

Empowering SENCOs in Their Role

Author: Anne-Marie Harrison,
Ideas Afresh Ltd



This resource is brought to you by Anne-Marie Harrison, Education and Training Director Ideas Afresh Education Ltd, in partnership and with thanks to Witherslack Group. Anne-Marie also offers family support and CPD accredited staff training.

Situational examples included below are not intended as relative to any particular individual or school setting but do reflect true examples.

Introduction

Empowering SENCOs in Their role, supports SENCOs and those working with school aged children and adolescents, with a diagnosis or presentation of autism and /or associated neuro developmental differences (referred to as learners below) to liaise with professionals and parents, when supporting autistic learners.

Changing Hearts and Minds

SENCO role expectations outlined in the National Award for SEN Co-Ordinator include: support special educational needs; initiate and support education health and care plans and annual reviews; facilitate and make effective plans, intervene, record and review; ensure appropriate strategies are in place; and set challenging targets. The list does go on but does not mention changing hearts and minds, yet this is cited as one of the most common but difficult elements of the role. Perhaps there is a hope that attitudes and belief are in alignment.

“If only everyone was on the same page with these kids... can you believe X claims if kids can’t do the work they shouldn’t be here” (High school SENCO).

It is possible attitudes and beliefs such as these are rooted in a teacher’s own fears. An empowered SENCO can often be the bridge between the teacher’s concerns and appropriate strategies. Changes in hearts and minds are likened to ‘leaving our status quo’. This is something according to Bridges (2004) many of us are not comfortable with and feel challenged by. Knowledge builds power which builds confidence. Confident practitioners are usually more open to take risks, to explore changes, and to be flexible and accommodating in exploring appropriate strategies.

Recent coverage on Sky News brought to the nation’s attention the plight of Beth. Her experience of inappropriate secure accommodation was distressing to hear. The transition from this distressed anxious young lady to living an engaged, supported and fulfilling lifestyle was summed up by her father:

“Just having the right people in the right place, the right environment, supporting her in the right way. It’s as simple as that. The difference now is Beth is surrounded by people who fully understand autism and her part of the spectrum.”

This story demonstrates how vital the right hearts and minds are to the success and wellbeing of our learners and their futures.

A Memorable Impression

“I kept a flashing headband from Christmas and find popping it on suddenly raises awareness of my presence!”

EYFS SENCO

“The biggest eye opener for me was Suial, one of my autistic kids had become unsettled in class, it was only when he asked me when his real teacher was coming back I realised my lockdown hairstyle had thrown him completely.”

Primary SENCO

“Sam is no trouble but lies with his head on the desk the whole lesson, he is getting ok marks but can he really be taking it all in?” Query from High School Teacher to SENCO

Teachers across the age range express concern at creating an engaging and memorable learning experience for their autistic students. Capturing attention in an autism friendly way should recognise that looking, listening, sitting up and concentrating all at once can be overwhelming. A more open and willing perspective beyond interpreting their behaviour as ‘not paying attention, being silly or lazy’ is an important step towards engaging successfully.

When teachers are starting from a more positive perspective, they are likely to be open to considering what is available other than lying on the desk for an overwhelmed student. Is the lesson over or under stimulating? Is there a place to calm for a moment? Are there sensory trays with small quiet activities available?

For autistic neurodiverse learners, the classroom environment can feel like a first impression every day. If we consider as adults arriving in an unfamiliar country where communication systems feel alien, social expectations differ, sensory experiences are all new, everything feels and looks unfamiliar, it can feel very frightening.

Teresa Jolliffe (1992) shares **“It may be because things that I see do not always make the right impression that I am frightened of so many things that can be seen: people (particularly their faces), very bright lights, crowds, things moving suddenly, large images and buildings that are unfamiliar, unfamiliar places, my own shadow, the dark, bridges, rivers, canals, streams, the sea.”**

It is important to point out that each individual learner has personal and unique experiences and responses. Teresa is sharing hers but another learner may have totally different experiences. The reactions, just as adults visiting very unfamiliar environments, will be perceived and coped with uniquely. A state of heightened alertness, sensory stimuli or confused communication may for our learners be triggered by the slightest of changes that the other students have not even noticed.

