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The SENCO year – a bit of forward planning goes a long way

The **key points** covered in this chapter are:

- Practical strategies for making life as a SENCO both organised and easier.
- Planning the year ahead.
- Statutory assessment – following the timetable.



INTRODUCTION

By taking time to plan an overview of the year ahead, you'll be giving yourself an easy-reference, set-out agenda that will make your life as a SENCO much easier, especially once you're into the busy roll of activities that are woven into the life of an early years setting.

The *Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice* has an inbuilt timetable for implementing Individual Education Plans (IEPs),* holding reviews (whether of Differentiated Learning Plans [DLPs], IEPs or of Statements of Special Educational Needs) and carrying out statutory assessments. For example, it states that everybody involved in a review must have a fortnight's notice of the review date; they must also have sufficient time to prepare their reports or comments, and to submit or circulate these beforehand.

Keeping up to date with these timed commitments can be difficult and stressful, particularly if your setting has several children whose programmes are operating at different times across the year. Here we'll explore how to plan well ahead of time, enabling you to have a 'glance-at' system that keeps you up to speed.

PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR MAKING LIFE AS A SENCO ORGANISED AND EASIER

Assuming you're starting from scratch, it's a good idea first to have a look at your position as SENCO, in the context of your setting. As we discussed in the

(* You may prefer to use 'Effective Learning Outcomes' and/or 'Differentiated Learning Plans'. Whatever method or title you use for these tailor-made plans for the child, their objective remains the same as that of IEPs, which is the term used throughout the *SEN Code of Practice*.)

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Introduction, no single book can address the needs of every early years setting, since there's such a variety of provision on offer. However, have a look at the following questions – cherry-pick those that are relevant and appropriate to your situation – and use your answers to focus your thoughts on what you already have and what you might need.

- Are you confident and comfortable in your role as SENCO?
- If not, can you say for what reason(s)?
- Have you received sufficient training?
- Have you received effective training?
- If not, can you access training of the type and standard you require?
- Does your daily/weekly routine enable you to have sufficient dedicated SENCO-time? If not, can you address this?
- Does your setting acknowledge your position as SENCO, e.g. by awarding you recognised status, influence, time, resources, finances, support, etc.?
- Do your setting's resources, equipment, facilities and structure enable you to support children with differing needs effectively?
- Do they enable you to practise inclusion fully and effectively?
- If not, can you address the reasons why not?
- Are you confident in your abilities to support your colleagues and meet their needs in relation to including children with differing needs?
- If not, why not? And what can be done about it?
- Have your colleagues received sufficient and effective training?
- If not, can they access it, or can you access it for them?
- Do you feel supported and valued in your setting by (a) your management team, (b) your colleagues, (c) your Local Authority (LA) or another authority's provision and facilities?
- Do you feel ineffective and/or unable to carry out your role as SENCO? If so, make a list of the reasons why, and decide what can be addressed immediately, and what's short term, medium term and long term.
- Do you have the opportunity to meet with other SENCOs regularly for mutual support, exchange of ideas, sharing of best practice, etc.? If not, can you do something about it?

Keep your answers on file, and revisit them after nine months or so (remember to date your original answers). If you find that you're making progress with your situation, that's fine. If, however, you find that your answers seem to be the same,

or haven't changed much, it might be a good idea to review your situation with your management colleagues, highlighting the areas you feel need to be developed. Use the questionnaire above to support your case.

Nuts and bolts (well – maybe a filing cabinet and photocopier/printer/scanner)

Let's have a look now at the down-to-earth stuff. If you're a newly appointed SENCO and wondering where to start, don't despair – just start at the beginning, decide what you need and ask for it!

