

## **Introduction**

### **A Guide for working with parents of children with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND)**

This guide aims to support all early years practitioners to reflect on how they work in partnership with parents of children with SEND. It also aims to offer practitioners suggestions about how to prepare for and have those all-important initial conversations with parents regarding concerns about their individual child's development.

The starting point of this guide is to support Early Years Practitioners and Managers to recognise that:

- Parents have vital and unique knowledge about their child's needs
- Developing a relationship with parents based on mutual trust and respect is the cornerstone of the partnership between Practitioners and Parents/Carers
- A wide range of factors need to be taken into account prior to and during discussions about a child's development and progress
- All Practitioners can develop the necessary attitudes and skills to build a positive working relationship with Parents

The guidance is divided into 8 sections which can be used as 'standalone' advice or viewed together for a complete early years setting toolkit for working with Parents of children with SEND.

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## Section 1

### The Foundations of working with parents of children with SEND



The importance and value of working with all parents is widely accepted. It is recognised in the underlying principles of the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (2014) (EYFS). The Children and Families Act (2014) part 3 and Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice 0-25 years (2015), reinforce the requirement to engage with and involve parents in decision making and providing information and support in order to do so.

The key points of these documents are listed below



#### Key Points - The EYFS

The EYFS sets out an inclusive approach which is designed to be responsive to individual needs and requires settings to have arrangements in place to identify and support children with SEN or disabilities. It also specifies that early years settings should make information available to parents about how the setting supports children with SEN. This includes involving parents in identifying needs, deciding outcomes, planning provision reviewing progress and seeking expertise at whatever point it is needed.

For more detailed information:

[www.foundationyears.org.uk/eyfs-statutory-framework](http://www.foundationyears.org.uk/eyfs-statutory-framework)



#### Key points – The SEND Code of Practice (2015)

The focus of the new Code of practice is on inclusive practice, removing barriers to learning and providing high quality provision to meet the needs of children and young people. The Code clearly lays out the actions early years settings need to take to identify and support all children with SEND. Part of this is an aim to increase the participation of children with SEND and their parents in decision making, giving them more choice and control over their support.

***“Where a setting identifies a child as having SEN they must work in partnership with parents to establish the support the child needs. SEND Code of practice (2015) Para 5.3***

***“Parents should be involved in planning support and, where appropriate, in reinforcing the provision or contributing to progress at home. SEND Code of practice Para 5.41)***

For more detailed information:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-guide-for-early-years-settings>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25>



## Key points - The Equality Act (2010)

The Equality Act states that early year's settings must promote equality of opportunity and must not discriminate against, harass or victimise disabled children. Settings also have a duty to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that disabled children are not at a substantial disadvantage compared with their peers. This duty is anticipatory: settings must look ahead and anticipate what disabled children might need and what adjustments might need to be made to prevent any disadvantage

Importantly the definition of disability is wider than many might presume and so covers a greater number of children.

**Definition:** *A person has a disability if they have a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.*

For more detailed information:

<http://www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/resources/disabled-children-and-the-equality-act-2010-for-early-years>

<https://shop.pre-school.org.uk/A134/guide-to-the-equality-act-and-good-practice>



## Key points - The Children and Families Act 2014 (Part 3)

The principles of this include recognising the importance of the wishes, views and feelings of children, young people and their parents, promoting their participation in decision-making and acknowledging the importance of information and support.

It also provides a definition of SEND and requires all early years settings to use their *best endeavours* to ensure that special educational provision is made for children with special educational needs and *have regard or* take into account the SEND Code of Practice whenever they make decisions about young children.

**Definition of SEN:** *a child has a special educational need if they have a learning difficulty or disability that calls for special educational provision.*

*A learning difficulty is a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of children of the same age*

*A disability is a disability that prevents or hinders a child from taking advantage of the facilities generally available*

*Special educational provision is provision that is additional to or different from that which is normally available*

For more detailed information:

<http://www.councilfordisabledchildren.org.uk/media/554523/ChildrenAndFamiliesActBrief.pdf>

