



# SEN in the Early Years: **The Complete Guide**

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# What is SEN?

The term 'SEN' is an incredibly broad spectrum. Children may have physical disabilities, hearing difficulties, learning disabilities, visual disabilities, social and/or emotional difficulties, or special diets.

However, special educational needs are generally grouped into 4 broad areas:

- Communication and interaction
- Cognition and learning
- Social, emotional and mental health
- Sensory and/or physical needs

Of course, how you meet the needs of children with SEN will depend on the complexity and specifics of that individual's needs. However, these practices can be broken down into:

- Systematic – the type of support that your nursery routinely practices, tailored towards children with SEN.
- Specialised – the type of support that is specifically designed to cater for children with higher needs. This could include developing individual learning plans and strategies.

## The EYFS



You'll all know the Early Years Foundation Framework (EYFS) as the framework that providers have to follow in England.

When it comes to children with SEN, there are some specific requirements you must meet. These include:

- Making arrangements to support children with SEN, and giving parents information about how you're going to do it.
- Identifying a staff member with lead responsibility for SEN (a Special Educational Needs Coordinator or SENDCo).
- Discussing developmental concerns with parents and agreeing on how best to support them, considering specialist input if it is needed.
- Ongoing assessment, keeping parents informed about the child's development.



## The Policy



Two main policies ensure children with SEND get greater support, choice and opportunities in the UK. They are:

- **The SEND Code of Practice 2014** - This focuses on the requirements that early years settings must adhere to in regard to SEND children.
- **The Children and Families Act 2014, section 3** - This focuses more on the responsibilities of Local Authorities.

You can find both of these in the resources section at the end of the book. In short, they require that you:

- Promote equal opportunities for children with SEN.
- Focus on inclusive practice.
- Ensure there are no barriers for children with SEN to learn.

# The Essentials

Now that we've established a few of the basics around SEN, it's time to dig into the essential things you need to have in place to provide a welcoming environment for SEN children.

## Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinator (SENCO)

The SENCO's main role in any setting is to oversee the day-to-day implementation of your nursery's SEN provision and policy.

They have a legal duty to follow the SEND code of practice but it is important that this person is not expected to do all the hands-on work with every SEN child in your setting. Instead, they should be focusing on:

- Making sure that all members of staff are clear on what their responsibilities are.
- Supporting teachers in the effective implementation of provision.
- Monitoring the parent-nursery relationship.
- Liaising with services beyond your nursery to give your SEN children the best environment possible.
- Regularly reviewing the nursery environment – discussing improvements, modifications and amendments to the layout.



- Ensuring the setting delivers a broad and balanced curriculum suitable for all children.
- Keeping records of assessment, planning and provision for the review of children with SEN.

### Key workers

Getting the right key workers in place is just as crucial as finding the right SENCO for your setting.

Many SEN children struggle with attachment and as a result, it is much easier for them to get comfortable with one or two people rather than all the staff members in the setting.

The SENCO and each child's key worker need to work in close partnership with the parents or carers to make sure they are totally up-to-date with their child's journey at your nursery.

In turn, the parents need to have a hand in keeping you on top of updates and changes with the child at home.

## Hiring the right SENCO



The person should have:

- A desire to promote equal opportunities for all children and understand that every child, with or without SEN, has the potential to develop and progress.
- Patience, persistence, tenacity and great communication skills.
- Thorough knowledge of general child development.

The person should know:

- How to meet the needs of children with different types of SEN (usually a combination of experience with theory and practice).
- The importance of observations for future assessment and planning.

The person should be:

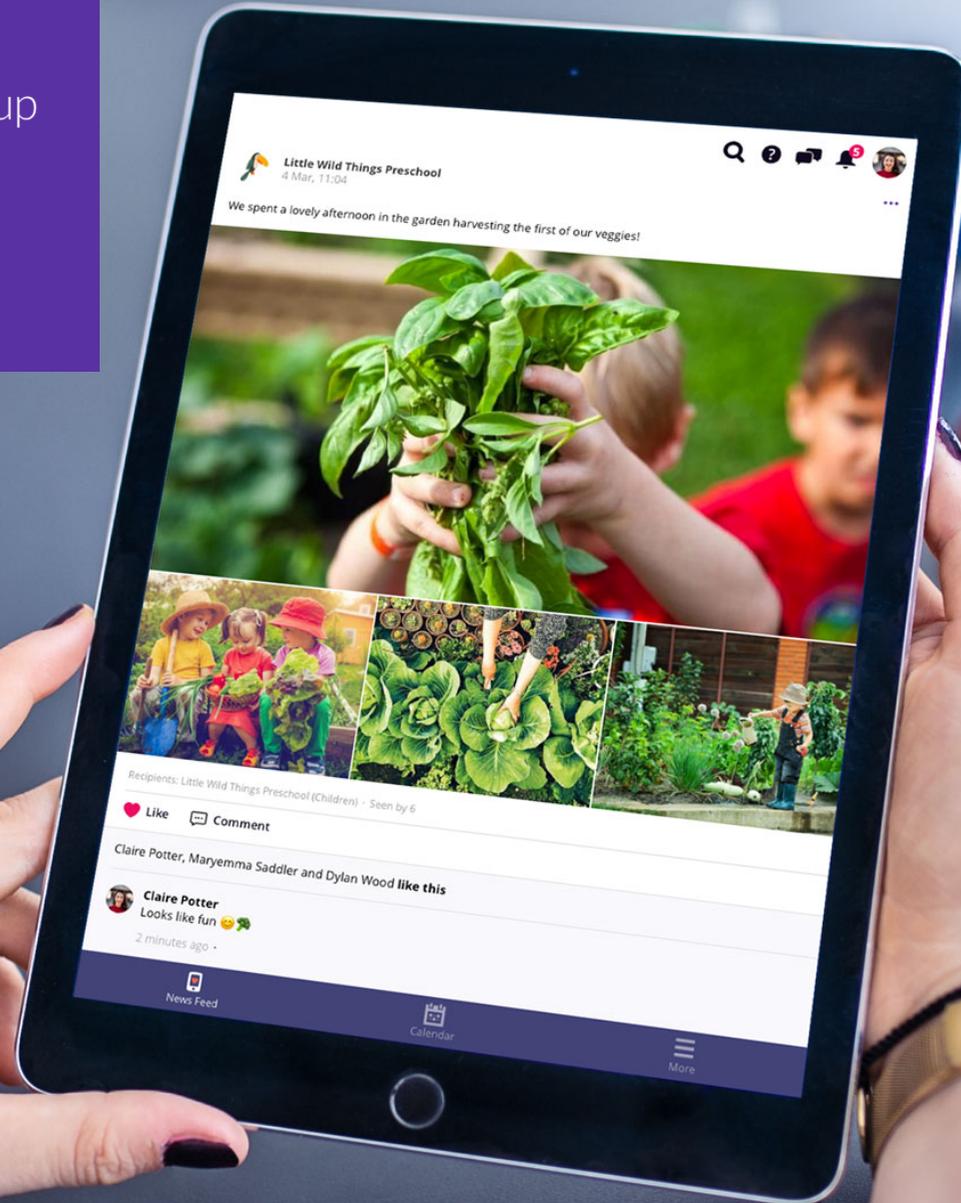
- Very familiar with the SEND Code of Practice.
- Aware of services beyond the nursery that may need to be involved.



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## Assess > Plan > Do > Review

This cycle of action (promoted by The SEND Code of Practice 0-25) is a great way to stay on top of things with your SEN provision.

**Assess** – You can base this on:

- Views of the child and their parents/carers.
- Assessments and observations made by practitioners (focus on those made by the key worker and SENCO).
- Current attainment and previous progress made.
- Comparison of attainment to national averages.

**Plan** – This step must be child-centred:

- Set outcomes for the child, within a timeframe.
- Any necessary adjustments, whether that be outside services or a modification to the syllabus.
- A review scheduled.

**Do** – All practitioners should be made aware of the plan for effective implementation.

**Review** – You should review the provision in your nursery by the date decided in the planning stage. Share this with the child's parents or carers too to keep them informed.

All finished? Time for the cycle to start again. This is how you make sure that improvements are being made each and every time.

## Liaise with services outside the setting

It can be daunting to take on certain children with SEN, especially if their needs are very particular or extreme. But, as practitioners, you can access a large and ever-expanding network of providers. Outside services used by children, their families and your setting could include:

- Speech and language therapy
- Physiotherapy
- Educational psychology
- Portage worker
- Health services

## Early responsiveness/intervention

An early response to a concern, leading to early identification and intervention of SEN are key to helping children to reach their potential.

