



Child Development, Inclusion and Family Engagement

A practical guide for early
years professionals

Introduction

Why getting all three right changes everything

Bring child development, inclusion and family engagement together as one joined-up approach, rather than three separate boxes to tick, and the results for children are measurably better, which is exactly what this guide shows you how to achieve in your everyday practice.

Every child deserves a setting where they can grow, belong and thrive - as an early years professional, you already know that. What's harder is joining up the three things that make it happen, since child development, inclusion and family engagement tend to get treated as separate boxes to tick when really, they work best as one connected approach. Get that join-up right, and children's confidence grows faster, their learning goes deeper, and the families who trust you with their children feel like part of the journey too.

This guide is for you if you manage a nursery, lead a room, or work as a key person and want to move past compliance into practice that makes a genuine difference. We'll walk through what child development looks like in an inclusive EYFS setting, how to build family partnerships that go further than a quick chat at the school gate, and how to bring all three strands together in your day-to-day work.

Get this right and every child benefits, including those with SEND or from disadvantaged backgrounds, who often have the most to gain from that joined-up start.



1. Understanding Child Development in the Early Years

What child development actually means in your setting

Child development covers everything a child grows through between birth and age 5, spanning physical, cognitive, language, social and emotional growth; and the EYFS groups these into 7 areas of learning: 3 prime areas (communication and language, physical development, and personal, social and emotional development) and 4 specific areas (literacy, mathematics, understanding the world, and expressive arts and design).



You're not just watching this happen; you're actively shaping it, because the environment you create, the relationships you build and the activities you plan all have a direct effect on how children develop. A child who feels safe and understood in your setting will explore more freely, take healthy risks in their learning and build the self-regulation skills that everything else depends on.

There's no single path through development, and two 3-year-olds in the same room can sit at very different points across the EYFS areas while both doing well. Your job is to know each child as an individual, understanding their strengths, interests, barriers and next steps, and to plan around them accordingly.

KEY POINT

The 3 prime areas of the EYFS - communication and language, physical development, and personal, social and emotional development - are the foundation everything else builds on, so if a child is struggling with a prime area, they'll find the specific areas harder to access, which is why the prime areas deserve priority.

FRAMEWORK UPDATE

The [EYFS statutory framework](#) was refreshed for September 2026, with updates to safer sleep practice, a new requirement for providers to have regard to screen use, and further safeguarding clarifications. Check that your setting's policies are aligned to the current version before you use this guide for induction or training.

The role of relationships in development

The key person relationship might be the single most powerful tool you have, because a child with a secure attachment to their key person develops better across every area of the EYFS, not just PSED. They feel safe enough to try new things, make mistakes and ask for help, and that security builds through consistent, warm, responsive interactions, day after day.

None of this needs grand gestures. It comes down to noticing a child's mood when they arrive, responding to how they're trying to communicate, getting down to their level and following their lead in play. These small, repeated moments of connection are what build attachment, and attachment is what builds development.

2. What Inclusive Practice Looks Like Day to Day

Moving from inclusion as policy to inclusion as practice

Inclusion means every child takes a full part in the life of your setting, not just present in the room but genuinely included in activities, routines, relationships and learning, so it's worth designing your environment deliberately, in a way that means no child is routinely left out, withdrawn, or given a watered-down version of the curriculum.



Start with an honest audit of where you stand today. Can a child in a wheelchair get to every area? Do your books and displays reflect the families in your setting and the wider world, and are your activities open-ended enough for children at different developmental stages? It's also worth asking whether you've adapted how you communicate for children with limited verbal language.

REMEMBER

Inclusion isn't about treating every child the same; it's about giving every child what they need to take part fully, whether that means extra support in some cases or removing a barrier in others. Both count as inclusion.

Approaches that work across settings

- Graduated support - offer the same activity with different levels of adult support, so every child can access it at the right level
- Visual schedules - daily picture timetables help children with SEND, children with EAL, and younger children navigating transitions
- Sensory-aware spaces - a quiet corner, less visual clutter or access to fidget tools can be the difference between a child engaging or becoming overwhelmed
- Open-ended resources - loose parts, natural materials and unstructured creative materials let children of different abilities play alongside each other, genuinely together

The principle behind all of these is the same: design for the child who needs it most, and practice improves for everyone.

Addressing unconscious bias

Inclusive practice also means looking honestly at your own assumptions, since practitioners can hold different expectations of children based on gender, ethnicity or socioeconomic background without ever meaning to. Regular reflective supervision, peer observation and honest team conversations about bias aren't always comfortable, but they matter, and the most inclusive settings build a culture where practitioners feel safe to challenge each other and where leaders model that openness first.

3. Engaging Families as Partners in Child Development

Why family engagement is not optional

Children whose families are genuinely involved in their early years education develop better across every area of the EYFS, arriving at school more ready to learn, with stronger language and better self-regulation. That effect is strongest for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, where good family engagement can close developmental gaps significantly.

