

Finding out your child has special educational needs (SEN) affects everyone differently. Some parents feel upset, overwhelmed and worried about how they'll cope. For others, it's a relief to finally know what's going on. Everyone's experience is different.

However you're feeling, you've probably got lots of questions about all kinds of things. We're here to help you make a start. The information on this page can help you get to grips with some of the basics and point you in the right direction for where to go next.

What does SEN mean?

SEN is short for Special Educational Needs. It's a term you'll probably hear a lot from now on.

A child has special educational needs if both things are true for them:

1. They have a learning difficulty or disability.

This means:

- they have 'significantly greater difficulty' in learning than most of the other children in their age group or class; or
- they have a disability which prevents them making use of what's on offer in a mainstream school.

2. Their learning difficulty or disability means they need educational or training support that is additional to, or different from, that made generally for other children or young people of the same age.

New to SEND?

So, in other words, if your child or young person has both a learning difficulty or disability and they need extra or different support from others of their age, then they have a special educational need.

Special educational needs affect different children in different ways. For example, your child may find it hard to:

- understand things
- make friends and manage relationships
- concentrate and settle down to learn
- talk to others or make themselves understood
- read, write or understand maths
- emotionally regulate themselves and 'behave' in school

SEN is a broad area with lots of different kinds of need. Some children may have SEN in a specific area or just need some support to make progress. Whereas other children may have a range of needs or need a lot of support. Sometimes these are called complex needs.

Some children or young people may need extra support which isn't special educational support, for example, if they need medicines given at school to manage a health condition.

You'll also see the term SEND. This stands for Special Educational Needs and Disability.



All children and young people with SEN are entitled to extra support with learning at nursery, school or college.

What does disability mean?

The Equality Act 2010 says that someone has a disability if they have:

‘A physical or mental impairment, which has a long-term and substantial adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day to day activities’.

Long-term means it’s lasted a year or more. Substantial means it’s not minor.

Disabilities include:

- hearing and sight impairments
- long-term physical or mental health conditions such as asthma, epilepsy, anxiety and depression
- conditions that change, so sometimes symptoms are minor and at other times they’re more severe, such as rheumatoid arthritis, ME and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome
- conditions that affect development, such as autistic spectrum condition (ASC)
- learning disabilities
- brain injuries

Children and young people with these kinds of conditions don’t necessarily have SEN, but there are large overlaps between disabled children and young people and those with SEN. Not all children with special educational needs are also disabled.

You can find out more about what a disability is, and isn’t, by looking at the guidance about the Equality Act.

What should I do if I think my child might have SEN, but I'm not sure?

Many parents with a child with special educational needs will tell you they had an instinct that things were not quite right, before a professional suggested it or before any diagnosis.

You might see subtle behaviour that on its own might seem like nothing but put together might form a pattern. Or your child might do the same things as other children, but do them much more often, with more intensity and for different reasons.

If you think that things aren’t quite right, here are a few suggestions to help you get a clearer picture:

- Keep a diary about your child. Write down the things you notice, such as how they behave in certain situations or the things that really seem to challenge them. Note down what might have set off a tantrum, meltdown or withdrawal. It’s a great way to gather ‘evidence’, and that can be helpful when you start speaking to professionals.
- If your child is at pre-school or school, try and find ways to spend time with them while they’re there – go on your child’s school trips, or volunteer in class or at an after school activity that your child goes to. That way you can see how they are with other children and in an environment that’s different from home.
- Talk to other people about your child, such as your family and friends, your childminder, health visitor, teacher, teaching assistant or nursery staff. Ask how your child behaves when they aren’t with you.

Once you have more information, if you still think your child may have special educational needs, make an appointment to speak to a professional. This might be your child’s

- GP or health visitor
- staff at nursery
- your child’s teacher
- a Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO)

Take the information you’ve collected about your child and talk about the things you’ve noticed or are worried about.

What should my child's nursery, school or college be doing to support my child?

If staff at your child’s pre-school, school or college have identified a special educational need they must tell you. SEND law and guidance is clear that professionals “must have regard to”

- the views, wishes and feelings of the child or young person, and the child’s parents
- the importance of the child or young person, and the child’s parents, participating as fully as possible in decisions

That means you and your child (where possible) must always be involved in the discussions and decisions – that’s the law.

Once it’s clear that your child has a special educational need, they should get support to help them manage. Special educational support (provision) in schools is called SEN Support.