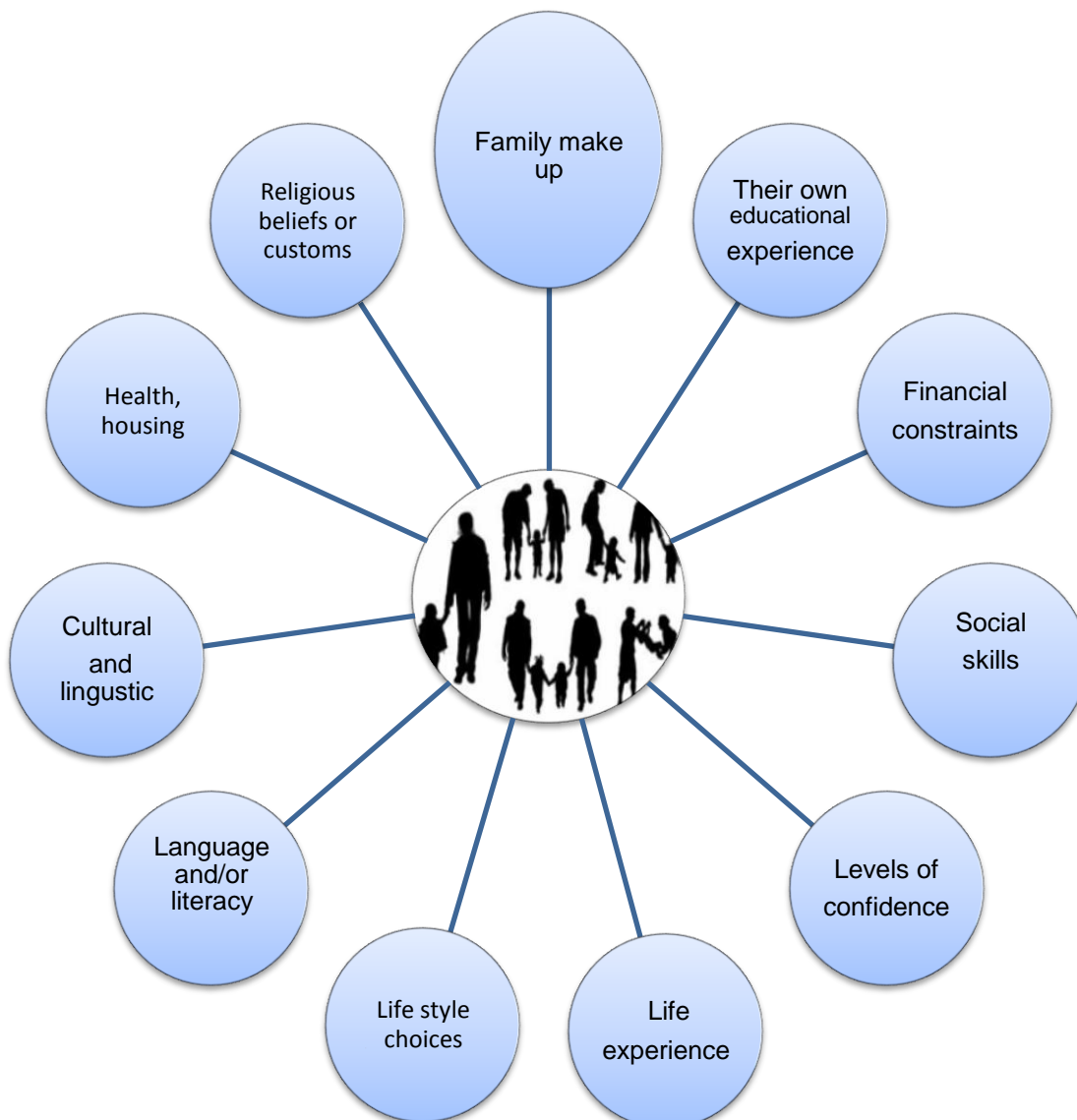
## Section 2

### The uniqueness of Parents



As Practitioners we recognise the uniqueness and individuality of children. Parents, like their children, bring their own individuality to your setting. Every Parent will bring a unique set of values, beliefs, attitudes, background and circumstances to your setting. Being aware of and understanding these factors will support you to build positive relationships with Parents.

#### Individual aspects of families you may work with



## Team Task

- Think about how some of these factors might influence how parents engage with your setting
- What do you already do to support them and how could this be developed further?

## Ideas for engaging and building positive relationships with parents

Involve Parents in providing information about their child prior to the child starting. One page profiles are good for this. Give them examples of the sorts of things they could say about their child

Make sure that you ask the questions that will help you gather the information you need.