Here's a starter list:

- *An efficient, confidential and lockable filing system.* Depending on your needs, this could be a filing cabinet with two or three drawers, a small cupboard or even a dedicated drawer within the main, larger filing system. But stake a claim to some SENCO and/or SEN-only space. If you're really lucky, your setting may even give you an area of your own (dare I say *an office?* ...). Some practitioners prefer to keep their records on the computer and print hard copy only when required. If this is the case with you, do make sure that all data are protected or encoded/anonymised to ensure absolute security and confidentiality. This is especially important if you keep records on a shared and/or open computer which can be accessed by personnel who are not authorised to view these files.
- *Folders for the children's records.* Here you should decide as a staff whether to incorporate a section that's designated for their SEN documentation within the child's main folder, or whether you want a separate SEN folder. As a team, decide how you want to file the folders, e.g. by level of the *SEN Code of Practice*, by age group, by setting group, by key worker, in alphabetical order, etc. Don't forget to decide on the type of folder, e.g. ring binders, manila wallets, plastic folders, etc. Your budget will probably help in making this decision!
- *Coloured stickers.* You can use these on the outside of each child's folder, to show at a glance what stage of the *SEN Code of Practice* the child has reached, e.g. a blue sticker for 'Expression of Concern/Differentiated Learning', a green sticker for 'Early Years Action', a yellow sticker for 'Early Years Action Plus' and a red sticker for 'Statutory Assessment'. As the child moves through the different levels, simply put a sticker in the next colour onto the front of the folder.
- *Ring binders and clear plastic insert-wallets.* Use these to file summary sheets, forms, registers, etc. that are currently in use – in other words, the everyday working documents containing information you may want to check frequently and quickly. You might decide as a setting that everybody should have duplicate files with copies of the same information. Make sure that all colleagues keep such files and records in secure and confidential places.
- *Wallets for blank pro forma, record sheets, letters, etc.* Keep these well stocked up – there's nothing more irritating than needing a form or review sheet only to find the wallet is empty. Have a rule that says whoever takes out the last form should make several more copies and leave them in the wallet for future users.

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- *A wall calendar with every day on it.* Depending on your setting, you'll need one that shows either the calendar year (January to December) or the academic year (September to August). Keep it displayed so that all staff can see at a glance what's happening in relation to the 'additional needs events', but display it in a confidential place and position.

The paper chase

By definition, you'll probably have a lot of paperwork to store. Much of it will be record forms – blank ones, completed ones, and 'sleeping' ones waiting to be finally discarded – but which ones should you keep? Here's a list:

- Observation forms
- Assessment sheets/baselines/checklists; etc.
- Expression of Concern forms
- Differentiated Learning Plan (DLP) forms (or chosen equivalent)
- Play Plan forms
- Home/setting communication forms or system
- Activity report sheets
- Individual Education Plan (IEP) forms (or their chosen equivalent)
- Review forms
- Summary sheets
- Referral forms (a) to outside agents, (b) for Statutory Assessment
- Educational advice forms – these are usually supplied by the Local Authority (LA)
- Statements of Special Educational Needs
- Letters.

You'll also need to keep in the file your setting's SEN documents and information, and all the documentation from the LA, outside agents, voluntary bodies, etc., that your colleagues may need. *What documentation?* you might ask. The answer is

- your SEN policy (long and short versions, where appropriate)
- the LA's SEN policy and all relevant circulars, directives and documentation issued locally
- Parent Partnership documents
- *SureStart* documents (or their equivalent) relating to additional needs
- contact details of parent support groups, translators, alternative communication agents, etc.

- the *SEN Code of Practice* and the *SEN Toolkit*, plus any other relevant and current government circulars regarding additional needs
- contact details, prospectuses, policies, etc., of outside agents and/or other departments, e.g. social services, health, etc.
- In-service training (INSET) materials and other relevant copiables, documentation, etc. (where relevant).

If you keep the logistical aspects of the job organised and easy to use, life as a SENCO will be less fraught. It is a demanding job, and you don't need the added stress of trying to find records, contact details, local procedures, etc. which have been lost and are now in a heap of damp documents piled up on a work surface in the Water Play area!

Planning the year ahead

It will depend on your setting what you will need to plan and how. For example, if you're a SENCO in a large primary school, you'll have more manpower, time and resources than if you're SENCO in a pre-school or for a group of childminders. You'll need to assess what you have to hand and how you can exploit it, in order to do the job effectively. There's no doubt that the role of SENCO involves plenty of paperwork, so getting this under control must be one of your priorities. If you and your computer have a close relationship, use a good spreadsheet program to plan the year ahead. Setting up the calendar at the beginning may involve a bit of a time-investment on your part, but once the job's done, all you'll need to do in future years is tweak the fine details.

