

When the Need Isn't Seen: Identifying Hidden SEN in the Classroom

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Why This Matters: The Scale of Hidden SEN

- 13.6% of pupils in England receive SEN Support — many without a formal plan.
- Autism is the most common primary need in EHC plans (around one-third).
- ADHD affects around 5% of children, but a significant portion remains undiagnosed.
- Neurodevelopmental conditions often overlap (e.g., ASD + Dyslexia, ADHD + SEMH).
- Delayed recognition leads to academic underachievement, emotional distress, and disengagement



The Cost of Missed Needs: Emotional and Educational Impacts

- Emotional distress (“I’m stupid”, “I can’t do this”)
- Increased behavior challenges
- Low self-esteem and school anxiety and avoidance
- Reduced academic progress
- Higher likelihood of exclusion or internal truancy
- Increased time in ‘isolation’ rooms
- Breakdown in teacher–pupil relationships



What to Look For: Behaviour Domains

Behavioural Domain

Attention & focus

Organisation & planning

Social interaction

Emotional regulation

Communication

Possible Classroom Examples

Difficulty sustaining attention;
forgetfulness; incomplete work

Missing deadlines; losing materials; poor
time management

Trouble making friends;
misunderstanding social cues

Frequent meltdowns; anxiety;
withdrawal

Literal interpretations; difficulty
following instructions



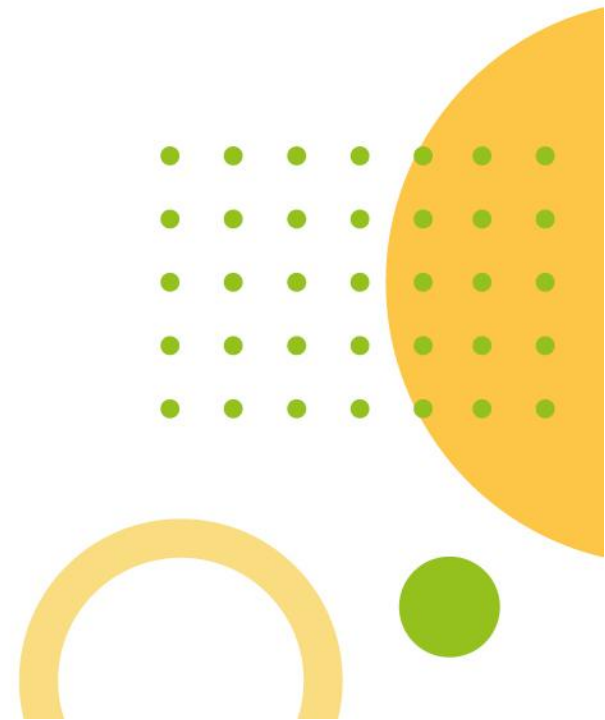
ADHD: Key Classroom Behaviours

- Inattention: forgetfulness, missing instructions
- Hyperactivity: fidgeting, movement seeking
- Impulsivity: calling out, interrupting, risk-taking
- Working memory difficulties
- Time blindness (poor sense of time)



ASD: Key Classroom Behaviours

- Differences in social communication
- Literal understanding
- Sensory sensitivities (noise, lights, touch)
- Routines and predictability are essential
- Repetitive behaviours or intense interests



Pathological Demand Avoidance – What Is It & Behaviours to Recognise

- Anxiety-driven demand avoidance
- Negotiating, distracting, humour or charm to avoid tasks
- Sudden emotional changes under pressure
- Strong need for control
- May appear socially confident but highly anxious underneath



Dyslexia- What you might see

- Slow or inaccurate reading
- Avoiding reading aloud
- Poor spelling, letter reversals
- Difficulty organising written ideas
- Avoidance of writing tasks
- Better verbal than written responses
- Behavior changes when asked to do reading or writing tasks



SEMH- What you might see

- Anxiety and worry
- Withdrawal or avoiding social situations
- Behaviour escalation under stress
- Low resilience or low frustration tolerance
- “I don’t care” attitudes masking fear or shame
- Inconsistent effort linked to emotional state



When Needs overlap

- ADHD + ASD
- ASD + Dyslexia
- ADHD + SEMH
- PDA within ASD
- Dyslexia + anxiety
- Trauma overlay on existing needs
- Masking behaviour that hides true difficulties



Three In-Depth Strategies for Supporting Unrecognised SEN

- Strategy 1: Structured Observation & Reflection
- Strategy 2: Building Relationships & Emotional Safety
- Strategy 3: Differentiated Teaching & Scaffolding



Strategy 1- Structured Observation & Reflection

- Use short, objective behaviour logs
- Note triggers, time of day, task type
- Watch for patterns (environmental, emotional, sensory)
- Compare behaviours across subjects or teachers
- Share observations with SENCo early



Strategy 2: Building Relationships and Emotional Safety

- Positive relational climate
- Regular check-ins
- Consistency in approach
- Avoid public sanctions or shaming
- Restorative conversations
- Quiet regulation spaces



Strategy 3- Differentiated Teaching & Scaffolding

ADHD:

Chunk tasks

Timers and checklists

Movement breaks

ASD:

Visual schedules

Predictable routines

Reduced sensory overload

PDA:

- Indirect language (“I wonder if...”)
- Choice-based tasks
- Collaborative problem-solving

Dyslexia:

- Dyslexia-friendly fonts
- Audio options
- Word banks, writing frames

SEMH:

- Check-ins
- Safe spaces
- Flexible deadlines



Impact of Using These Strategies

- Improved attention and engagement
- Reduction in behaviour incidents
- Increased work completion
- Greater emotional stability
- Strengthened teacher–student relationships
- Better long-term outcomes



Monitoring Progress

- Pre/Post behaviour reflection
- Work sampling
- Pupil voice (mini-interviews)
- Six-week review cycle
- SENCo consultation
- Adjust strategies based on evidence



Overcoming Barriers and Challenges

Barriers:

- Time pressures
- Lack of confidence
- Behaviour misinterpretation
- Miscommunication with home
- Staff inconsistency

Solutions:

- Start with one pupil
- Share workload with SENCo
- Use brief logs
- Professional curiosity over assumptions



The case for Early identification

- Prevents unnecessary sanctions
- Improves wellbeing
- Builds engagement
- Reduces exclusions
- Supports long-term outcomes
- Creates an inclusive school culture



Next Steps

- SEN observation week
- Staff shadowing or peer observation
- Regular SEN CPD slots
- Whole-school regulation strategies
- Clear referral pathway to SENCo
- Build an SEN working group



Q&A

Thank you — what questions or reflections do you have?

