Writing Effective Hypotheses for INclude Referrals
A quick guide for schools

1. What is a hypothesis?

A hypothesis is a working explanation for a child's behaviour. It describes what the behaviour might be communicating and what underlying needs or contexts may be influencing it. A good hypothesis is:

- Needs-focused, not diagnostic
- Open to change as new information emerges
- Useful for guiding support and evaluating what works

2. What to consider when developing your hypothesis

A. Function of the behaviour
- Escape – avoiding a task, demand, situation, or person
- Attention – seeking connection or reassurance
- Tangible gain – accessing something they want
- Sensory needs – seeking or avoiding sensory input

B. Contextual factors
- Transitions, noise, busy spaces
- Relationships with peers and adults
- Curriculum access, frustration, unmet learning needs

C. Unmet needs
- Safety, predictability
- Belonging and identity
- Autonomy and sense of control

D. Protective & risk factors
- Protective: strengths, interests, trusted adults
- Risk: trauma history, SEND, family or socio-economic stressors

E. Multiple perspectives
- Voice of the child
- Teachers/support staff
- Parents/carers
- SENDCo
- Other professionals

3. Structure your hypothesis

We hypothesise that [child's behaviour] occurs in response to [underlying/unmet need or trigger] and is maintained by [relational or environmental factor]. This may be linked to [vulnerabilities or strengths] and is best understood in the context of [broader systemic or situational factors].

4. Example

We hypothesise that James's physical aggression occurs in response to feelings of threat and is maintained by a cycle of negative staff responses and limited opportunities to express himself safely. This may be linked to him witnessing domestic violence at a young age and is best understood in the context of ongoing family conflict and previous school suspensions.