

Introduction

Since the first edition of this book was published in 2005, the early years sector has undergone, and indeed is continuing to undergo, major changes in both practice and policy. Further educational and social welfare legislation has been put in place, with, for example, the updated Disability Discrimination Act becoming fully operational. The *SureStart* programme is now a well-established part of early years provision. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework, together with the EYFS Profile and the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), have been implemented and lie at the core of everything practitioners are doing for the children in their care. The career structure and professional development of early years practitioners have been overhauled with, among other things, the introduction of the levels of qualification, and the availability of the Early Years Professional Status (EYPS).

Some of the issues discussed in this book refer to the situation in England, particularly with regards to recent legislation and initiatives. The devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are implementing their own strategies, with their own relevant legislation in place to support these. However, because the fundamentals of best practice are enshrined in all the initiatives, this book is also relevant and appropriate if you are a practitioner in the administrative areas outside England. If you are working in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland, therefore, the book will be just as useful and relevant to your working practices.

The book was written initially in response to a request that I've heard many times from newly-appointed Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs): *I've never done this before – is there a manual or guidebook in Easyspeak that I can get hold of?*

SENCOs are now, by law, appointed to all early years settings and provision. Sadly, many of them will feel they've drawn the short straw, have been thrown in at the deep end and will be totally overwhelmed by the enormity of their responsibilities. They really shouldn't be feeling that way, but if that's how you feel too, then this book is for you! It aims to help and support you, to outline in reader-friendly language exactly what you're supposed to do as your setting's SENCO, and, above all, to enable you to realise you don't have to struggle on your own.

This book shows you how to help and support your colleagues, but also how to access the help and support you may feel you need yourself. It explores your roles and responsibilities as outlined in the *Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice*, and how these are relevant to the early years sector. Each chapter addresses in detail one of those roles, and the issues behind putting that particular role into practice.

SENCOs work within a huge variety of early years provision, everything from a 'standard' nursery school or class with several practitioners, to a single childminder with a few little ones in their care; from a small village pre-school to a large day nursery offering care from birth to four or five years. Clearly it's impossible to address every type of provision in detail, and therefore some of the advice in this book may need to be adapted to suit your individual needs. However, the book's overall content is there as a framework for you to tweak, adopt, adapt or use as a

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kick-off (i.e. for you to cherry-pick), to help you formulate practices that will not only make you an efficient SENCO, but, more importantly, will also give you confidence in your role, and help you feel comfortable and happy in it.

I have written this book with the assumption that you are a SENCO completely new to the job and that you're looking for ideas in each area of responsibility in your role. If, however, you're becoming an old(er) hand at the game, you could skip the bits you're conversant with and go to the sections you want to focus on, since each chapter is free-standing, and you won't have to wade through pages of text to get to the core of your question. The format of each chapter is the same: an outline of the key points addressed, a short introduction, the main body of the chapter and the issues it's exploring, followed by a list of relevant CD-ROM resources. There are also copiable resources where appropriate which can be used as they stand, or adapted to your specific setting.

There is a sample SEN policy that you may like to use as a framework for your own, again to be adapted if required, to better suit your particular setting, or to use as it stands. All the forms, policies and samples within the text are on the accompanying CD-ROM. There are useful sample letters to parents/carers that can be used when working together to support a child, and blank referral letters to outside agents, also on the CD-ROM. You can use them as part of your own best practice portfolio, to stimulate discussion with your colleagues, as the basis of in-house professional development sessions, or as part of your overall, wider-ranging policy and practice planning. The CD-ROM also has several PowerPoint presentations which you can use for professional development sessions. These will save you time since they are ready to present, and you can easily print the handouts of the slides. And, of course, you can always tweak them, if you wish, so they become more appropriate to your setting and circumstances.

There are case studies running through the book to highlight specific points where appropriate, all of which feature real children in real situations. To protect the children's identities, their names have been changed. All of the case studies appear in a designated section on the CD-ROM.

There is a Further reading list (page 97) if you would like more information, suggestions and support regarding additional needs. Most of the books recommended have been chosen because they are 'reader-friendly' and also very practical. I have included a few of the more theoretical texts if you wish to study the academic aspects of the subject, such as research findings, but the majority of the titles are not of this genre. If you are following a course of further study you should also refer to your own academic institution's reading list or be guided by your tutor.

There's a section on the CD-ROM showing the Standards that have to be met for the award of Early Years Professional Status. These are clearly closely linked to best practice when it comes to supporting a child with additional needs, and achieving each and every one of the Standards should be the goal of all practitioners, whether or not they register to be officially awarded EYPS. Again, this section will be highly relevant to you, wherever you are (Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, as well as England) since the Standards encompass everything that a good early years professional should be doing automatically, and they represent sound goals to aim for in your daily working practices.