SEN support in nurseries, schools and colleges is based around the specific needs of each child or young person. The staff, equipment, resources and support that help your child are decided using the graduated response. This is an ‘assess, plan, do, and review’ cycle. That means if your child special educational needs, the school or college should:

- assess what support they need
- plan the support
- do the support set out in the plan and then
- review how well it’s working

Information about your child’s needs, support and goals should be written down in a plan, which is used by staff and updated regularly. Schools and colleges use all kinds of plans, so your child’s plan may look different from one for a child from a different school. What’s important is that your child has a clearly written plan which lists all their needs, support and goals. For most children and young people with SEND the support the school gives works, and they make progress.



This is what the legal guidance for local authorities, schools and colleges says about a schools duty:

“Mainstream schools, including academies, maintained nursery schools, 16 to 19 academies, alternative provision academies and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), must:

- use their best endeavours to make sure that a child with SEN gets the support they need – this means doing everything they can to meet children and young people’s SEN
- ensure that children and young people with SEN engage in the activities of the school alongside pupils who do not have SEN.”

What might it mean for my child and my family?

Everyone’s experiences with a child with SEND are different, because every child and family are different. But there are some things that parents have told us are important for everyone to know.

- Looking after yourself is important – you need to be in good health and able to take time out for yourself to switch off. Find ways to do this regularly. We know it can be hard, but it’s probably the most important thing you can do for yourself and your child.
- Sometimes it’s an emotional rollercoaster. Life with a child with SEND is not the life you may have imagined for your child and for some parents that can be tough. There will be ups and downs – there can be lots to celebrate as well as uncertainty and worries.
- You’ll need to learn the language of SEND and how to find your way around services and support. Our Jargon Buster can help with SEND terms and the Local Offer is the best place to start to find out what services and support are available in Devon.
- You will probably be meeting and working with lots of professionals – from SENCOs to specialist teachers, from social workers to enablers. Good relationships really help you and your child, so it’s well worth making the effort to build these.
- Meetings at school and with professionals will become part of life. Preparing well for these is the key to making sure they go well, as well as helping you get what you need.
- If you want to feel confident and well prepared, you’ll probably need to go on your own learning journey. It can really help to know as much as you can about your child’s SEN. So, talk to other parents, find and read information and make the most of any training that’s on offer. Many parents become ‘experts’ in their child’s SEN as well as their child themselves.
- Change is probably going to be difficult for your child. Many children and young people with special educational needs find moving from one thing to another tricky – whether that’s from lesson to lesson, from home to school or from key stage to key stage. These changes are called transitions and they usually work best when everyone is well prepared.

- Sometimes it's hard, but it's always better to deal with issues early on, before things reach crisis point. Sometimes that's easier said than done! Early help is the way to pick up problems early and get support in place in Devon.
- Getting the right support at the right time is crucial. Many families have a good support network of friends, family members and other parents sharing similar experiences. Devon has lots of local support groups, leisure and relaxation activities and events that you can tap into. And of course, we are here to give you information and support too.

Where can I get more information and support?

A good place to start

If you're looking for information about education, health and care services available for children and young people with SEND and their families go to.....

Devon's SEND Local Offer website

w: devon.cc/newtosend

e: sendlocaloffer@devon.gov.uk

Facebook: [@SENDLocalOfferDevon](https://www.facebook.com/SENDLocalOfferDevon)

For local support groups or services in Devon

If you want to connect with other families or find out what's in your local area – from support groups to childcare, from leisure activities to family support – go to.....

Pinpoint Directory website

w: www.pinpointdevon.co.uk

For more in-depth or specific help

If you need more detailed information about any SEND issue or would like to talk things over, contact us! We also have details of other helpful SEND websites.

For legal information and advice

If you want to know the law around SEND, including SEN support, EHC plans, tribunals and exclusions – go to...

IPSEA (Independent Providers of Special Educational Advice)

w: ipsea.org.uk

For mentoring and support

Navigate is a national mentoring service from Scope, that provides online emotional support for parents and carers of disabled children who are finding out about their child's additional needs. It is a 6-week programme that puts you in touch with a personal adviser, who will help you to talk about your feelings and concerns. It's open to any parent or carer who:

- lives in England or Wales
- has parental responsibility for a child under 18
- has a child on a pathway to diagnosis or who has received one in the last year

w: scope.org.uk/family-services/navigate

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