



# Looking at neurodivergence and SEND with fresh eyes

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If you work in early years, you already know that no two children are the same. Some love noise and movement; others prefer quiet corners. Some speak early, and often, others communicate with their eyes, bodies or gestures long before their words appear. Many of these natural variations are part of what we now call neurodiversity – the understanding that there is no single ‘right’ kind of brain or way of processing the world, but there is a lot of diversity in humans. This affects how we think, feel, move and learn. Within this, some children will also meet the criteria for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and may need additional or different support from their peers.

This guide invites you to look at neurodivergence and SEND with fresh eyes. Instead of asking “How can we make this child fit the system?”, we now want to ask, “How can we shape our environment, attitudes and practice so this child can thrive exactly as they are?” This is the big shift in attitude that is happening in our society and educational institutions, and not before time.

## Neurodiversity, SEND and the legal picture in early years

Although the principles of inclusion and early intervention are shared across the UK, each nation has its own legal framework and guidance for supporting neurodivergent and disabled children. For early years practitioners and nursery managers, understanding these differences can help ensure that children receive the right support wherever they are.

### England

In England, the “SEND Code of Practice (0–25)” makes it clear that early years providers must use a graduated approach to meet needs and work in partnership with families. It sits alongside the Equality Act 2010, which requires settings not to discriminate against disabled children and to make reasonable adjustments, so they are not placed at a substantial disadvantage.

#### Guidance for early years settings emphasises:

- A child-centred approach to assessment and support, focusing on the child’s strengths rather than their disabilities
- Early identification through ongoing observation and the two-year progress check
- Working with other professionals where needed, such as health visitors, portage and specialist teams
- Access to an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) where needed through the Local Authority



## Scotland

Scotland does not use the language of “SEND”. Instead, children who need additional help are supported under the Additional Support for Learning (ASL) framework, guided by the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 and its amendments.

### Key principles include:

- Any child may need additional support at any point, for any reason, including disability, family circumstances, trauma, or language acquisition
- Early years support is delivered within the national GIRFEC (Getting It Right For Every Child) approach, which focuses on well-being, early intervention and multi-agency working
- Practitioners use the SHANARRI well-being indicators (Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected, Responsible, Included) to assess needs and plan support
- If required, children can receive a Co-ordinated Support Plan (CSP) involving multiple agencies
- This creates a flexible, holistic system that recognises that a child’s needs do not have to be “diagnosed” before additional help is provided.

## Wales

Wales reformed its system in 2021, replacing “SEN” with Additional Learning Needs (ALN) under the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act 2018.

### Important points for early years settings include:

- The new system applies from birth to 25, ensuring continuity across education stages
- Children who need support receive an Individual Development Plan (IDP) which replaces all previous documents (IEPs, statements, etc)
- IDPs must be created in collaboration with families and regularly reviewed
- The focus is on inclusive practice, early identification and person-centred planning, with a strong emphasis on the voice of the child
- Wales is widely recognised for its ambitious reforms and its commitment to removing barriers and simplifying processes for families.



## Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland continues to use the term Special Educational Needs (SEN), guided by the SEN Framework, which includes the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 and the SEN Code of Practice.

### Key features include:

- A five-stage approach to assessment and provision, beginning with early identification within the setting and moving to more formal stages if needed
- The Education Authority (EA) offers specialist support teams for early years, including autism advisory services, behaviour support and speech and language teams
- Like the rest of the UK, there is a strong emphasis on working in partnership with parents and ensuring reasonable adjustments under disability law
- The system is currently under reform, with a focus on improving timeliness and consistency of support across regions.

### Although terminology differs across the nations, several shared values run through all four systems:

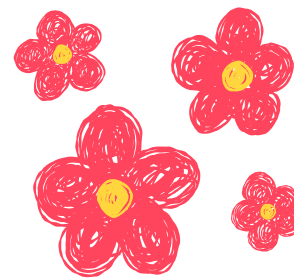
- Children do not need a diagnosis to receive help
- Inclusion is a right, not an add-on
- Early identification and early support lead to better long-term outcomes
- Families should be involved as equal partners
- Support should be strengths-based, person-centred and flexible
- Removing barriers in the environment is just as important as individual strategies





**For practitioners, the message is reassuringly consistent wherever you are:**

- See the whole child
- Listen deeply
- Understand and reduce stress and barriers
- Build on strengths
- Work with families
- Consistently challenge discrimination in all its forms
- Create a setting where every child feels they belong



The legal frameworks are clear. The challenge for early years settings is how to live this and embed it into day-to-day practice.