Now a few words about terminology. Throughout the book I refer to 'children with special educational needs' or 'children with additional needs', because they are just that: children first and foremost, who happen to have a difficulty, problem or disability. I still hear references to, for example, 'an autistic child' or 'a Down's child', comments which show how deeply entrenched the practice still is of identifying a child

by their disability. That disability is (or should be) secondary to the child's right and entitlement to be automatically perceived principally as a child, a human being who happens to have differing needs from the majority of their peers. I refer to 'special educational needs' with reservation, and use the term mainly because it's the common currency within the field, and it's the terminology of the SEN and disability legislation. Some groups representing the world of the disabled (their preferred term) are lobbying to have the phraseology within the legislation altered, but until that happens, we may have to continue using the SEN terminology on many occasions. That doesn't mean, however, that we can't use alternative phrases such as 'differing needs' or 'additional needs' in our everyday dealings. Use the terminology that you and/or the families with whom you're working are comfortable with, but make sure it's not offensive or derogatory.

I'd like to expand a little even on my use of the word 'child'. Clearly, since *Birth to Three Matters* and *Every Child Matters* are enshrined in the EYFS, the child and their welfare from the moment of their birth are of paramount concern to all professionals involved. Therefore while I refer to 'the child' throughout the book, I do in fact mean the baby or the older child, without differentiating.

I use the term 'Individual Education Plans' (IEPs) again with reservation because of the perception that the term may not be appropriate for children in the early years. You may prefer to speak of 'appropriate intervention' or 'effective learning objectives' (I know I do!), but where you see 'IEPs' in the text of this book, please bear in mind the term is being used in its widest sense, and only because it is still current in the legislative SEN jargon. It is equally applicable and relevant to use 'Differentiated Learning Plans', 'Effective Learning Objectives', 'Individual Plans' or 'Play Plans' – whatever is appropriate in your situation and for the child with whom you are working.

Finally, you'll come across the occasional reference to Area SENCOs in the book. At the time of writing, the terms 'Inclusion Consultant', 'Inclusion Officer' or 'Inclusion Adviser' are now being used in some local authorities to refer to Area SENCOs. The terms all apply to designated practitioners performing the same role which, in essence, remains unchanged, regardless of the title of the post held.

Let's consider next what a SENCO needs in order to do the job effectively. Apart from you having to be a sort of early years Houdini, your diplomatic, social, organisational, humanitarian and specialist skills need to be developed, alert and active at any given moment! The Pre-school Learning Alliance (2002) sums up very well what the minimum specifications of a SENCO should be:

Knowledge and understanding

- Diploma in Pre-school Practice or equivalent level 3 qualification
- Knowledge and understanding of the DfES* SEN Code of Practice
- Knowledge of relevant legislation
- Sound understanding of child development, and of children's needs
- Understanding and implementation of equal opportunities

Experience

- Experience of implementing the requirements of the SEN Code of Practice
- 3 years' experience of working in a pre-school setting

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- Experience of contributing to the development of Individual Education Plans
- Experience of participating in reviews
- Experience of working with very young children with SEN and their families
- Experience of working in a multi-disciplinary team

Skills

- Sound observation and record-keeping skills
- Ability to plan and implement Individual Education Plans
- Ability to plan and participate in reviews
- Ability to write clear reports
- Ability to work with a range of professionals
- Ability to work with parents and encourage their involvement in their child's learning
- Ability to work in a team and to lead a team of adults

Some specialist pre-schools may demand additional knowledge and expertise in their area of specialist provision. This should also be indicated in the person specification.¹

Now before you wail in despair and say, *I'm not all those, I can't be all those and I haven't done all those*, have a think about your experience and expertise as a mainstream early years practitioner. You'll have worked closely with parents/carers, colleagues and other professionals. You'll have attended and/or organised meetings, parents' evenings or case conferences. You'll have kept up to date with your records, portfolios, files and profiles. You'll have planned activities, lessons or sessions, adapting and differentiating them to ensure all the children were included. You'll have written reports, recommendations and resumés. By definition, you're an early years practitioner because you have your qualification(s) and knowledge and experience of child development. So, in the final analysis, these specifications of a SENCO aren't a million miles removed from your present situation. If there's an area or two in which you'd like to expand your knowledge and/or experience, ask for the means to do it – if you need it to fulfil your SENCO role effectively, then you should receive it!

One of the most important things to remember is that **you do not have to do everything yourself**. It isn't your job to implement the Individual Education Plans (IEPs), Play Plans or Individual Target Programmes (except where they're for one of 'your' children) or to train your colleagues (unless you have that specific brief because of an extra qualification, for example) or to draw up the SEN policy. You're there as a **coordinator** and as such, you can enable your colleagues to take on board and carry out *their* responsibilities. So don't try to be all things to all people, because you'll end up being of no help to anybody, particularly the children. I hope that this book will enable you to find the ways there are of getting help and support, not only for your colleagues but also for yourself – especially for yourself. If only one or two SENCOs finish this book feeling more confident and with a better belief in themselves, then I'll be a happy author!

Note

¹ Pre-school Learning Alliance (2002) *The Role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator in Pre-school Settings*. London: Pre-school Learning Alliance.

* NB the DfES is now the DCSF: the Department for Children, Schools and Families.