

Unlocking Potential: The Vital Role of Early Identification and Action for SEND in Early Years Education

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As dedicated early years practitioners, our role in shaping a child's educational journey is unparalleled. Today, we explore Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), shedding light on the significance of early identification and action. We'll be drawing on insights from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)¹ and the Department for Education (DfE) Recovery Programme², so let's delve into the key aspects that underpin the importance of early intervention in fostering positive outcomes for early years children.

The Power of Early Identification:

1. Understanding the Landscape:

The majority of schools and settings have experienced an unprecedented wave of SEND challenges in post-pandemic education. We've seen an increase in children with SEND and EHCP plans³ and the Child of the North report⁴ revealed the disproportional loss of learning for children in the North East when compared with the rest of the UK. Amongst our own Great North Stronger Practice hub community, 73.6% of practitioners told us that SEND was an area of concern for their setting⁵. Yet despite these challenges, there is much we can do to effect change and improve outcomes for our children. According to the latest data from the EEF, early identification of SEND needs can significantly impact a child's trajectory, making it crucial for practitioners to be skillful at recognising signs and indicators.

2. Research-Backed Benefits:

The EEF gives easy access to research, strategies and interventions that have been reviewed and trialled to enable settings and schools to choose the most appropriate approach to meet the needs of their children and setting.

¹ [Education Endowment Foundation \(EEF\) Website](#)

² [DfE Recovery Programmes](#)

³ [SEN needs in England Statistics](#)

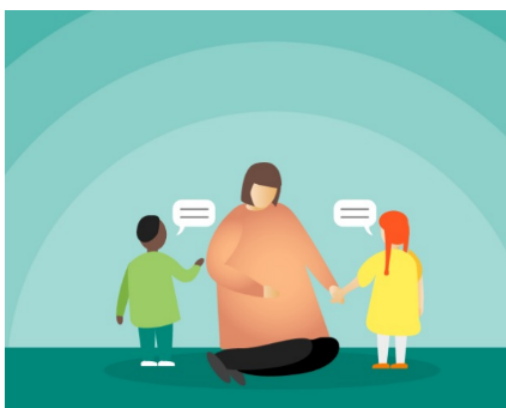
⁴ [Child of the North Report](#)

⁵ GNEYSPPH Audit

- The **Early Years Toolkit**⁶ provides high quality information about what is likely to be beneficial based on existing evidence that you can use to make informed decisions. These range from early literacy and numeracy interventions to advice on successful ways to develop parental engagement.
- The **Early Years Evidence Store**⁷ is a summary of evidence-informed approaches to help educators to understand and reflect on their practice.
- **SEND guidance documents**⁸ provide strategies to implement for all children as well as the specific aspects that enable children with SEND to access all learning opportunities and environments.

The EEF underlines the long-term benefits of early identification and intervention. Recognising SEND needs at an early stage enables practitioners to implement targeted strategies promptly, addressing challenges before they escalate. Studies consistently show that early support results in improved academic achievement, enhanced social skills, and increased overall well-being for children with SEND. The power to make a lasting impact lies in your hands.

Lesson learnt: Early Years education has huge potential to prevent the attainment gap becoming entrenched before children start school.



- By the time children start school at age five, those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds are already likely to be behind their classmates.
- Evaluations of Early Years based interventions typically have larger effect sizes than trials at later stages of education.

Strategies for Early Identification:

4. Observations and Assessment:

Your observations, understanding of child development and knowledge of your children are key! Regular, purposeful assessments, contributed to by parents, are the foundation of generating an accurate picture of a child's attainment. They can be informed by the use of observation tools or checklists which are designed to help practitioners focus on specific areas of development, and these can make the observation process more targeted and

⁶ [EEF Early Years Toolkit](#)

⁷ [EEF Early Years Evidence Store](#)

⁸ [EEF SEND Guidance Documents](#)

effective, enabling you to spot potential concerns early on. This feeds into the 'assess, plan, do, review' cycle and with this information at hand, practitioners can feel confident to seek the advice of specialist professionals and to make informed decisions about the next steps of learning for the child.

A prime example of a purposeful assessment is the **Statutory 2 year old Progress Check**⁹. *'This progress check must identify the child's strengths, and any areas where the child's progress is less than expected. If there are significant emerging concerns, or an identified special educational need or disability, practitioners should develop a targeted plan to support the child's future learning and development'*, (DfE, September 2023).

Points for practitioners to consider:

- Are you involved in this check?
- Have you liaised with the health visitors and parents about this check?
- Have any gaps or concerns been discussed?
- What action has been taken?
- Do your observations match? If not, what action have you taken?

5. Collaborative Partnerships:

Communication is the cornerstone of success. Fostering open and collaborative partnerships with parents, carers, and external professionals, such as health visitors can reveal a missing link and documents such as the 'Red Book' and 'Progress Check at age 2' can provide valuable insight into a child's early development. Regular dialogue ensures a holistic view of the child, enabling a more accurate and comprehensive identification process. Evidence shows that progress improves when the relationship between the setting and parents improves and strategies and this impact is greatest in the Early Years¹⁰. Approaches which consult parents and involve them in decision making about their child's development promote trusting relationships, the heart of effective partnership working.

While we are aware of increasing waiting lists for many agencies, we need to access our local networks to support our early actions and interventions:

- Local Offers - every local authority publishes their Local Offer on their website which provides information on what is available for children and young people and their families, settings and schools.
- Area SENCOs/Early Years Advisers/Inclusion Support - All local authorities provide access to local authority officers who are there to support settings and schools.

⁹ [Progress Check at Age 2](#)

¹⁰ [EEF Supporting Parents Guidance Reports](#)

- Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs¹¹ - provide advice, share good practice and offer funded evidence-based professional development for early years practitioners.
- Local family support hubs and centres - these settings offer groups and sessions for parents which can support early action such as play groups, early talk sessions, parenting groups.

Early Action for Lasting Impact:

6. Inclusive Environments:

Creating an inclusive early years environment is not just a goal but a necessity. The DfE advocates for inclusive practices that celebrate diversity and cater to the individual needs of each child. Simple adjustments in teaching strategies and classroom setups can go a long way in supporting children with SEND.



7. Accessing Resources and Support:

Early years practitioners, you are not alone in this journey. The DfE Recovery Programme¹² offers resources, training, and support services tailored to assist you in identifying and supporting children with SEND. Training such as the EYPDP will improve your understanding and skills in supporting the development of the most disadvantaged children between the ages of 2 and 4. There is also the Level 3 SENCo training qualification which provides the training and tools to equip a member of your team with the skills to be able to support early identification across your setting. There are many options available and the team at the Great North Early Years Stronger Practice Hub can support you to identify and access the training which is most valuable to your settings context and connect you with other local practitioners able to support your journey.

¹¹ [Great North Early Years Stronger Practice Hub](#)

¹² [DfE Recovery Programmes](#)

Conclusion:

In conclusion, early identification and action for SEND needs in the early years are fundamental to unlocking every child's potential. Your commitment to this crucial aspect of education ensures that no child is left behind. Let us embrace the power we have to shape the future positively and inclusively, one child at a time.

Remember, early intervention isn't just about addressing challenges – it's about unleashing possibilities. Thank you for your dedication to nurturing the next generation of learners!