Supporting staff in creating inclusive environments begins with the first impression. Are they warm and willing, is the room engaging but not overwhelming, are there areas where learners are calm? Often small but effective changes can also have a positive impact on the neurotypical learners too.

“Every lesson I put name cards on the desks the students are so receptive and my autistic learner comes into class a minute ahead of time, chooses his place first and then hands out the name cards for the others.”

This teacher was delighted that restructuring the start of the lesson created a positive first impression for her class to begin their lesson.

Using consistent terminology

There is likely to be around 1% of the school population with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), diagnosed or possibly not. Of those, 50 - 70% may also have Attention Deficit Disorder (ADHD) or possibly terms such as PDA (Pathological Demand Avoidance), ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder), Dyslexia, Dyscalculia and possibly other references that denote and explain their personal profile.

Terminology is altered and reformed as research enlightens us and an important consideration is that families and professionals are familiar and comfortable with the language used. 'Neuro-developmental disorders' is a term used in the medical diagnostic manuals to encompass the range of terminology mentioned above and is used for categorisation and identification. (DSM-5 2013 ICD-11 May 2019). It is an umbrella term now more commonly used along with neurodiverse and neurotypical. These terms hopefully promote a more holistic understanding of an individual's needs, but we should not lose sight of the importance of recognising their personal experiences of the social, communicative and sensory aspects of the world.

Some of these terminologies may explain and present a person who has little or no verbal communication, severe cognitive impairment or a person who is verbally able and academically gifted in some areas but remains challenged in social experiences. Many autistic adults share that with appropriate support, maturation, and life experience, they are very capable of leading a fulfilling and rewarding life.

When party to collating Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP) consistent language supports a collaborative and inclusive ethos. Review meetings run more smoothly when the terms, abbreviations and language are understood by all present. An environment fostering joined up thinking and planning unites policies and practices.

Policy and Practice

It may be helpful to take a step back and remind ourselves of what it is we want policies and practices to achieve for our students and ourselves.

“I’m the one everyone comes to for every tiny incident; I’m supposed to be the guru of behaviour management, you can bet every break time there will be a knock on that staff room door.”

As the SENCO you are part of a team and not solely responsible. Investing time and energy in training, ideally the whole school team, can be hugely beneficial. It supports a more collaborative ethos and shares the responsibility. A partnership approach is important for all students but particularly so for learners perhaps less able to share information:

“Please can you tell me if something has changed? Faye has come home from school again most upset. She says she couldn’t go inside at lunchtime and that’s when she was biting her arm. I thought at our meeting, was it an IEP or something...whatever it was I’m sure we agreed if Faye was overwhelmed at break time, she could go inside?”

This excerpt from a parent's email to school illuminates the importance of ensuring lunchtime supervisors, class teachers and peers, if appropriate, are all aware of agreed action plans and if something goes wrong parents are prepared for this and informed appropriately. Policies remind us of a 'whole school' responsibility.

“All schools have duties under the Equality Act 2010 towards individual disabled children and young people.” SEN Code of Practice (2015).

“All teachers demonstrate knowledge and understanding of how pupils learn and this must impact on teaching.” Teaching standards (2011).

Collaboration with families is extremely enriching and helpful. It can directly support knowledge and understanding of how a learner is best supported. In the previous excerpt it served to generate a useful internal review, to establish where communication broke down and ensure everyone understood the plan that was in place, and why. A well communicated and collaborative approach is more likely to empower teachers in implementing changes to support personalised learning.

