



childcare & education EXPO

SEND in Early Years Conference

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SEND in Early Years Conference Insight Pack

Introduction & Executive Summary

The SEND in Early Years Conference brought together practitioners, SEND specialists, early years leaders, consultants and providers to explore how the sector can create more inclusive environments for children, families and staff. Throughout the day, a consistent message emerged: inclusion is not a specialist area of practice - it is the foundation of high-quality early years provision.

The Three Biggest Messages from the Conference

1. Inclusion is everyone's responsibility

- SEND should not sit solely with the SENCO.
- Every member of staff contributes to inclusive practice.
- Leadership teams must actively champion inclusion.

2. Relationships matter more than paperwork

- Strong parent partnerships lead to better outcomes.
- Co-regulation, trust and communication are central to practice.
- Excessive paperwork can distract from meaningful interactions.

3. Children should be viewed through strengths, not deficits

- Language influences expectations.
- Diagnoses should inform support, not define potential.
- Every child deserves opportunities to belong and thrive

Creating Inclusive Cultures – What Effective Settings Do Differently

Key Discussion Theme

A major discussion throughout the conference focused on moving away from a system where SEND is seen as an "additional responsibility" and towards a culture where inclusion is embedded across the whole setting.



What effective inclusive settings do

- Make SEND everyone's responsibility.
- Use consistent approaches across teams.
- Prioritise strong communication between practitioners.
- Equip staff to adapt their practice with confidence.
- Demonstrate a clear leadership commitment to inclusion.

Action: Review the language you use

Shift conversations away from what children cannot do and towards:

- Strengths and interests
- Progress and achievements
- Emerging skills and next steps

This strengths-based approach shapes staff expectations and improves families' experiences.

Key takeaway

Inclusion is not about helping children fit existing systems. It is about adapting your systems so every child can participate, belong and thrive.

Supporting Children and Families – Building Strong Partnerships

What Was Discussed?

One of the most talked-about topics during both the table discussions and panel session was the relationship between practitioners and parents.

Many delegates acknowledged that families can be at very different stages in their SEND journey.



Recognise where families are

Every family is at a different stage of their SEND journey. They may be seeking answers, processing a diagnosis or feeling uncertain about the future.

Actions to take:

Make support accessible

- Provide a SEND information pack.
- Signpost local services and practical resources.

Keep aspirations at the centre

- Start with the child's strengths.
- Ask about the family's hopes.
- Focus support plans on outcomes, not labels.

Communicate positively

- Celebrate progress.
- Use clear, supportive language.
- Be honest with empathy.

Key takeaway

Families may forget what was said, but they will remember how they were made to feel. Positive, respectful communication builds trust and leads to better outcomes for children.

Neurodiversity, Play and Independence

Understanding Neurodivergent Children

The conference challenged traditional assumptions about behaviour, communication and play. Panel members highlighted that neurodivergent children often engage with the world differently - and that difference should not automatically be viewed as a concern.



Rethink how you view play

Recognise that play looks different for every child. Instead of redirecting children towards "typical" play, seek to understand the purpose behind behaviours such as:

- Repetitive play
- Sensory exploration
- Repeated use of favourite resources
- Individual play preferences

Use these interests as opportunities to extend learning and engagement.

Actions to take

When planning support, ask:

- Does this encourage greater independence?
- Are children given opportunities to make choices and self-advocate?
- Will this help prepare them for long-term outcomes?

Key takeaway

The purpose of support is not to increase adult reliance, but to empower every child to participate, learn and thrive as independently as possible.

Care, Co-Regulation and Neurodivergent Staff

One of the strongest messages from the panel was that care should be recognised as a professional skill rather than an additional task.

Examples included:

- Co-regulation
- Emotional support
- Responsive interactions
- Respectful care routines
- Creating psychological safety for children



Create an inclusive culture where both children and staff feel safe, understood and supported to thrive.

Why it matters

Children are more able to learn and participate when they:

- Feel safe and understood.
- Are emotionally regulated.
- Trust the adults around them.

Actions to take

Create a more inclusive workplace by:

- Offering flexible working practices where possible.
- Considering sensory needs within the environment.
- Providing quiet spaces for staff.
- Encouraging open conversations about neurodiversity.
- Normalising reasonable adjustments as part of everyday practice.

Key takeaway

Inclusive teams create inclusive settings. When staff feel accepted, understood and supported, they are better equipped to provide the same experience for every child.

Key Actions for Settings Moving Forward

Final Reflections

The final keynote focused heavily on sensory needs, regulation and removing barriers to learning. The message aligned closely with the wider themes heard throughout the day: children cannot access learning when they are overwhelmed, anxious or dysregulated.



Top 10 Actions to Take Back to Your Setting Culture & Leadership

- Review how inclusion is discussed within the setting.
- Ensure SEND is everyone's responsibility.

Communication

- Audit the language used in reports and support plans.
- Move towards strengths-based documentation.

Parents

- Strengthen signposting and support available to families.
- Create opportunities for open dialogue.

Practice

- Review how independence is promoted.
- Consider whether interventions build long-term skills.

Environment

- Evaluate sensory environments.
- Reduce unnecessary visual and sensory clutter.

Workforce

- Review staff wellbeing and support systems.
- Consider how neurodivergent staff are supported.

The conference highlighted a key shift in SEND practice: moving from asking, "How do we help this child fit in?" to "How do we create environments where everyone can belong?"

This change in thinking was one of the most important takeaways from the conference.