If possible set up a small comfortable 'Parents Space' for Parents waiting or settling their children. It can also provide an opportunity to support Parents to get to know each other by introductions, coffee mornings etc

Establish a pattern of talking to Parents about everyday matters .  
Encourage Parents to tell you social stories about their child's babyhood, family holidays etc .  
This will make it easier if you later have to sensitive issues

Listen carefully to what Parents have to say about their child and acknowledge that they know them best.  
Ask if you can add their comments to the child's profile.

Use open and honest dialogue and deal with issues and difficulties the same day as they occur – this may mean putting aside time to meet with Parents

Ask Parents to contribute regularly to record keeping..Be creative!!  
Diaries, photographs with comment, sending activities home, using IT profiles which Parents have access to etc

Share positive events of the day through communication books, photographs, email or text or chatting.

Make sure Parents know what is happening in the setting use a Newsletter (important for those Parents who work) and have a notice board

Encourage inclusiveness involving Parents as volunteers and fundraisers, discourage "in-groups"  
Keep a list of Parents skills ask them how they think they can support the setting

Hold regular Parent/Child event such as a trip or picnic, try to make it at the weekend so that all Parents can attend

Tell Parents who their child is friendly with and encourage play dates. Some parents are happy for settings to collect and circulate contact details.

**If Parents need additional advice or support direct them to local services via the Local Offer**

## Section 3

### Getting it right from the start - Identifying a child's needs and SEN support

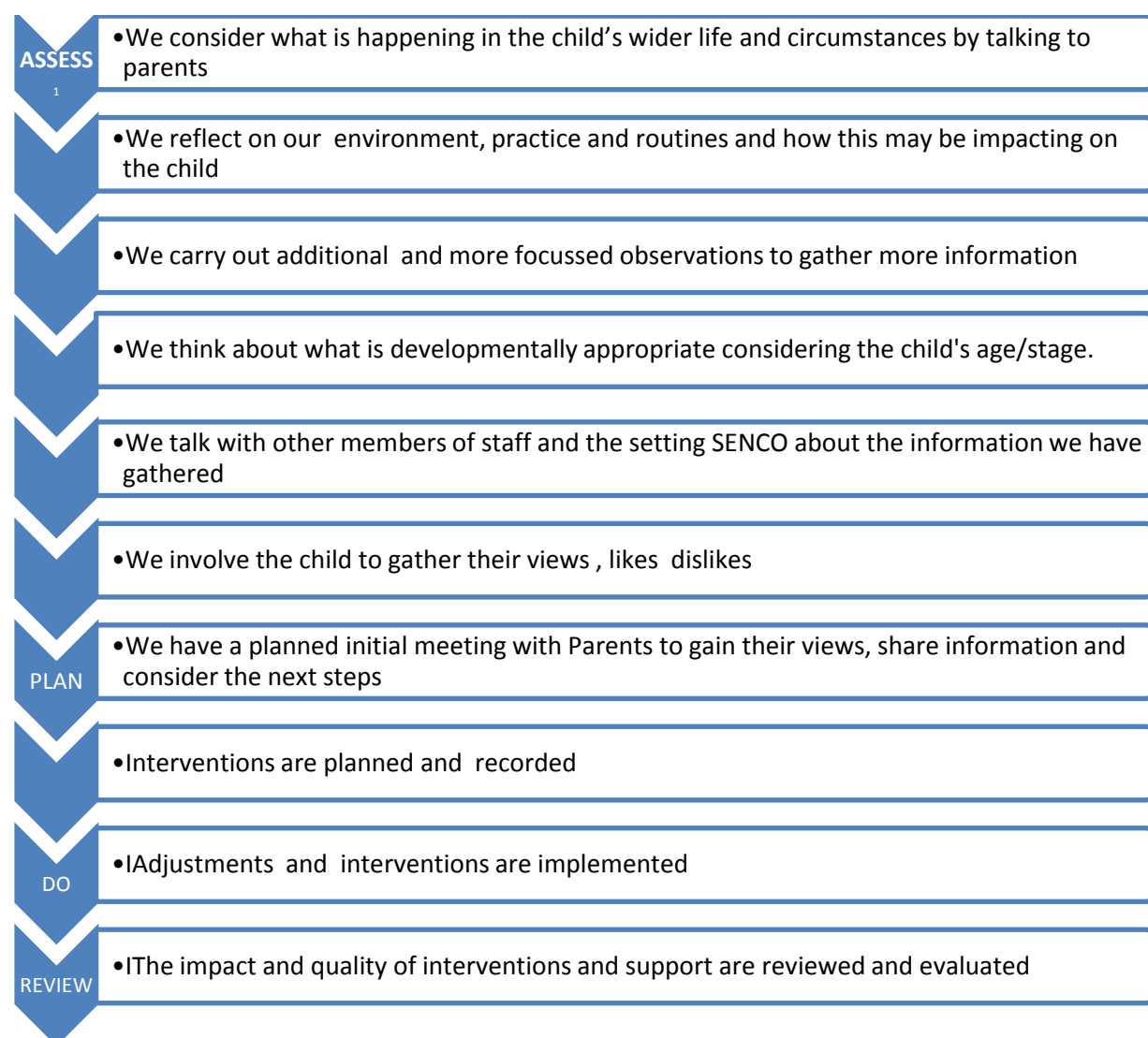


When thinking about early identification of SEND it is helpful to have an agreed protocol or procedure in your setting.

This ensures that all members of staff know what to do should they or parents have concerns about a child's learning or development. It prevents any knee jerk reactions or hasty decisions and allows information to be collected in a systematic manner.

This is crucial when initially talking to Parents, as most Parents will be far more open to discussion if you show that you have taken time and care in assessing their child, demonstrating that you know them well and that you have observations and evidence to back up your conclusions.

#### SEN Support The Graduated Approach



## Team Task

### Consider the procedures for identifying children with SEND in your setting

- **Would a new member of staff be clear about or know what to do?**
- **Are Parents aware of how to voice concerns and the role of the Setting SENCO?**

### The setting SENCO supporting staff in your setting

Staff members are able to support parents better if they themselves feel supported so:

- Have regular slots at staff meetings where colleagues can raise concerns or discuss individual children.
- Offer support to colleagues by spending some time in each room or group within your setting, talking to staff and observing children.
- When there are resources available release staff to carry out their focussed observations
