Watchful Waiting is a common technique used across different helping and support professions. It refers to a process where attention and awareness is paid to the family to see if the concerns continue or get worse. It is used ahead of a direct therapeutic or social care intervention.

When would we use watchful waiting?

We would start to use watchful waiting if we had any questions or concerns about a child’s development. The first step is to share your thoughts with colleagues and a manager and then decide what form of watchful waiting you are going to take and how long for before reviewing the original concerns.

What does it look like?

The way you pay attention can be varied. Some people use observations, some use weekly discussion about a child, some check in with parents and talk about how the child is doing generally. You might to a combination of all of these. In any situation you will be considering the child in the context of their current developmental stage. The awareness and noticing of the child by you and other staff is the most important thing.

How do I speak to a family about it?

Building a strong and respectful relationship with families is essential to good working with a child. Checking in the family about how things are going and what they are noticing in their child is part of an ongoing relationship you can build with a family. It is important to think carefully about talking to a family with concerns before you are sure about them. Take into account the relationship you have with the family before deciding how and when to talk with them.

How does it help the child?

Watchful waiting can help a child in the following ways:

- It gives the child and experience of an adult noticing something is different and being curious about what it might be. Children will benefit from this even if the attention is indirect.
- It allows all the child’s needs to be considered by a safe and consistent adult/s
- It doesn’t interfere with the child’s developmental processes
- It encourages reflective practice which is linked to better outcomes for children.