Divide your jobs into less frequent ones (the annual or biannual happenings) and frequent ones (the ongoing daily, weekly or monthly stints, or those that happen every three months/each term) and decide which are happening when. Decide, too, which dates are non-negotiable and log these onto the calendar before you do anything else. Let's have a look at this in more detail.

Less frequent jobs

First of all, identify the whole-setting jobs and commitments that take place across the year. Here's a list, although some of the items on it may not apply to you, depending on your setting:

- whole-setting assessment sessions, e.g. medical and/or dental checks, baseline/checklist assessments for mass admissions, etc.
- INSET sessions (your own and/or your colleagues') and the dates these are scheduled
- annual reviews of Statements of Special Educational Needs, and biannual reviews where relevant
- annual and/or three-monthly/termly commitments involving the children, e.g. trips, outings, visits, the photographer, pantomimes and other social events, etc.
- times where you can expect large numbers of children to be absent, e.g. high season holiday periods, etc.

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Log onto your calendar any dates that you know are definite, even if those booked for much later in the year may need to be rescheduled or cancelled. This will help you to avoid double booking. By keeping the year planner near the telephone, you can see at a glance whether a suggested date made by a caller is convenient.

Frequent jobs

Next, identify the events that happen every three months (or every term), every month or every week. Among these might be:

- your own regular meetings, e.g. a staff meeting every Thursday afternoon, a meeting with other SENCOs on the third Wednesday of the month, Parent/Staff Group meetings every fourth Monday afternoon, etc.
- regular and/or arranged visits by outside agents, e.g. the health visitor calls in every other Monday, the educational psychologist comes on the first Tuesday after each half-term holiday, the social worker pops in every Thursday afternoon, etc.
- reviews of DLPs, Play Plans, IEPs, etc., whether these are every six weeks or every three months, as appropriate
- meetings to review the setting's SEN policy
- meetings with the governors (if appropriate to you)
- parents'/carers' open days or evenings (if appropriate).

Again, log these onto the year planner and once they're in place, you can play around with the free dates for other meetings or reviews and so on, that will crop up as the year rolls along. It's a good idea first to get into the habit thing every Monday of checking the week's bookings, commitments and jobs on the 'To Do' list.

Also check:

- the review schedule for the fourth week from where you are, and log in all the 'To Dos' for each review, on the relevant date. (For a more detailed discussion of these 'To Dos', see the section *IEP reviews* in Chapter 4, page 41)
- this week's IEP listings to see who's been on what level and for how long
- whether there are any meetings to arrange regarding these IEPs
- whether any outside agents are due to make support visits.

By now, your year planner will be starting to fill up quite a bit, and you'll also be beginning to see why it's a good idea to have an overview of what's happening on your additional needs agenda.

Once you've filled in the immovable feasts on your year planner, you'll need to update it on at least a weekly basis. If you can, get into the habit of checking each evening whether you have marked something up that was arranged during the day.

MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT	SUN
	1	2 David Jones's docs all in yet?	3 3.30: Policy review – whole staff	4	5	6
7 Suzie Scott's docs all in yet? 3.30: SENCO meeting	8	9 Biscuits etc. for David's review?	10 Send invites & docs for Suzie Scott's review (24th)	11 10.00: David Jones's IEP review	12	13
14 Ask for docs for Sam Brown's review (due 10.04.)	15	16 Vikki B's IEP 3 wks old – check progress	17	18 10.00: Ed. Psych. re: John F. (Mum coming)	19	20
21	22	23 Biscuits etc. for Suzie's review?	24 10.00: Suzie Scott's IEP review	25	26	27
28 9.00 – 3.30 Staff SEN training day	29	30 Mrs Smith's group on farm visit	31 pm: Charity Santa Dash	1 Ask for docs for Gita Rani's review (due 28.05)		

Figure 1.1 An example of a completed month from a year planner form

It's so easy in the hubbub of a busy early years setting to come off the phone and be so distracted by one of the children marmelising another, that you forget to make a note in your diary of an arranged visit or review meeting or whatever. Taking a few minutes of peace and quiet at the end of the day will help keep you up to date, and may even save you some embarrassment later when everybody turns up for a review meeting that you'd completely forgotten about!

