

COMMUNICATING WITH FAMILIES ABOUT SEND

BEST PRACTICE GUIDE FOR SERVICES

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 for services. A separate guide for schools and education settings is available at: www.learnsheffield.co.uk/inclusiontaskforce.

What families have told us

Young people:

- 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

We need:

- Empathy
- Patience
- Honesty
- Compassion
- Transparency

😊 *"They've listened and supported our family with information on how to help at home."*

😊 *"My child's team at hospital have worked with her since birth. They are always happy to talk to school and help with planning and adaptation."*

😊 *"Constantly looking at highlighting and focusing on the positives rather than just behaviour."*

😊 *"My son's speech and learning has improved tremendously due to his school, ongoing support and partnership working."*

😞 *"The process and trying to find out information took over my life."*

😞 *"Families are left isolated and alone after being referred for assessment, without any support or practical help."*

😞 *"Need to listen more to parents who say things are not improving instead of dismissing them."*

😞 *"It was down to me to try and calm him down at the end of the session. I was never asked if we were ok or given any information or techniques to regulate my child."*

TOP TIPS

1. Parents and carers of children with SEND want regular communication:

- Let families know when you are going to see their child in school/setting, or ask their SENCO to inform them. Provide copies of any follow-up reports or assessments.
- If you are using specific techniques with the child, show the family so they can use them at home.
- Let families know if their child will be discussed at a meeting they are not invited to. Tell them what it is about, who will be there and why the family is not invited. Ask the child and family beforehand if they have anything they would like to input.
- At the meeting, confirm who will report back to the family. When doing this, they should:
 - Offer a written account of the meeting, as well as verbal feedback.
 - Make sure this is received.
 - Update records to confirm the conversation with the family has taken place and summarise what was said.
- Before you meet a family, make sure that you're aware of the child's needs and history so they don't have to repeat their story and time with the family can be as productive as possible.
- Give as much handover as possible when new people start working with the child, so families don't need to explain everything from the start. This should be included in your service's intervention plan for the child.

2. Link with schools/education providers as well as parents and carers:

- Keep SENCOs informed. Use them to work with you to help develop a family's understanding of their child's needs and how to support them.
- Sometimes schools and parents can have a different perspective on a child's needs. Ensure all voices are heard.

- Where appropriate, share copies of reports with schools/settings as well as families. Where appropriate, let SENCOs know who they can contact for extra support.
- Involve the family, as well as school, in strategies to support the child. If you are training a teaching assistant could you also invite a parent? (Or to join virtually?)

3. Make sure parents and carers know how they can contact you:

- Be explicit about this. Let families know if you are giving direct contact details or for a central office.
- Consider including a photo when you write to families so they know who is supporting them.

4. Think about how you will communicate:

- What will suit your families best? What will they want to know? Do the parents and carers have any extra needs or communication difficulties? Make sure you record this need clearly and it is easily identifiable for anyone visiting from your team where they are new to the child or family.
- Have empathy. Parents and carers may find it hard to process the information you are giving.
- Check if a parent or carer understands and 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 help.
- If you are emailing, remember it is harder to judge someone's tone. Use language the family can understand - don't presume they understand everything you may have said over the phone.
- If you are writing notes during a meeting remember to keep using good communication skills: Active listening, frequent eye contact, open body language etc. Tell them that you are taking notes and why and how the notes will be used.

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

- Think about the parent or carer's needs and provide extra support. If you are using an interpreter, brief them in advance.
- Keep language simple and focus on what things mean for the child. Check written text is accessible by using a tool like www.hemingwayapp.com
- Be aware of terminology and acronyms and explain them when used.
- Keep report formats standard across a service so parents and carers get used to what to look for and where.
- Ask families to contact you if they do not understand things. Include this in all communication.

6. Be specific and open:

- Explain to families what you are doing to meet their child's needs, why and what you hope to achieve. Return to this later to look at progress.
- Let them know what will happen if you cannot attend a planned appointment or meeting.
- Be clear about how much involvement you will have with the child.
- Let families know how long they might have to wait for support and what they can access in the meantime.
- Set timescales for communicating and stick to them.
- Follow up reviews with a short note of what you will do. Share this with the family and education provider. Use home language where possible.
- Avoid using definite language about a diagnosis if one has not actually been agreed. But be realistic so not to create false hope.

7. Be aware of the situation at home:

- Never underestimate the challenges that a family has at home - or the positives.

- Treat the family as an equal partner. Listen to what the child, parent or carer is saying.
- Acknowledge the difference that parents and carers are making. Delivering interventions is hard work, and a bit of praise can help them stay motivated.
- Find out what things are like at home and if they are different to at school.
- 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 helps families to hear what is going well, as well as the things that need support. Focus on the achievements and positives. Ensure that you include these in your written reports.
- This helps 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:

- Remember to check parents and carers are alright at the end of appointments. Refer them to relevant support groups if useful:
 - Parent Carer Forum gives information and peer to peer support: sheffieldparentcarerforum.org.uk or 0300 321 4721
 - Other groups are on the Local Offer website: www.sheffielddirectory.org.uk/localoffer (write 'support groups' in the search).
 - SEND parenting support: www.sheffield.gov.uk/parenting and tinyurl.com/y54ca2w7
 - For impartial advice contact SENDIAS at www.sheffieldsendias.org.uk or 0114 273 6009. (SENDIAS stands for Sheffield's Special Educational Needs and Disability Information, Advice and Support Service).

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?

Think about whether a family member or friend could be invited to support the child/family and ask if they would like to invite that person.

Where possible, link with the child's SENCO to help support the family and develop their understanding. Can they be present when the conversation takes place?

- **Treat the child as a child, not a diagnosis:** All children show their symptoms 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 in difficult conversations.
- **Empathise and be aware how the parent or carer may be feeling:** Ask parents and carers how they are. Think about where you can signpost them to if they need further support. SSENDIAS (contact details above) can help families understand their rights and signpost to support.

If you have been assessing a child, do parents and carers need some time with them following the appointment to get them ready to transition before they leave the premises? Can you accommodate this?

Some parents and carers will find it hard to accept their child's needs and some will have had negative experiences. Keep calm and do not match any upset in your tone of voice.

- **Be clear and check the family understands your suggestions and if they need to, go over specific things they are unsure about:** Be specific about what support you will give to the child. If you are referring them elsewhere, be clear about why and what you hope to achieve. Check the family is alright with this and has understood. If asked for something you can't provide, say so 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 and when they will happen. Check the family is happy with this. Ask the family to come back to you if they need anything else. Signpost them to additional support if this would be useful.



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