

COMMUNICATING WITH FAMILIES ABOUT SEND

BEST PRACTICE GUIDE

This guide sets out best practice for communicating with young people and their families about Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). It has been designed to help all staff working in a school or education setting, including SENCOs.

The guide has been developed by a city SENCO, Sheffield's Parent Carer Forum, Sheffield's Special Educational Needs and Disability Information, Advice and Support Service (SSENDIAS) and the local authority. It uses feedback from young people, parents and carers.

Young people in Sheffield have told us to:

- Be clear and say what you mean
- Use clear language, images and videos
- Remember communication goes both ways
- Use the types of communication people need, including sign language, Braille and Makaton
- Hold child friendly meetings - incorporating the points above

Parents and carers in Sheffield have told us they need:

- Empathy
- Patience
- Honesty
- Compassion
- Transparency

TOP TIPS:

1. Parents and carers of children with SEND want regular communication but this needs to be done sensitively:

- People can feel anxious when a teacher asks to speak to them at the end of the day, and can worry about what other parents think of them and their child.
- Where possible, try and let parents and carers know you would like to speak to them in advance - e.g. with a quick call or text message. It can be better than asking 'for a word' in front of others.
- Think about where you will speak. Five minutes in a room is more private than a conversation in the school yard.
- Consider if it is appropriate for the child to be present. Or would it help for someone else to be with the child while you are talking?



2. Let parents and carers know how their child is getting on socially and with their wellbeing, as well as academically:

- This is really important to parents and carers of children with SEND.
- If an incident happens at school, try to make sure the parents or carers are told about it. How much to communicate is a difficult balance. But this can save worry at home.

3. Make sure parents and carers know they can contact you about their child:

- Try to make time for ad hoc conversations when the parent or carer needs it.
- Parents and carers know their child best. Take the concerns they raise seriously, including how the child is at home. Act promptly and appropriately when concerns are raised.

4. Think about how you will communicate:

- What will suit your families best? What do they want to know? Try to agree this.
- Check if a parent or carer is alright with what you are saying. Questions like “does this sound alright to you?”, “are you okay with this?” and “are you happy we do this?” can really help.
- Make sure you are clear on communication follow up. Provide a note or email summarising what was said and ask the family to come back to you if they need anything else.
- If you are emailing, remember it is harder to judge someone’s tone.
- If you are using technology during the meeting (to write up notes) remember to keep using good communication skills: active listening, eye contact, body language etc.

5. Think about how your families will understand what you are saying:

- Think about the parent or carer’s needs - do they have hearing needs, language needs, any disabilities, any help to understand things?

- Keep language simple, focus on “what does this look like for my child?”
- Be aware of terminology or acronyms used and make sure you explain it.
- Use pictures and diagrams where possible.
- If you need an interpreter, it can help to brief them in advance about what the meeting will cover.

6. Be specific:

- Explain to parents and carers what you are doing to meet their child’s needs, why and what you hope to achieve. You can return to this later on, when you look at progress.
- Follow up reviews with a short note of what you will do, so everyone is clear about what was discussed. Share this with the family. Use home language where possible.
- Set timescales for communicating and stick to them so families know what is happening next.

7. Be aware of the situation at home:

- Never underestimate the challenges that a family has at home - or the positives.
- Take a ‘whole family approach’ and find out what things are like at home. For example, does the child seem fine at school but is very stressed by the time they get home? How do other siblings fit in?
- Treat the family as an equal partner. Listen to what the child, parent or carer is saying.
- Be aware that families may feel ‘judged’ even though that is not our intention. Continue to offer reassurance and support.

8. Focus on the child’s strengths as well as weaknesses:

- It really helps families to hear what is going well, as well as the things that need support.

- This helps to show that you know the child and see them as an individual.

9. Consider available support for the parents and carers, as well as the child:

- Consider support groups in school - e.g. SEND coffee mornings.
- Parenting support (programmes, seminars and groups) including SEND specific: www.sheffield.gov.uk/parenting
- Support groups - on the Local Offer website: www.sheffielddirectory.org.uk/localoffer
- Parent Carer Forum: sheffieldparentcarerforum.org.uk or 0300 321 4721.
- For impartial advice - Sheffield's Special Educational Needs and Disability Information, Advice and Support Service (SENDIAS): www.sheffieldsendias.org.uk or 0114 273 6009.

HAVING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

The above points are relevant for all communication. But there are particular things to think about for difficult conversations:

- **Prepare:** This is key. Think how the family may feel when you speak - are they likely to want to hear what you are saying, could they be unhappy about what has been done/not done?

Make enough time so the conversation is not rushed. Meet in a comfortable space. Think about how many professionals will take part - you do not want to overwhelm families. Talk to colleagues before, so you are all clear what messages are being shared. Make sure you have the right professional input beforehand. Ask a more experienced colleague for advice if needed.

- **Treat the child as a child, not a diagnosis:** All children present differently, regardless of whether they have a diagnosis or not. Treat the child as an individual and do not compare their needs to other children. Talk about their individual strengths and needs. There is always something positive to say about a child. Make sure this is included in any difficult conversation.
- **Listen actively:** Make eye contact, give listening cues and repeat back what someone has told you so the family knows you have listened and understood. Starting the conversation by asking the family how they think their child is getting on can help.
- **Empathise and allow time for the parent or carer to process the information:** Keep calm and do not match any upset in your tone of voice. Remember the difficulties families may have faced and try not to take anything personally. Some parents and carers will find it hard to accept their child's needs - ongoing communication with them is key.
- **Be clear and check the family is alright with your suggestions:** be specific about what you will put in place to meet the child's needs and why. Check the family is alright with this. If asked for something you can't provide, say so honestly but try not to let that be the end of the conversation. Encourage families to ask questions. Use open questions when possible.
- **Ending the conversation:** summarise the conversation and give positive feedback. Be clear about next steps, when they will happen, and when you will speak again. Check the family is happy with what has been agreed. Provide a note or email summarising this afterwards and ask the family to come back to you if they need anything else.

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