

Factsheet #6: Developing a supportive environment

For children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) to reach their full potential, they need effective, flexible support in a wide range of areas. While these support needs will differ for each individual, all good support starts in an environment in which all adults, children and young people see support as a positive element of a child or young person's life.

This resource has been co-produced with children and young people to provide guidance on developing an environment which is responsive to disabled children and young people's support needs, and views them in a positive light. It consists of two mutually reinforcing aspects: 'building a supportive environment' and 'talking about support needs'.

Important note: This resource has been co-produced with children and young people with a range of support needs. Where it references 'talking', this is intended to encompass the full range of communication methods, including non-verbal communication, signing, and creative methods.

Building a supportive environment

Normalise support needs

Children and young people can feel like their support needs are a problem, making them embarrassed or reluctant to raise where improvements could be made. By viewing support needs in a positive and proactive light, stigma can be reduced and all children, young people and supporting adults will feel more comfortable.

"[Support] needs to be practical and not feel like a bother."

"Some teachers get defensive when you say things aren't right and blame you for them."

- Ensure that everyone is aware of the Equality Act 2010 and the right to reasonable adjustments.
- Be positive about support needs so that children and young people feel they are valid.
- Use positive language which focuses on proactivity and finding solutions, rather than obstacles.
 - For example 'Would having a scribe help?' or 'What would make it easier for you to join in?' rather than 'Is this activity going to be a problem?'



For child-friendly resources on the Equality Act 2010, see:

[CRAE, Making the Most of the Equality Act 2010 – A Guide for Children and Young People in England](#)

[Government Equalities Office, The Equality Act: Making Equality Real \(Easy Read\)](#)

Build trust

In order to open up fully about their support needs, children and young people need to be able to trust the professionals who support them. This should be done by:

- Respecting children and young people's needs and wishes.
- Being open and honest.
- Taking action to make improvements.

"I need adults not to doubt my decisions."

"I trust adults who encourage me to make choices and listen to me."

Remember that support can be subtle

Obvious support can mark disabled children and young people out as 'different', impacting on self-esteem and social interactions, particularly as they get older.

"I want my support to be more arm's length as I get older, not right next to me."

"[Your supporter] pushes everyone away from you like you are in a bubble. They shouldn't necessarily sit next to you."

Children and young people have suggested that more subtle support could include:

- Peer support
- Building good relationships so professionals, children and young people can see when support is needed.
- Talking to children and young people in advance so they are not put on the spot in the course of the session.
- Building confidence to ask for support when required.

"Work out where children and young people can work together to support each other."

"It helps to know teachers that you can talk to, and you know that they'll help."

Note: This relies on support being seen as positive by adults, children and young people.

Take the pressure off

The onus is often on children and young people to raise support-related issues with professionals, however many lack the confidence to do so.

Here are a few ideas for informal communication methods, which can then be the basis of conversations with adults:

"Some people are more likely to suffer and just work on it without talking to people."

- RAG rating – the child or young person uses red, amber and green stickers to rate their support for a given session, day or week as appropriate.
- Thermometer – the child or young person has a poster of a thermometer on which they can mark their feelings on their support (e.g. not enough, just right, too much).
- Post box – the child or young person can put notes or drawings into their 'post box' to share what has and has not worked well for them in terms of support.

Top tip: Support children and young people to choose or design their own monitoring method so that they have full ownership over it. Be clear that it is their choice whether they use it or not.

"Build in an opportunity to say This isn't working for me."

Be flexible

Children and young people's needs change from activity to activity, and from day to day.

"However well you plan, things will always change. Different people need different support on different days"

"Make sure other young people know why things are being changed for me, and that it is for a good reason."

