



Early Years SEND: Signs to Look For

RANi Need to Know Guides | SEND in Early years and young person Advisory sheet 3

Updated: April 2025

A Practical Guide for Parents, Carers and Early Years Practitioners

What Does SEND Mean in the Early Years?

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in the early years refers to children aged 0–5 who need *additional or different support* from others their age in order to learn, develop, or access early education.

SEND includes both:

- **Special Educational Needs (SEN)** – learning difficulties or delays
- **Disabilities** – long-term physical, sensory, or mental impairments

Early identification is vital to ensure the right support is in place as soon as possible.

Disclaimer: This resource is intended to provide general information and should not be considered legal advice. While RANi strives to ensure the content is accurate and current at the time of publication, we cannot accept responsibility for any loss, damage, or inconvenience that may result from using or relying on the information provided.

Why Spotting Signs Early Matters

Early identification and intervention can:

- Improve long-term outcomes in learning and development
 - Reduce the need for more intensive support later
 - Help families feel supported and understood
 - Ensure the child's voice and needs are central
-

General Signs to Look Out For

Some signs may indicate a child could benefit from additional support. These may appear in **one or more areas of development**.

Keep in mind:

- All children develop at their own pace
 - Some signs may be temporary or due to other factors (e.g. home life, illness)
 - Patterns over time are more important than one-off behaviours
-

Key Areas and Possible Signs of SEND

1. Communication and Interaction

Children may:

Disclaimer: This resource is intended to provide general information and should not be considered legal advice. While RANi strives to ensure the content is accurate and current at the time of publication, we cannot accept responsibility for any loss, damage, or inconvenience that may result from using or relying on the information provided.

- Not respond to their name or familiar voices
- Have limited eye contact or gestures (e.g. pointing, waving)
- Have delayed speech, or no speech
- Echo words or repeat phrases without understanding them
- Struggle with back-and-forth interaction or imaginative play
- Find it hard to follow simple instructions

Possible needs: speech delay, developmental language disorder, autism

2. Cognition and Learning

Children may:

- Struggle to remember routines, names, or learning tasks
- Find it hard to concentrate or remain engaged in play
- Learn skills more slowly than other children (e.g. colours, counting)
- Need repeated support to grasp new ideas or problem-solving

Possible needs: global developmental delay, learning difficulty

3. Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH)

Children may:

- Become easily distressed or struggle to self-regulate emotions

Disclaimer: This resource is intended to provide general information and should not be considered legal advice. While RANi strives to ensure the content is accurate and current at the time of publication, we cannot accept responsibility for any loss, damage, or inconvenience that may result from using or relying on the information provided.

- Withdraw from social interaction or prefer to play alone
- Show challenging behaviours (e.g. biting, hitting, throwing)
- Have sudden changes in mood or energy levels
- Find changes in routine very distressing

Possible needs: attachment difficulties, trauma, anxiety, autism, ADHD

4. Sensory and/or Physical Needs

Children may:

- React strongly to textures, lights, noise, or smells (sensory sensitivity)
- Appear clumsy or uncoordinated (e.g. difficulty with stairs, holding items)
- Have difficulty using hands for tasks like drawing, feeding, or puzzles
- Show limited movement, flexibility, or strength
- Have hearing or vision difficulties
- Appear tired often or have undiagnosed medical needs

Possible needs: sensory processing disorder, hearing/vision impairment, cerebral palsy, genetic conditions

Other Early Signs to Watch For

Disclaimer: This resource is intended to provide general information and should not be considered legal advice. While RANi strives to ensure the content is accurate and current at the time of publication, we cannot accept responsibility for any loss, damage, or inconvenience that may result from using or relying on the information provided.

- **Feeding challenges** or unusual eating habits
 - **Toileting delays** or fear of toilet use past expected age
 - **Regression** in skills (e.g. stopping talking, walking, or playing as they once did)
 - **Sleep difficulties** affecting development or mood
 - **Unusual repetitive behaviours** (e.g. hand flapping, spinning, lining up objects)
-

When to Seek Support

You do not need a diagnosis to seek help.

If a child:

- Is not meeting milestones
- Has a significant difference in one or more areas of development
- Is showing behaviours that cause concern or impact their access to play or learning

...you should speak to:

- Your child's **key person** or the **setting SENCO**
- Your **health visitor** or GP
- A local **early years inclusion team** or **SENDIASS service**

Disclaimer: This resource is intended to provide general information and should not be considered legal advice. While RANi strives to ensure the content is accurate and current at the time of publication, we cannot accept responsibility for any loss, damage, or inconvenience that may result from using or relying on the information provided.

- Ask the local authority for an **Education, Health and Care (EHC) needs assessment**
-

What Can Families Do?

- Keep a diary or notes about concerns and patterns over time
 - Record developmental milestones and any challenges
 - Ask for regular reviews and meetings with the setting
 - Explore Portage services or local early support teams
 - Don't wait for a diagnosis – support can and should begin based on need
-

Legal Entitlements and Next Steps

- All early years providers must follow the **SEND Code of Practice 2015**
 - Settings must adopt a **graduated approach**: *Assess – Plan – Do – Review*
 - Parents can request an **EHC needs assessment** at any age (including under 5s)
 - The **Equality Act 2010** protects disabled children from discrimination
-

Disclaimer: This resource is intended to provide general information and should not be considered legal advice. While RANi strives to ensure the content is accurate and current at the time of publication, we cannot accept responsibility for any loss, damage, or inconvenience that may result from using or relying on the information provided.

Summary: Key Signs Checklist

Area	Possible Signs
Communication	No words by 2, limited interaction, struggles to follow simple instructions
Cognition	Slow to grasp new ideas, struggles to focus or remember routines
Social & Emotional	Withdrawn or overly anxious, aggressive or distressed behaviours
Physical & Sensory	Hearing/vision concerns, motor delay, sensory sensitivity
Other	Regression, poor sleep, extreme reactions to change

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
- **ASQ-3 or ASQ-SE** screening (used by health visitors)
- **Development Matters** and **EYFS framework**
- **Speech and language screening checklists**
- **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

If you'd like help preparing your request or understanding your appeal options, RANi can provide guidance and templates.

Disclaimer: This resource is intended to provide general information and should not be considered legal advice. While RANi strives to ensure the content is accurate and current at the time of publication, we cannot accept responsibility for any loss, damage, or inconvenience that may result from using or relying on the information provided.

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.

Disclaimer: This resource is intended to provide general information and should not be considered legal advice. While RANi strives to ensure the content is accurate and current at the time of publication, we cannot accept responsibility for any loss, damage, or inconvenience that may result from using or relying on the information provided.