## Moving from 'fixing the child' to changing the focus

As the legal frameworks adapt, newer resources, such as the Anna Freud "Guide to neurodiversity in the early years" (2023), highlight the need to move away from ableist views that see neurodivergence and SEND as a deficit, and instead focus on inclusion, belonging and acceptance.

Many practitioners still feel pressure to "normalise" children, so they fit the expected developmental pattern. This often comes from external forces such as curriculum expectations, parental fears or anxiety over quality inspections rather than from practitioners' own values.

**A neurodiversity-affirming approach invites practitioners to:**

- See neurodivergent and disabled children as different, not deficient
- Focus on reducing barriers and distress, rather than trying to eliminate differences
- Ask "what does this behaviour communicate?" rather than "how do we stop it?"

Middletown Centre for Autism's early years guidance encourages goals that are meaningful, suitable, engaging and flexible for the child, rather than simply ticking boxes on a developmental checklist.

When the lens shifts in this way, the question becomes: "What needs to change in the environment, routine or expectations so that this child can feel safe, regulated and included?" Which is very different from trying to change or 'cure' the child.

The Autism Education Trust (AET) framework for early years identifies 4 themes and 8 principles related to neurodivergence, which are shown in the diagram below for early years practitioners to address. There are other models which you can follow, but rethinking your approach to the issues here would be beneficial.



Let's look at **(and rethink)** some of the main areas of early years practice which directly affect the experience of neurodivergent and SEND children. **These are:**

1. Stress and sensory experiences
2. Routines and expectations
3. Belonging and positive identity
4. Communication and behaviour
5. Assessment and paperwork



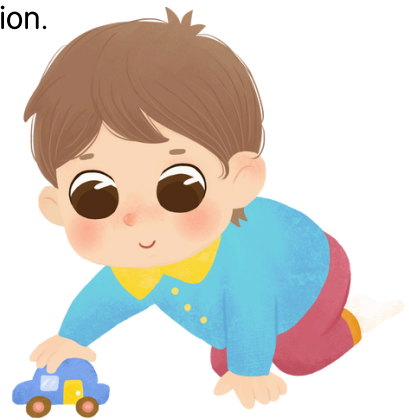
## 1. Understanding stress and rethinking sensory experiences

Many neurodivergent and SEND children experience the world as more intense, unpredictable or confusing than their peers. Noise, bright lights, busy displays or strong smells can be overwhelming and lead to what adults might label as “challenging behaviour”.

Strengths-based approaches and good autism practice training for early years both highlight the importance of understanding sensory profiles to support children’s emotional regulation.

### Practical steps could include:

- **Creating low-arousal spaces**
  - o Neutral or softer colours
  - o Reduced visual clutter
  - o Dimmed or indirect lighting where possible
- **Offering sensory choices**
  - o A quiet tent, den or cosy corner
  - o Fidget toys, chewable jewellery or textured items
  - o Access to movement breaks, such as a rocking chair, trampette or heavy lifting activities
- **Adjusting noise levels**
  - o Soft furnishings to absorb sound
  - o Smaller group times for circle or story time
  - o Noise-reducing headphones available if helpful



These adjustments do not just benefit neurodivergent children. Many other children (and staff) feel calmer and more able to focus in a thoughtfully designed environment.



## Practical questions for your setting

- Are there genuinely low-arousal areas available at all times?
- Could a neurodivergent child find a space that feels safe, predictable and not overwhelming?
- Do your staff understand the impact of sensory overwhelm on children's behaviour?

## 2. Rethinking routines and expectations

Many early years routines have been designed around the needs of the group and the ease of the practitioner rather than the needs of the individual child. For neurodivergent and SEND children, transitions, group times, and unstructured periods can be especially hard. So, rethinking how you encourage involvement and inclusion for all children is a valuable exercise.

