' personalised curriculum. It is often found that working on one target area within SCERTS will have an impact across other skills not specifically highlighted. For example, being able to use language strategies to request a break is likely to have a positive impact on the ability to self-regulate/cope in otherwise challenging situations.

This policy should be considered in conjunction with all of Ribble Autism School's policies and local procedures with particular reference to the Curriculum local procedure.

**For more information on how SCERTS is implemented at Ribble Autism School please contact Charlotte Hill, Occupational Therapist or Amy Martin, Speech and Language Therapist.**

[Charlottehill@aspriscs.co.uk](mailto:Charlottehill@aspriscs.co.uk)

[Amymartin@aspriscs.co.uk](mailto:Amymartin@aspriscs.co.uk)