Some ideas for ways to gather information for early intervention include:

- Information from parents
- The voice of the child
- Observations within the setting
- EYFS outcomes and tracking
- The progress check at age two
- Health and development review at age two



## Getting Parents Involved



Parent engagement always matters in the early years, but when it comes to children with SEN, it's even more crucial. Here are some ideas to do just that:

- **Play sessions** - Allow you to meet the child and family before they start, giving you great insights into the child's preferences and giving yourself a chance to get familiar with the family.
- **Open evenings** - Great for allowing staff to give detailed feedback to parents about progress.
- **Family workshops** - Nursery can be very stressful for SEN children - having opportunities to share experiences with their family can give them the confidence to try something new.
- **Questionnaires** - Reflection is crucial. Anonymous questionnaires can help to get the feedback you need.
- **Termly reports** - Important to keep parents engaged in the child's development and useful to help the transition when the children move on.
- **Parent observations** - Giving parents the chance to submit observations too can give more impact to your teaching and create more meaningful learning journals.

## Your 2 year checks

All early years providers have to give parents a short written summary of their child's development across the three prime areas when they're aged between 24-36 months.

For children with SEN in particular this check should:

- Enable the SENCO and your practitioners to understand the children's needs, with the idea that this will inform the planning of your SEN provision to meet those needs in your nursery.
- Enable parents to understand their child's needs and, with support from practitioners, enhance development at home.



# The Setting

When you're looking at the physical aspects of your setting, the aim should be to modify the environment so that the transition from A to B is easy for as many children as possible.

Here's some ideas to get you started:

- 1 Organise your furniture and equipment in a way that leaves a wide aisle for children to get through.
- 2 There should be a ramp as well as steps or stairs to ensure all children can enjoy the outdoor environment.
- 3 Children will learn best when they are comfortable. Find out (from the child's SENCO or parents) what position the child finds most comfortable, and then make sure this is an option for the child when they're taking part in the activities.
- 4 A key component of any inclusive practice is that you ensure that all equipment is steady. Choose either heavily-weighted items that can't be knocked over or secure loose items to the table or floor.
- 5 Well-lit rooms are much easier for children with sight problems to navigate around. Make sure to have as much natural light coming into the rooms as possible.
- 6 Make use of sound-making objects like a chime or bell in the different rooms in your setting. These sounds will help children who struggle with their sight to get to know their surroundings.
- 7 Although the reorganisation of a room is important for a high quality continuous provision, try to avoid doing this too often. SEN Children, in particular, need to familiarise themselves with your environment before they can really engage and enjoy learning.
- 8 Whether you're doing an activity in the classroom or outside, make sure there is a 'safe place' for the children to calm down. Children with SEN that get anxious or restless can be taken here by their key worker to allow them to settle again.



# The Teaching

We all know that the key to having a great nursery is having great people working in it, and even more so when you want to build a welcoming, inclusive environment for children with SEN.

Here's a few ideas to pass down to your practitioners:

## Choice

Giving children the right number of choices is crucial. Not enough and they won't be able to pick something that engages them, too many and it could be a stressor. The better you know the child, the easier it'll be to find this balance.

## Varied communication styles

Gestures, noises, facial expressions, words - there is more than one way to communicate with children. Utilising all of these is key to a more inclusive practice.

## Quiet time

However well you plan and execute your inclusive practice and teaching, children with SEN may get tired, fed up, or bored more quickly than other children. Quiet time is really important to schedule into your teaching schedule, to give the children time to switch off and relax.



## Repetition

We all know that practice makes perfect. For young children, repetition forms the basis for learning, skill development, and eventually accomplishment. For children with SEN, more practice may be needed to master a new skill.

## Transitioning

Give children a forewarning that a transition is coming up. This will give them the opportunity to finish up in their own time and reduce the stress that can come with changing activities.

## Between time

Make sure there's always something to do for children in between planned activities. Patience can be difficult for children with SEN, so make sure there's something for them to do to ensure a smooth transition.

## Cooperative learning

You need to provide opportunities for SEN children to play near normally developing children doing the same or similar activity. Even if they're doing slightly different things, they can always learn from one another and share learning experiences.

## Everyday opportunities

Not all learning takes place during the pre-planned activities. Take lunch - you can ask children to match the colour of their cup and plate or give a helping hand to prepare for snack time.

## Labelling

Label as much as you can in large clear letters, photographs, or even braille. This will help your children learn the names of items or objects in the setting, giving them a headstart with their early years literacy.



# Activities

Looking for inspiration? Here's some great sensory play activities to try with your children.

## VEGETABLE PRINTING

Use cut up vegetables and different coloured paint to stamp onto paper. Brushes, sponges or ice lolly sticks can be used too!

## SCULPTING PLAYDOUGH

How about making your own playdough for children? Use herbs and spices like rosemary or nutmeg to stimulate their smell while you're at it.

## SORTING ACTIVITIES

You can use a muffin tin or egg carton and some different coloured cereal and encourage children to place different colours in different compartments.