- Meet with parents alongside the key person
- Organise professional development opportunities and sharing of skills and knowledge. This will encourage discussion, broaden staff knowledge and increase confidence
- Make sure that SEND is always on the agenda at Partnership meetings in order to gain support and advice.

### How to let Parents know who you are:

Make a notice board or a leaflet for your setting with your SENCOs details.

You could include:

- Your name and photograph
- An outline of the role of the SENCO
- Other contact details e.g. phone number, email etc. and when you are available to talk
- Information for parents what to do if they have concerns about their child's development or learning
- A copy of your Inclusion/ Equal opportunity policy and /or your protocol for identifying children with SEND
- Details of any outside or local authority advisors or other professionals who visit your setting or give advice
- Details of the Local offer, and any other useful information that Parents may find helpful

## Section 4

### Ongoing relationships and involving Parents in their child's learning



Once a positive relationship has been established with parents it is important to continue building upon it so that if new concerns or situations arise, practitioners are in the best possible position to work alongside and support parents.

It is important that all staff are aware of their own responsibilities for working with all parents especially those whose children have special /additional needs.

The Code of Practice makes it clear that **all** staff are responsible for working with and supporting children with SEND. This includes observing, planning and delivering individualised programmes.

The key person has responsibility for working with a child on a daily basis and are in a unique position to work with parents.

Find below some helpful strategies that are easy to implement. By putting in place some or all of the suggestions you can be assured that you are doing your best to reach out to parents even those who are harder to reach.

#### **Help Parents understand ‘the system’ and explain what you are doing and why**

- Share information with parents about how things work e.g. admissions, procedures for early identification, referrals, transitions etc.
- Parent's need to know who they should go to when they need to discuss important issues regarding their child.
- Make sure parent's know and understand the role of the key worker, setting SENCO and any Advisory Support staff.
- Make sure parents have a copy of your relevant policies such as settling in and Inclusion policy
- Try not to use ‘jargon’ or acronyms as parents are sometimes embarrassed to say they don't understand
- Signpost them to the Local Offer and other information

#### **Supporting Parents to participate**

- Be open and prepared to learn from and with parents
- Avoid making assumptions about how each parent might want to get involved
- Remember the parent may be experiencing a range of emotions and feelings, don't give up offering opportunities for their involvement
- Always ask parents views and make sure that it is reflected in planning for the child
- Aim for a partnership approach with joint planning, evaluations, contributions suggesting outcomes or targets



The child benefits as their Parent/Carers are working in partnership with their Key worker and SENCO. Skills are shared and the child benefits

Parents/carers have skills and knowledge in relation to their child. They share this information with the Practitioner

## Sharing Skills

A Practitioner has skills and knowledge about the early year's curriculum and differentiation. With Parental input they can plan for the child

### Joint working between home and one or more settings

Where joint outcomes are set for working on at home, in your setting or if there is a joint placement, consideration should be given to if they are:

- set within the context of everyday play and experiences at home and each setting
- are not laboured, overdone or regarded as a chore
- take into account the interests of the child and have variety and fun built in
- are realistic in terms of what a parent / setting is able to do in their individual circumstances, e.g. time, equipment, staff
- do not lead to parents or their child feeling pressurised

Some parents will feel more comfortable with the idea of joint targets than others. Practitioners should be sensitive to this and follow a few general rules:

- Avoid using jargon
- Illustrate what you mean by giving a few examples of how an activity could be worked on at home
- Ask if parents have the toy, game or equipment needed and offer to lend equipment or toys
- Plan an opportunity for you to model a particular strategy whilst parents observe.
- Allow time for parents to ask questions and clarify any issues
- Check how things are going in case parents need further support.

#### Team Task

- **Do all staff take responsibility for working with children with SEND in your setting?**
- **Reflect on how you involve Parents in their child's learning. Could this be improved?**

## Section 5

### Developing a Personal Toolkit



A Personal Toolkit or personal skills bank should be viewed as work in progress. It can be added to as practitioners gain experience and develop reflective practice. Having a variety of skills in your personal toolkit will allow you to be more effective in your work with parents.

Below is a starter kit which will support you in building strong foundations to work with individual children with SEND and their parents.



#### 1. Developing Empathy

Empathy involves showing compassion and understanding towards parents. When developing empathy a practitioner must attempt to understand the feelings and experience of the child and the child's parents. The way a parent may be feeling will depend on what is happening in their life in relation to their child at any given moment in time. The simplest way to do this is to imagine yourself in their place and consider their feelings and concerns in any given situation.

Empathy is *not* feeling sorry for a person and treating them with sympathy instead it is a positive emotion that helps give insight.



#### 2. Developing Respect for Families and a Non-Judgemental attitude

At the heart of any positive working relationship lies a genuine respect for the families of the children in your setting. It recognises that the family and parents in particular are the most important element in a child's life.

Being non-judgemental involves thinking positively about parents, regardless of their personal characteristics, child rearing practices or situation. It requires a practitioner to believe that parents have a fundamental desire to do the best for their child.

A non-judgemental and respectful practitioner communicates confidence that the parents are managing often difficult situations well. The main beneficiary of this positive relationship is always the child.



#### 3. Developing good, active listening skills

Good active listening involves listening to what is being said as well as *how* it is being said and helps avoid any misunderstanding of the message. It includes acknowledging parent's feelings, reflecting back, asking open questions and using appropriate body language.

## Acknowledging a Parents feelings or emotions

Recognising and acknowledging how Parents are feeling can immediately give comfort and reassurance and often deflects a difficult situation. Use phrases like *“I can see you’re upset”* or *“I know you would like the situation to be better”* or *“Yes I can see that you are angry about what has happened”*.

Acknowledging a feeling does not mean you agree, but it does mean you are open to discussion and are aware of how a parent may be feeling.

## Reflecting back what a Parent has said

In order to ensure there are no misunderstandings between practitioners and parents, throughout conversations with a parent it is useful to get into the habit of summarising the points parents may make.

You can do this by using phrases such as *“I think you may be saying.....”* or *“Can I just clarify that you mean.....”* or any other similar phrase.

Using this strategy of reflective listening will ensure both parent and practitioner have a clear and shared understanding of what has been said.



## 4. Asking Open Questions

*Open ended questions* encourage people to talk, invite further information and allow parents to express what are their most relevant and important concerns. These are some examples

- Tell me about .....(child’s name)
- What can we do to help..... to settle in?
- What types of activities does ..... like to do?
- What sorts of things are challenging for .....?
- What concerns you most about ..... coming here every day?
- What types of changes have you noticed since..... started here?
- What can we do to keep you informed about how ..... is doing?
- How do you manage toileting at home? Do you think we should do that here?
- What makes ..... happy and content?
- Are you confident we are doing enough to meet ..... needs?
- Is there anything else that you would like us to know about.....?



## 5. Body language

Much of the way we communicate is non-verbal. This includes tone of voice, volume, and body language such as facial expression, gesture and posture. It is important then to think about this aspect when communicating with parents.



## 6. Being open and honest

It is important to share positive information with parents in order to help build good relationships. This in turn will help smooth the way for future conversations that may centre upon concerns about their child's development. If a positive relationship has been established with parents, practitioners will find it easier to be open and honest in their conversations even those which are potentially more difficult.



## 7. Maintaining professionalism and knowing your boundaries

This enhanced relationship with parents can raise various issues. Practitioners will empathise with parents and may even have been in a similar situation as the Parent or know of another family with similar difficulties. Despite this it is often not useful to "tell your own story". Parents want to talk to you about *their* child and *their* difficulties.

Another issue is one of confidentiality and it is important that practitioners never agree or promise not to share the information they may be given. Equally important is that any confidential information is shared appropriately.

### Team Task

**Practice some of the above skills with colleagues. For example:**

- **Ask some open questions about a hobby or holiday destination**
- **Try using the opposite of good body language when talking to a colleague and ask them what it feels like**
- **Discuss what you might mean by professional boundaries**

## Section 6

### Meeting with Parents



The most successful meetings with Parents of children who may have or have SEND are those which are the result of ongoing dialogue and where practitioner and parent already have a positive relationship.

It is also essential to be properly prepared for any meeting so although you must obviously make time to listen to parents. Talking in an environment which is calm and comfortable always leads to more positive outcomes. Sometimes a practitioner will need time to think how to respond or sometimes will need the time to take advice from others.

#### Preparing for a meeting

1. Ask parents when the most convenient days and times for meetings might be before you make any arrangements, be flexible about when or where you meet
2. Make sure you give enough notice of meetings to allow parents to prepare, organise time off work or child care  
A note or written reminder is often appreciated a week or a few days before the meeting
3. Encourage parents to bring a friend or relative with them if they feel they need support. Ask for the person's name
4. Be specific about the purpose of the meeting so that parents know what to expect. It is helpful to have an agenda which is given to parents in advance
5. Encourage parents to think about what they might like to say or talk about at the meeting.
6. Make sure parents are aware of who else will be at the meeting so they are not suddenly confronted with a whole group of professionals.  
Ask parents if there is anyone else they would like to attend.
7. If you would like parents to bring any reports or information, ask them if this is possible and offer to copy the documents for them if necessary
8. Make sure you have all the information you need to hand, such as assessments, progress towards outcomes, recent successes, observations etc. Complete the administrative parts of any forms such as names, date of birth beforehand.
9. Organise a private meeting space, chairs, tables, water etc  
If parents need to bring younger children or babies to meetings with them either try to provide childcare or make sure there are toys and books for the child to play with in the meeting room
10. Decide who will chair the meeting and who will take notes – it is very difficult to do both



## 10 Tips for Meetings with Parents

1. Make sure that you either introduce everybody or ask people to introduce themselves.
2. Be sensitive to how parents might be feeling and use the knowledge and relationship you already have with them to put them at ease.
3. Ask if there are any objections to notes being taken and indicate that all those present will be given copies of those notes.
4. Try not to ask for parents contributions first, as being the first to speak at a meeting is always quite hard.
5. Make sure that parents have the chance to comment on the views of the other people present.
6. Always start with the positives for their child like progress and successes  
Avoid using jargon and clarify any terminology that may be used
7. Offer time to have a break or a drink if at any point parents seem to be stressed or upset, so that they can gather their thoughts.
8. Keep to time by remaining focussed and arrange another time to meet if there are additional matters to be discussed which have not been planned for. It can be difficult for parents who may need to return to work or pick up other children, if a meeting overruns
9. Summarise the outcomes of the meeting so that everyone is clear as to what has been agreed. If possible circulate any notes or 'My agreed outcomes' etc. immediately, if not, make sure you have contact details in order to send them later.
10. Set a date for the next meeting while everyone is present

### Team Task

Think about the last few Parent meetings that you have held

- How successful were they?
- What could you have done to improve the preparation or outcome?

## Section 7

### Supporting parents through difficult times



Parents can have very different responses to staff expressing concerns about aspects of their child's development, learning and progress. Every parent will respond differently depending on their own emotions, and ways of coping, this is also not unusual for mums and dads to respond differently. Not only this but these feelings may change on a regular basis. It is important that practitioners are sensitive to this and realise that for parents to express their genuine feelings can take a long time and will only happen in the context of an open, honest and trusting relationship.

#### Feelings which Parents may experience





## Practical pointers for supporting Parents

1. Do not make any presumptions about how parents might be feeling
2. Allow time for parents to adjust and let your concerns and comments sink in
3. Avoid overloading them with information
4. Try not to bombard them with too many questions or ask them to make decisions immediately
5. If parents seem overwhelmed invite them to come back at another time, when they are ready, and discuss how their child can best be supported.
6. Have information available on parent support groups in your area.
7. Find some joint targets to work on at home as well as in the pre-school
8. Focus on the child's strengths as well as areas of need and meet regularly to keep parents informed of progress.
9. Remember to be sensitive to how parents *might* be feeling in relation to other parents or children at your setting.
10. Remember that the child is still the same child whatever their needs or differences



## Receiving a diagnosis

Many parents find receiving a diagnosis helpful because it finally gives a name to their child's difficulties. This can help parents understand their child's needs and difficulties and can motivate them to seek further help and support for both themselves and their child. It can also be helpful in trying to explain them to others in the family or the wider social circle.

For other parents however their child having a diagnosis is a less than positive experience. The negative connotations of a child being 'labelled', particularly at an early age, can change the way parents see their child, their child's abilities and future progress.

Parents will undoubtedly experience a range of emotions and many are very vulnerable at this time whatever their attitude to receiving a diagnosis. Remember too that parents will need ongoing support as their child reaches different ages and stages

### Team Task

- What might parents find difficult when coming to the nursery each day if**
- a) their child is displaying challenging behaviour
  - b) their child has recently had a diagnosis



## Section 8

### Helping Parents move on – transitions



Whilst *all* parents of *all* children have anxieties about changes in their child's lives, for parents of children special educational needs or disabilities these can often be magnified. Transition to another room, setting or to school can raise a variety of questions and worries. This is especially so when parents have established a good, positive relationship with a particular member of staff or staff team.

Concerns may relate to:

- If their child will be made welcome
- If new staff teams have any knowledge of their child's particular condition or needs
- If new staff are aware of how their child's needs might affect learning or behaviour
- If their child will be 'understood' by a new set of staff
- If adequate support will be in place
- If any one person will be taking particular responsibility for their child.
- Who they can talk to if they are worried or concerned.

Most of these fears and worries can be addressed by having a sound transition procedure, with documentation to support it.

SEN Support should include planning and preparation for transition, before a child moves into another setting or school. This can include a review of the SEN support being provided or the EHC plan. To support the transition, information should be shared by the current setting with the receiving setting or school. The current setting should agree with parents the information to be shared as part of this planning process

SEND Code of practice (2015) Para 5.47

#### Team Task

##### Reflect on your settings transition procedures and documentation

- Do you have established links with local pre-schools and schools?
- Do you pass on thorough transition records?
- Do you make extra provision when planning transitions for children with SEND?

## Ideas to support smooth transitions



- Invite parents, all new staff and professionals to meet together hear about the child
- Support parents in preparing for the meeting perhaps draw up a list of questions or concerns which can be dealt with at the meeting
- Ask parents to complete a profile or Getting to know You type booklet about their child
- Highlight the child's strengths and any interests which can be used to settle them
- Pass on any successful strategies or activities which support the child
- Consider creating a Transition Action Plan outlining how the child is to be helped to settle into the new environment
- Where possible encourage staff to make a home visit
- Arrange new staff to visit or spend time with the child in their current room or setting
- If moving to school consider the child's start date. Would they benefit from being one of the first or last to start?
- Take the child on short settling or familiarisation visits to the new room or setting
- Be aware and take into account the child's friendship groups
- Identify any resources, equipment or training needs for the new room or setting staff
- Make parents aware of any possible changes of professionals or different systems used by a setting or school
- Give parents a named person who they can contact if they have any questions or concerns
- Talk to the child about the new room or setting, if moving to school read books about starting school and making friends
- Take photos of new staff, uniforms, rooms, buildings to look at over weekends or holidays can help young children feel reassured
- Practice walking the new route to setting or school on a regular basis