Personalise Classroom Strategies

Encouragement to implement strategies often grows from a desire to create a more positive learning experience. Knowledge grows confidence and confident practitioners are more likely to explore and experiment with different ideas and strategies. A key stage one teacher shared that she had noticed a learner in her class was putting his hands over his ears so frequently it was getting in the way of his learning. He was reluctant to wear earmuffs. The teacher had aired the idea of carpet but budgets and, and, and...!

The teacher shared this in a home to schoolbook and Mum sent a photograph of dining chairs with tennis balls on the legs!

“School was overwhelmed with the response when they sent a note out for tennis balls and Mrs Trinsal told me lots of kids liked the quieter room .. who says autistic kids do not add value?” (Names changed but with permission from school and home visit)

Working collaboratively to observe and reflect on the learner facilitates an understanding of specific sensory, communicative and social differences which often cause anxiety. This creates an ideal starting place to identify strategies that may be helpful and explore how they may need personalising.

There are a number of broad recommendations for supporting learners but even these need considering in terms of the information available and how it is interpreted. The use of timers is a good example. Many of our learners benefit from the denotation of time but consideration of types of timers may be needed. For some, a visual sand or oil timer can be distracting, a traffic light timer alarming, a ticking, countdown timer distressing and a clock with a sticker on most tolerable!

Schedules are another commonly suggested strategy but if these are too busy or perceived as ‘demanding’ a PDA learner may become more distressed and less engaged by it. They might better tolerate a more spontaneous ‘lucky dip’ style visual where a number of choices are offered rather than a more structured ‘first this and then that’ approach that for many learners can be the reassuring, calming predictability that they need.

Clearly then, support and guidance needs to be personalised and may benefit from sharing best practices as well as an autism experienced professional helping in exploring the options. Behaviours and responses often communicate if the implemented strategies and ideas need reviewing!

Developing a SENCO 'tool box' for autistic learners

Tea, tissues, tons of tolerance, creative thinking are voted as the top tools by a group of trainee special needs teachers as they discuss the importance of realistic expectations, 'not every day is going to be a good day'.

Phil Christie, in his book *Understanding PDA*, highlights the need to prioritise and gauge tolerance levels of teachers and learners. This is a partnership approach particularly important in prioritising and deciding on where, when and how support is best offered.

- Does communication need some attention so that is clearer, more visual?
- Do timetables and corresponding books need colour coordinating to assist with executive functioning challenges in getting oneself organised?

Exposing learners to environments and situations within their tolerance levels and within reach of success and completion is imperative for good mental health. Rather than trying something for the first ten minutes and failing it is more positive to join in for the last ten minutes and finish at the end point. This experience develops a better attitude to learning because it fosters a self-belief in succeeding.

No one strategy has magic powers, but if we load our 'tool-boxes' with some of the following it is likely that we will reduce opportunities for failure and frustration and increase the opportunities for engaged and successful learning:

- Appropriate knowledge and information, autism specific training.
- Reflective and observation skills.
- Practical supports for sensory experiences.
- Visuals to help with communication.
- Countdown systems that are acceptable.
- Targets that are framed around tolerance.

Activity

This activity can be used to prompt discussion and identify where changes may be best tolerated. The process of labelling teacher expectation against learner tolerance or usual behaviour helps to identify a target that may be too broad. Using a visual discussion aid with staff and learners if appropriate can alleviate tension and support constructive thinking.

For example **Target / request** sit on a chair.

The usual experience is 10 minutes on the chair then running around class. Observation and reflection suggested sensory processing makes the time on the chair difficult.

