



# What to Do If You Suspect Your Child Has Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND) in the Early Years

RANi Need to Know Guides | SEND in Early years and young person Advisory sheet 4

*Updated: April 2025*

*A Step-by-Step Guide for Parents and Carers*

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## What Are Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)?

In the early years (ages 0–5), a child may have **SEND** if they need extra help with learning, development, communication, physical needs, or emotional wellbeing, compared to others their age.

SEND can include:

- Communication or language delays
- Developmental delays
- Learning difficulties

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- Physical or sensory impairments
  - Social, emotional, or behavioural needs
  - Diagnosed conditions (e.g. autism, ADHD, genetic conditions)
  - Emerging or unidentified needs
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## **Step-by-Step: What to Do If You're Worried**

### **1. Observe and Record What You Notice**

Keep a simple record of concerns over time. You might include:

- Missed developmental milestones
- Speech delays or unclear communication
- Behavioural challenges or emotional distress
- Difficulty with play, learning, movement, eating, or sleeping
- Reactions to noise, light, or touch
- Signs of withdrawal or distress in social settings

Tip: A notebook or phone app can help track changes, patterns, and examples to share with professionals.

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### **2. Talk to Your Child's Key Person or Nursery/SENCO**

If your child attends a nursery, preschool or childminder setting:

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- Raise your concerns with their **key person**, teacher, or the **Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO)**.
- Ask what they've observed and whether they have concerns too.
- Settings should begin a **graduated approach**:  
**Assess → Plan → Do → Review**

Ask:

- Are any early support strategies in place?
- Can we create an individual support plan?
- How will progress be reviewed?

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### 3. Speak to Your Health Visitor or GP

If your child is under 5:

- Your **health visitor** can offer developmental reviews and support referrals.
- You can also talk to your **GP** about concerns, especially if you suspect health-related needs, speech/language issues, or autism/ADHD.

You may be referred to:

- A **paediatrician**
- A **speech and language therapist (SALT)**
- An **educational psychologist**
- Local **early years inclusion or portage team**

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Ask for a formal referral and keep a record of appointments.

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#### **4. Ask for Early Years SEND Support**

Your child does **not** need a diagnosis to receive support.

Settings must:

- Make “*reasonable adjustments*” under the **Equality Act 2010**
- Provide SEND support as part of the **SEND Code of Practice 2015**
- Use funding from their **Early Years SEN Inclusion Fund** where needed

Support might include:

- Small group or 1:1 help
  - Adapted routines or sensory-friendly areas
  - Visual timetables or communication aids
  - Extra adult support or early interventions
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#### **5. Consider Requesting an Education, Health and Care (EHC) Needs Assessment**

If your child’s needs are:

- Complex
- Long-term
- Or the support needed goes beyond what the setting can provide

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...you can **formally request an EHC needs assessment** from the local authority. This can be done **by the parent, nursery, or both**. It is a legal right and **no diagnosis is required**.

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## 6. Learn About Your Legal Rights

You have a right to:

- Be fully involved in decisions about your child's education
- Access support based on **need**, not diagnosis
- Request assessments or referrals
- Appeal decisions made by the local authority

Helpful legislation includes:

- **Children and Families Act 2014 (Part 3)**
  - **SEND Code of Practice 2015**
  - **Equality Act 2010**
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## 7. Build a Circle of Support

You're not alone. Reach out to:

- Local **RANi** organisation for advice and guidance
- Your area's **Early Years Inclusion Team**
- Local **SENDIASS** for independent advice

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- **Local Offer** for independent advice and guidance
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## Quick Checklist: What You Can Do Now

- Keep a record of your concerns and observations
  - Speak to the setting and ask about support plans
  - Contact your health visitor or GP for referrals
  - Learn about the EHC needs assessment process
  - Connect with local and national SEND support services
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## Final Thought

It's okay to feel unsure or overwhelmed. The early years are a time of huge development and change. The most important thing is that you've noticed something and taken the first step. **Trust your instincts** — you are your child's best advocate.

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## 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](http://www.iasmanchester.org)
- **IPSEA** – Independent Provider of Special Education Advice: [www.ipsea.org.uk](http://www.ipsea.org.uk)
- **Contact** – A national charity supporting families with disabled children: [www.contact.org.uk](http://www.contact.org.uk)

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

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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.

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## Get in Touch

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

**Email us:** [info@rani.org.uk](mailto: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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