STATUTORY ASSESSMENT – FOLLOWING THE TIMETABLE

Because the *SEN Code of Practice* gives a specific timetable for Statutory Assessments and the issuing of Statements of Special Educational Needs, you might find it a good

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idea to have a separate calendar or diary dedicated to this level of the process. On a routine year planner the day spaces can look quite busy and crowded over time and you may miss an important date in the schedule of a Statutory Assessment. Having a dedicated planner will avoid this. Again, a computer spreadsheet or even a simple wall-hanging calendar will do nicely.

Once you have a child going down the Statutory Assessment route, mark on the calendar the dates showing what should be happening and when. You can work these out by looking at the flow chart on page 120 of the *SEN Code of Practice* and calculating the appropriate dates following the date that your child's referral was received by the LA. You can also check this by ringing them to confirm the receipt and the relevant date. So, for example, if your child's referral was received by the LA on 3 March, the obligatory timetable is this:

	3 March	LA receives referral
by	14 April	LA must decide whether to assess (i.e. within 6 weeks)
by	23 June	LA asks for and receives advice, and must decide whether to make a Statement of Special Educational Needs (i.e. over the next 10 weeks, which is 16 weeks from receipt of referral)
by	7 July	LA must issue either draft Statement or reasons for not making a Statement (i.e. within the next 2 weeks, which is 18 weeks from receipt of referral)
by	1 September	LA must issue final Statement (i.e. within the next 8 weeks, which is 26 weeks from receipt of referral)

Figure 1.2

The dates on your wall calendar could therefore look something like this:

3 March	LA received Jade Kirby's referral (confirmed on phone 8 March – spoke to Kelly Blythe, SEN Dept.)
14 April	Has LA decided whether to assess Jade Kirby? If not, chase.
28 April	Has LA requested educational advice re: Jade Kirby yet? If not, chase.
23 June	Has LA received advice re: Jade Kirby? Has it decided whether to make Statement? If not yet notified, chase.
7 July	Has LA issued draft Statement or reasons for not making a Statement for Jade Kirby? If not, chase.
1 September	Has LA issued Jade Kirby's final Statement? If not, chase.

Figure 1.3

Once the child's Statement of Special Educational Needs has been issued, there'll be a strict timetable of reviews. Usually the LA convenes these reviews so, while as SENCO you organise in-house review meetings, you're unlikely to be expected to

do the Annual or Biannual reviews. However, you'll still need to collate the paperwork, educational advice and feedback from all the involved agents within the setting.

Above all, you must continue to make sure the child's parents/carers are being kept informed, advised of their rights and consulted for their opinion, as indeed so must the child, where possible and appropriate. They may need extra support during this time, so it's important you check whether they're comfortable with the process and understand fully what's happening. And, of course, it goes without saying that the child must continue to receive support and help too.

The legislation requires an Annual Review to be held on the anniversary of the issue of the Statement. For very young children, an interim review will also be held (i.e. every six months), although this will be on a less formal level. Because the needs and development of children in the early years stage can change rapidly and fundamentally, their progress must be monitored very closely and reviewed more often than older children's.

From the content of this chapter, you can see it's not hugely demanding to put together an organised and smoothly-run schedule. As with all things, time and effort invested in the beginning will pay dividends in the end. Once you have a system in place that you're comfortable with, and that you find easy to run, much of the paper-chasing that the SENCO's role demands will be manageable. Don't become frustrated if you haven't got it all in place within 24 hours. Take time to let your system 'bed down', so you can see how and where it works for you, and where it's causing you headaches; give it two or three months/one term and then look at it again to see how you can change it to suit your needs.

Remember, you're not on your own. If you're unsure about anything, do ask your Inclusion Consultant. They may also be stumped by your query, but they'll know where to go to get it sorted out!