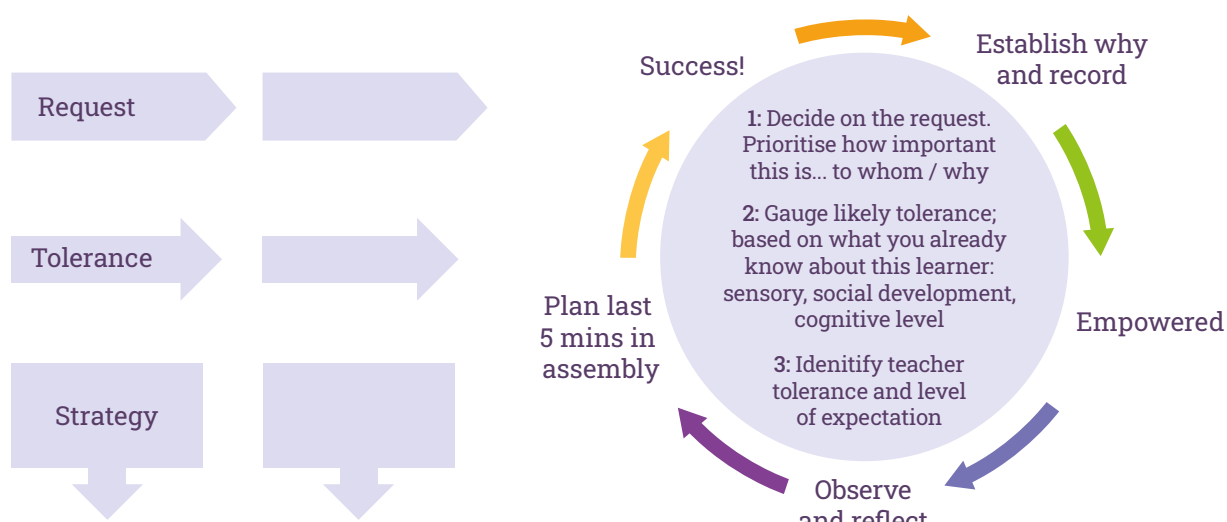
The teacher initially expected 60 minutes on the chair but armed with knowledge of sensory processing has moved the expectation arrow and the tolerance arrow to 20 minutes. However without additional strategies this is still unlikely to happen.

By using this activity to visually highlight tolerance levels and expectations, discussion about additional strategies is generated. It is agreed that a bean bag at the back of class will be available or pacing quietly will be accepted, after five minutes of sitting on the chair. This is less time than usually tolerated and hopefully will trigger a positive engagement in the process that will be extended over time in a maximum of five-minute increments. For this particular learner, because the pressure and attention around the situation was removed, Sam was able to tolerate his chair with a cushion he brought from home for up to 30 minutes.

Instructions

Cut out the arrows and complete

1. Decide on the request
Prioritise how important this is... to whom / why
2. Gauge likely tolerance; based on what you already know about this learner: sensory, social development, cognitive level. Place this in position on the gauge.
3. Identify teacher tolerance and level of expectation. Place this in position on the gauge
4. Discuss a possible strategy and identify where this may be best tolerated



Further Reading

Martin-Denham, S (2019) The SENCO Handbook: Leading Provision and Practice London Sage Corwin

Bridges, W (2004) Transitions Making Sense of Lifes Changes De Cappo Life long Books

The Story of Beth <https://news.sky.com/story/autistic-girl-who-was-locked-up-24-7-now-loves-hair-dye-gardening-and-fishing-one-year-on-12087199>

Terminology <https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/help-and-support/how-to-talk-about-autism>

About Witherslack Group

We are committed to sharing advice and support to parents, carers and professionals. Our webinars and online resources provide expert knowledge and practical support. If you would like to find out more information you can email webinars@witherslackgroup.co.uk or visit www.witherslackgroup.co.uk.



About Ideas Afresh Education

This resource is brought to you by Anne-Marie Harrison, Education and Training Director for Ideas Afresh Education Ltd, in partnership and with thanks to Witherslack Group. Anne-Marie offers family support and CPD accredited staff training.



If there are any topics raised in this resource you would like additional information on, or for a range of virtual support, home/school visits, or whole school CPD accredited training please contact Anne-Marie at annemarie@ideasafresh.co.uk or visit www.ideasafresh.co.uk