**A fresh, strengths-based, neuro-affirming approach to routines might include:**

### Enhancing predictability

- Visual timetables at child height
- "Now and next" boards for children who find change difficult
- Clear warnings before transitions, using visual or auditory cues

### Flexible participation

- Offering alternative ways to join in, such as sitting on a cushion at the edge of the circle
- Allowing movement breaks during longer group sessions
- Recognising that looking away, drawing, or fiddling may actually help some children to listen and is not a sign of "naughtiness"

### Reducing unnecessary demands

- Questioning whether a particular routine (for example, insisting all children sit cross-legged for long periods) is truly essential, or whether it exists primarily for the ease of the practitioner or group and may unintentionally exclude some children
- Prioritising emotional safety and regulation over "perfect" compliance

These adjustments align with national and local guidance on 'ordinarily available provision' in early years. Reasonable adjustments and flexible practices are now expected as part of universal and targeted support for all children.



## Practical questions for your setting

- Where and when are children most stressed, dysregulated or distressed?
- Do all staff understand the needs and difficulties of all children?
- What could you change about timing, group size, sensory load or expectations in those moments?

## 3. Building belonging and positive identity

Children quickly pick up how adults talk about them. If they only ever hear words like “behind”, “delay” or “problem”, they may internalise the idea that something is wrong with who they are. So, it’s important to rethink the language you use as well as the way that children’s progress is discussed with colleagues, other professionals and parents/carers.

### A neurodiversity-informed approach encourages practitioners to:

- Use respectful, non-shaming language about differences
- Talk about strengths, interests and talents alongside support needs
- Show children role models with different bodies, minds and communication styles in books, displays and stories



### In practice, this might look like:

- Celebrating a child’s deep interest in trains, animals or numbers as a strength that can be woven into their learning
- Explaining to peers that “everyone’s brain is different” and that some children may need headphones, extra breaks or a buddy
- Consistently challenging discriminatory comments and ensuring staff understand the impact of ableism on children’s sense of self, which may need more staff awareness or training to ensure your approach is mirrored by everyone

Creating a sense of belonging cannot be created by a single policy that sits on a shelf or in a computer file. It needs consistent and applied practice, built on hundreds of daily micro-interactions to ensure that children always feel seen, accepted and valued.





## Working with families as equal partners

Parents and carers of neurodivergent and SEND children often arrive at your door already carrying a heavy load: worry, guilt, fear of judgement and sometimes previous negative experiences with services and other settings. The SEND Code of Practice is clear that families must be involved in decisions and that their expertise about their child should be respected.

### In your setting, looking at these relationships with fresh eyes could mean:

- Making more time for genuine listening, not just information-gathering
- Asking families about their child's sensory preferences, interests and what helps them feel calm, then using that knowledge in practical adaptations in the setting
- Sharing observations in a strengths-based way before talking about concerns
- Being transparent about processes such as support plans, referrals, Early Help assessments or EHCP and similar applications

Families are more likely to trust your professional judgement if they feel you are on their side, rather than judging their child for not conforming to a rigid norm.



### Practical questions for your setting

- How do we talk about children's differences in staff rooms, handovers and reports?
- Would we be happy for a child or parent to overhear our conversations?



## 4. Rethinking your understanding of communication and behaviour

For some children with SEND or neurodivergent profiles, speech may be delayed or different. Others may speak fluently but struggle with social communication, processing speed or understanding complex language. Best practice guidance from the Department for Education emphasises child-centred assessments that look at the whole child and values all forms of communication.

### You can support communication by:

- Using simple, concrete language and pausing so children have extra processing time
- Backing up spoken language with visuals such as objects, photos, pictures or symbols
- Using gestures, signs (such as Makaton) or communication boards
- Acknowledging and responding to non-verbal communication like eye gaze, body language or vocalisations
- Deeply understanding that all behaviour is the child's way of trying to communicate their needs or discomfort, and getting rid of the idea of 'naughty children' once and for all

### It can help to ask yourself:

"If this child could tell me what they need in this moment, what might they say?"  
This mindset naturally leads us to respond with empathy and curiosity, rather than control.

### Practical questions for your setting

- Do you give enough processing time and visual support?
- How do you record and value non-verbal communication?
- Do you still refer to or think of children as 'naughty' even if you no longer use that word?



## 5. Rethinking assessment and paperwork

The DfE's strengths-based SEND assessment resources for early years encourage practitioners to focus on what the child can do and what matters to them, not just what they are currently struggling with.