In order to be flexible, professionals must:

- Be aware of the child or young person's engagement and feelings throughout the session, however they express them.
- Be equipped to make positive change. This includes:
 - Willingness to adapt activities/ environments
 - Freedom and confidence to adapt activities/ environments
 - Access to resources for adapting activities/ environments



Adaptations might include, but are not limited to:

- Reasonable adjustment of rules
- Environment
- Availability of 1-to-1 support
- Resources and equipment

For more information on inclusion, see ...

[CDC \(2008\), Inclusion Policy](#)

[ALLFIE, An Inclusive Education Guide for Professionals](#)

"The person providing the support needs to know when the young person does and does not need their help with something. The young person also needs to be able to recognise when they need the help and feel that they are able to come forward to get it."

Build in reviews

As much as support needs change from day to day, they will also change as children and young people grow up, change learning environments and become more independent. Building in regular opportunities to formally discuss support can identify and pre-empt these changes.

Discussing support needs

Conversations about a disabled child or young person's support needs can be challenging. For the child or young person, the topic is deeply personal, and professionals may feel ill-equipped to respond. This section offers some simple strategies for conducting relaxed, positive, proactive conversations around support needs.



In general

Make time to talk

The children and young people who are most comfortable with discussing their support are those who have regular interactions with staff about it.

"[I feel confident in talking about my support needs because] the staff regularly check in to see if my needs have changed - every few months."

Be positive

Children and young people are often reluctant to talk about their support needs as they feel that support is a 'bother', or that discussions are not welcome. Establishing a relaxed, positive conversation environment will help them to see that talking about support needs is encouraged and necessary.

"Some teachers get defensive when you say things aren't right and blame you for them."

Build trust – We cover this on page 2!

Before the conversation:

Create the right environment

Ask the child or young person how they would be most comfortable having the conversation.

- They may prefer a more relaxed environment than face-to-face in an office. Consider alternatives, for example:
 - Walking together in the playground.
 - Talking while working on an activity together.
 - Finding more casual seating arrangements like beanbags or sofas.



Alleviate anxiety

A one-on-one meeting may make the child or young person feel like they are in trouble. Giving them ownership over the conversation will help to alleviate concerns:

- Ask the child or young person if there is anyone else who they would like to have there.
- Suggest a broad discussion framework in advance, but keep it relaxed. Ask the child or young person if there is anything else they would like to add or not talk about.

"Let the young person choose who is in the meeting with them."

It could be something as simple as:

- What is going well?
- What needs to be better?
- How will we know when things are working well?
- In a perfect world, my support would...

- Encourage the child or young person to prepare their thoughts in advance. This could include, for example:

- Drawings
- Videos
- Photos
- Creative writing

"Be creative, listen and support us."



During the meeting:

Make sure children and young people are aware of their right to reasonable adjustments.

Acknowledge the child or young person's views

- Reassure the child or young person of the validity of their views and experiences. Acknowledge and respect the child or young person's emotions.

"Don't put young people under pressure."

Listen actively

- Let the child or young person steer the conversation at their own pace.
- Encourage the child or young person not only to identify problems, but also to propose solutions.
- Paraphrase the child or young person's views and ideas to clarify understanding, and to show that you are taking the discussion seriously.

Consider alternatives

You may not always be able to provide exactly what a child or young person is seeking, and this should not be seen as a failure. Look at the challenges proactively by:

- Explaining why the request is not feasible.
- Understanding the underlying reasons for the request.
- Working with the child or young person to come up with a workable alternative.



Look forward

- Give an idea of the next steps.
- Work together to develop a plan for making any changes.
 - Will anybody else be involved in making the changes?
 - When can the child or young person expect to see change?
 - How will the child or young person know that changes are being made?

After the meeting:

- Provide an accessible record of the conversation.
- Maintain an open dialogue.
 - Update the child or young person with steps taken, including any delays or obstacles in implementing support.
 - Disabled children and young people are very aware of the current climate and often see themselves as a 'bother'. Open conversations can reassure an individual that their needs are valid. Work with the child or young person to establish systems for monitoring their support so this conversation is not a 'one off' (see page 1)
- