



A Parent's Guide: Signs to Look for if You Think Your Child or Young Person Has SEND

RANi Need to Know Guides | SEND in Early years and young person Advisory sheet 7

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Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) can affect a child or young person's ability to learn and thrive in a typical setting. As a parent or carer, you know your child best — and spotting early signs is the first step to getting them the right support.

What Does “SEND” Mean?

A child or young person has SEND if they:

- Have a **learning difficulty or disability** that makes it **harder than usual to learn**, understand, or access education
- Require **special educational provision** that is different from or additional to what is typically available to others of the same age

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SEND can fall into one or more of four broad areas:

1. **Communication and Interaction**
 2. **Cognition and Learning**
 3. **Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH)**
 4. **Sensory and/or Physical Needs**
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Common Signs of SEND to Look For

1. Communication and Interaction Needs

These may include:

- Delayed speech development
- Limited vocabulary for their age
- Difficulty starting or keeping up a conversation
- Not understanding facial expressions, tone of voice, or gestures
- Seeming withdrawn or struggling in group activities
- Difficulty with imaginative play or interacting with peers

May be associated with:

Speech and language delay, **autism spectrum**, or selective mutism.

2. Cognition and Learning Needs

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These may include:

- Struggling to learn new concepts or retain information
- Difficulties with reading, writing, spelling or maths
- Trouble following instructions or concentrating
- Learning at a significantly slower pace than peers
- Becoming easily overwhelmed or tired by schoolwork

May be associated with:

Dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, moderate to severe learning difficulties.

3. Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) Needs

These may include:

- Frequent meltdowns or outbursts
- Anxiety, fear, or phobias around school
- Difficulty coping with change or transitions
- Signs of low mood, withdrawal, or depression
- Challenges with friendships or bullying
- Risk-taking, impulsive or aggressive behaviours

May be associated with:

ADHD, autism, anxiety, trauma, or attachment difficulties.

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4. Sensory and/or Physical Needs

These may include:

- Over- or under-sensitivity to sound, light, touch, taste or textures
- Apparent clumsiness or poor coordination
- Difficulty with fine motor skills (e.g. holding a pencil, doing buttons)
- Delayed physical milestones (e.g. crawling, walking)
- Ongoing medical needs that impact learning
- Fatigue or mobility issues

May be associated with:

Sensory Processing Disorder, hearing/visual impairments, physical disabilities, genetic conditions.

Signs in Different Age Groups

Age	What to Watch For
0–2 years	Delays in speech, crawling, walking, or social engagement
3–5 years	Speech not understood by others, difficulty playing with peers, strong reactions to noise or change
5–11 years	Reading or writing well below age expectations, poor focus, sensory avoidance or seeking, emotional outbursts
11–16 years	Low self-esteem, school refusal, anxiety, academic struggles despite effort
16–25 years	Difficulty accessing further education or work, mental health concerns, ongoing learning challenges

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What Should I Do If I'm Concerned?

1. Trust Your Instincts

You don't need a formal diagnosis to raise concerns or seek support. If something feels "off" or your child is struggling more than peers, it's worth exploring.

2. Talk to Your Child's Setting

Start by speaking to:

- The **key worker** (in nursery)
- The **class teacher** or **SENCO** (Special Educational Needs Coordinator) in school or college

Ask:

- What have they noticed?
- Are there existing support strategies in place?
- Can they monitor and record progress?

3. Request Support

Ask for:

- A **graduated response** under SEN Support
- Observations, interventions, or referrals to professionals (e.g. Speech and Language Therapist, Educational Psychologist)

4. Keep a Record

Track what you're seeing at home:

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- Note concerns, dates, patterns
- Save reports or letters
- Document your communications with professionals

5. Explore a Formal Assessment

If the school/nursery's support isn't enough, or concerns are long-standing, you can request an:

- **EHC needs assessment** (to apply for an EHC plan)
 - **Neurodevelopmental assessment** (via GP or CAMHS)
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You Know Your Child Best

Even if professionals say your child is “fine,” your concerns are valid. SEND is **not always visible**, and many needs can be misunderstood or masked, especially in girls or children who “mask” well in school but struggle at home.

Support and Resources

You can get further support from:

- **RANi** – Help with advice, support and impartial information
- **Local Offer** - Help with advice, support and impartial information
- **SENDIASS** – Local impartial information and advice service for parents and young people www.iasmanchester.org
- **IPSEA** – Independent Provider of Special Education Advice: www.ipsea.org.uk
- **Contact** – A national charity supporting families with disabled children: www.contact.org.uk

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Remember:

Always keep a copy of all correspondence you send, along with proof of postage or delivery. If you send documents by post, we recommend using a **signed-for** service. If sending by email, request a **read receipt** if possible.

Get in Touch

If you need more information or have a question, we're here to help.

Email us: info@rani.org.uk

Please include:

- Your name
- Your child's name
- Your child's date of birth
- Your query

Or, if you prefer, you can fill out our online **contact form** and we'll get back to you as soon as possible.

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