**When drawing up support plans or contributing to reports, try to:**

- Start with the child's strengths and interests
- Describe difficulties in neutral, factual language rather than value-laden terms
- Assume that there are ways to facilitate inclusion rather than finding difficulties that prevent it
- Link targets to meaningful outcomes for the child (for example, "feeling safe at snack time")
- Involve the child and family in deciding priorities, as far as possible
- Be prepared to continuously re-evaluate interventions, policies and procedures to improve them



Using tools such as one-page profiles or child-centred planning meetings, as recommended in AET training, can help keep the child's voice at the centre of your paperwork, and not allow it to become lost.

### Staff development and leadership

Creating a truly inclusive, neuro-affirming culture is not the job of one enthusiastic SENCO alone. It needs a whole-team commitment and leadership support.

**Current good practice suggests that leaders should:**

- Ensure all staff, including lunch and support staff, access regular SEND and neurodiversity CPD to update their ideas and employ evidence-based best practice
- Use frameworks such as the AET Early Years Standards to review and improve practice
- Embed inclusion into supervision, appraisal and quality improvement plans



- Review policies and everyday routines through the lens of equality, making reasonable adjustments the norm
- Model respectful language and a learning mindset when discussing children's needs
- When leaders show that inclusion is not an optional extra, but at the heart of quality early years provision, staff feel more confident to adapt and experiment.

### Practical questions for your setting

- Do families of neurodivergent and SEND children feel genuinely welcome, listened to and informed?
- If you answered 'yes' to the above question, ask yourself, how you know? What have we actually asked them?

This kind of reflective practice moves us away from "fixing children" and towards the continuous improvement of the systems around them.

## The SEND/neurodivergent political debates

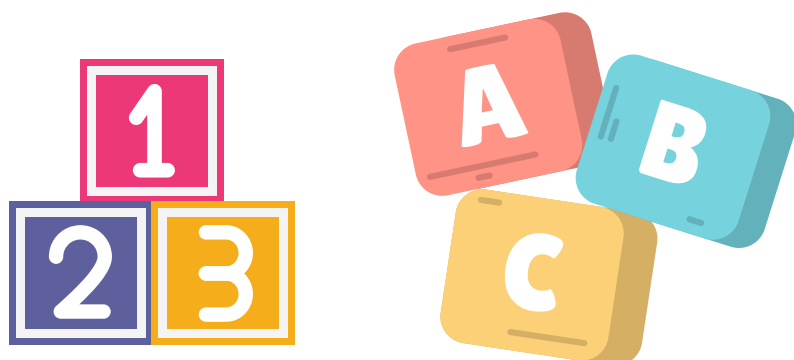
Across the UK, there is growing recognition that systems designed to support children with SEND, ALN or ASN are under significant strain.

In England, parliamentary committees, local authorities and national charities have raised concerns about rising demand, long waits for assessments, funding pressures and inconsistent provision, particularly for early support. Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland face similar challenges despite having different legal frameworks.

Investigations in Wales and Northern Ireland have highlighted families struggling to access timely help, while teacher unions across all four nations report that children are presenting with increasingly complex needs, and settings do not always have the resources to meet them.

Scotland's ASL system and Wales's ALN reforms are widely praised for being more holistic, yet both countries still face pressures linked to staffing, specialist services and funding.

Taken together, the evidence shows that there are UK-wide concerns which are strengthening the call for early intervention, better resourcing and more inclusive practice in nurseries and early years settings everywhere.





## Conclusion - seeing the child, not a label

Looking at neurodivergence and SEND with fresh eyes is ultimately about love, respect and curiosity. **It means:**

- Recognising neurodiversity as a natural part of human variation and acknowledging uniqueness as the norm, not selectively labelling some as an 'odd one out'
- Understanding our legal duties and using them as a floor, not a ceiling
- Designing environments, routines and interactions that reduce stress and increase safety
- Working with families and other professionals as partners
- Keeping the child's voice, strengths and well-being at the heart of everything

When we change our attitudes and our practice, children do not have to fight to fit in. They can simply arrive as themselves and find that there is already a place for the way their brain and body are in the world.

For many neurodivergent and SEND children, that sense of acceptance in the early years may be the most powerful 'intervention' of all.

## References and further reading

- [SEND Code of Practice: 0-25 years](#)
- [SEND Guide for Early Years Settings](#)
- [National Portage Association](#)
- [Guide to Neurodiversity in the Early Years – Anna Freud](#)
- [A Strengths Based Approach to Neurodiversity](#)
- [Middletown Centre for Autism Autism](#)
- [Education Trust Framework](#)



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