Families aren't passive recipients of updates. They're the experts on their own child, holding knowledge about temperament, home routines, cultural context and history that no practitioner can fully replicate, so when you treat families as genuine partners, you don't just build better relationships; you build better outcomes for children.

What genuine partnership looks like

- Two-way communication - not just telling families what happened at nursery, but asking what they've noticed at home, what their child's into right now, and what's changed in the family's world. Feed that straight into your planning.
- A welcoming environment - staff who greet families by name, displays that reflect home cultures and languages, and policies written in plain English.
- Multiple ways to communicate - not every family can make a morning event, reply to a written note, or check an app. Ask families how they want to hear from you, then do it their way.

IMPORTANT

Family engagement doesn't start at drop-off; it starts at enrolment, and how you welcome a family in those first weeks sets the tone for the whole relationship. Take time to understand their hopes, worries and expectations before their child even starts with you.

Reaching families who feel distant

Some families are hard to reach, not because they don't care, but because they're facing real barriers, whether that's a parent working 3 jobs with no spare time for a Thursday morning stay-and-play, or a family with a difficult history with statutory services who might not trust professionals easily.

Try reaching out differently. Home visits, where they're appropriate and safe, build a different kind of trust than anything you can offer in a setting, and community link workers or family support services can bridge gaps you can't bridge alone. Sometimes, simply asking 'what would help you feel more connected to what we do here?' opens a door that nothing else would.

The families who are hardest to reach are often, in the end, the ones whose children stand to gain the most from that connection.



4. Supporting Children with SEND Through Inclusive Family Engagement

The family at the centre of SEND support

For a child with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND), the [SEND Code of Practice \(2015\)](#) asks for a genuinely collaborative relationship between your setting and their family, with the graduated approach of assess, plan, do, review involving families at every stage rather than simply informing them once decisions have already been made.

In practice, that means sharing concerns early and honestly, listening properly to what families tell you about their child's experience at home, and co-producing targets on a SEN support plan that reflect the family's priorities alongside your professional judgement.

WORTH REMEMBERING

If you have concerns about a child's development, talk to the family early, because putting off a difficult conversation to avoid distress almost always makes things harder later, and most families feel relieved that someone's noticed and wants to help.

Keeping records that actually help

Make your records specific, noting what you observed, in what context, and when, rather than reaching for a label. Saying 'Joel moves between activities after around 3 minutes' tells a story, while saying 'he can't sit still' tells you nothing useful, and it's this level of specific detail that leads to specific, effective support.

ON THE HORIZON

The government's SEND White Paper, published in February 2026, proposes Individual Support Plans, national inclusion standards, a fast-track pathway to Education, Health and Care Plans for under-5s with complex needs, and closer links to Best Start Family Hubs. These are proposals following consultation, not yet in force - any legislative change is not expected before September 2029. For now, keep working to the SEND Code of Practice (2015) and the graduated approach, and watch for updates as the reforms progress.



5. Practical Steps to Strengthen Your Approach

Child development, inclusion and family engagement isn't a 'project' you finish; it's a practice you keep developing over time, and here are 5 steps any setting can take this week to move it forward.

1. Audit your environment for inclusion - walk through your setting with an inclusion lens. What barriers do you notice? Bring families and children into the process.
2. Strengthen your key person practice - look at how key persons talk with their key children's families. Are those conversations genuinely two-way?
3. Create more entry points for families - a short video on your app, a text with a photo, or an invitation to share something from home can reach families who'd never make it to a morning event.
4. Build reflective practice into your team - regular team meetings with case discussion and peer observation will improve inclusive practice faster than training on its own.
5. Use CPD strategically - identify where your team's knowledge has gaps around SEND, EAL or family engagement, and find training that addresses those gaps directly.



TOP TIP TO GET STARTED

You don't need to get inclusion right before you start; you just need to start. Pick one idea from this guide, try it this week, reflect on what happened and adjust, then pick the next one. That's what professional development looks like in practice.

Key Takeaways

Child development, inclusion and family engagement work best as one joined-up approach rather than three separate jobs, so here's what to carry forward:

- Development happens in relationships. The key person relationship is your most powerful tool for supporting every child's progress across the EYFS.
- Inclusion is designed, not assumed. A genuinely inclusive setting actively removes barriers - environmental, communicative and cultural - rather than expecting children to adapt.
- Families are partners, not passengers. They hold knowledge about their child that you need. Build real two-way relationships and treat their input as essential to your planning.
- SEND support belongs to the whole team. The graduated approach works best when families, key persons, SENCOs and external professionals all bring an honest, current picture.
- Reflective practice drives change. Noticing, questioning and adjusting your practice, day after day, is what makes the real difference.

Want to go further? We're here to help.

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