## STICKERS

On a large piece of paper, you can draw a wiggly line from one end to the other. Children can use stickers along the line too in order to test their hand-eye coordination.

## NON-GLASS MIRRORS

Mirrors can make self-exploration really fun, especially ones that have a normal mirror on one side and then a warped mirror on the other. This helps the child's social and emotional development as well as their body awareness. They can practice their expressions in the normal mirror and then giggle at themselves in the other.

## FLANNEL BOARDS

Flannel boards help with the teaching of visual literacy. Children learn to look and construct meaning from objects. Felt is the most common material to use, but there are plenty of different materials to choose from!

## SAND AND WATER PLAY

Sand and water play introduces concepts such as sinking, floating, and changes of state (dry to wet). Children use hand-eye coordination and their fine motor skills to funnel, sift, scoop, and pour.



# Physical Exercise and SEN

Physical exercise and development are some of the most important things we give children during their time in the early years. And it can be one of the most difficult things to focus on when you have children with SEN.

Of course, SEN is a huge spectrum and you'll need to assess each child's ability in terms of physical exercise. But hopefully you'll find some of these ideas worth tweaking and adjusting to the children in your setting:

## Music

Unlike language, Music actually activates every single subsystem of the brain and it will get them moving! Other benefits it offers for SEN children include:

- It's a motivator – Try singing a song to a child whilst completing a challenging activity with them.
- Music has been proven to release 'dopamine' (the mood-enhancing stuff) and 'Oxytocin' (also known as the 'cuddle hormone') in the brain.
- If a child struggles with words and speaking, music can be a great non-verbal way to communicate.
- Making music with instruments can help children develop a great deal of skills as it's a multi-sensory experience for them.

## Plant a garden

Planting a garden will, amongst other things:

- Create a great sensory experience.
- Provide hours of enjoyment.
- Teach delayed gratification and patience – since results normally show after 2-4 weeks.
- Support children's emotional development – looking after a plant is a fantastic opportunity for children to learn about the life cycle and gain empathy skills.

## Sensory Play



The benefits of sensory play are high for all children, but for children with SEN it can be particularly powerful.

Sensory play is defined as an activity that stimulates at least one of a child's five senses - touch, smell, taste, sight and hearing. Any activity that engages movement and balance counts as sensory play. Think about when children are splashing in muddy puddles, or feeling the cake mixture in the mixing bowl – this is sensory play in action!



## Sensory bins

Sensory bins are often good for children with SEN because they provide a unique opportunity to experience play without having to be fully immersed in the experience. They can stop at any point.

Because some SEN children have trouble with sensory activities, it's important not to overload the bins. Keep it simple and you'll provide them with plenty of enjoyment without overwhelming them.

## Dancing

Using music and props to encourage children with SEN to dance is a great way to broaden their imagination in an engaging and exciting way. It's great exercise and has a whole load of social benefits, helping them to express themselves and gain confidence while doing so.

## Yoga

Although yoga is a physical activity, it is naturally noncompetitive and can be very calming for children with SEN. It's good for concentration and focus, reducing stress, increasing self-acceptance, boosting self-esteem and can be powerful for children with aggressive behaviour or hyperactivity. If you want to find out more, check out the link to our article at the end of this guide.



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# More Reading

Interested in finding out more about SEN and the early years? Here's some expanded versions of some of the articles featured in this guide, along with some external resources that might help you out:

1. [The SEN toolbox: Getting Your SEN Provision Right](#) - This article explains all the things you need to have in place before you get started with your SEN provision.
2. [Your SEN Toolbox: Inclusive Practice For Every SEN Child](#) - This features expanded sections about how to improve your setting, teaching, and activities for children with SEN.
3. [Physical Exercise and SEN: Early Years Activities](#) - More information about the physical activities we mentioned in that last section
4. [SEN and Yoga: Why Nurseries Should Consider Yoga For Kids](#) - Interested in the benefits of yoga for SEN children? This guide will run you through everything you need to know.
5. [The Children and Families Act 2014](#) - This is an overview of the Children and Families Act, which covers young children with SEN and disability.
6. [The SEND Code of Practice 2014](#) - Government guidance on the code of practice that public bodies must follow with regards to SEND.
7. [Government Guidance on SEND](#) - The gov.uk site has a great overview and plenty of helpful resources with regards to children who have SEN.
8. [Council for Disabled Children on Early Intervention](#) - This policy briefing is interesting if you want to learn more about why early intervention matters.
9. [The National Association of Special Educational Needs \(Nasen\)](#) - Nasen are a charity and membership organisation who support practitioners in helping children with SEND



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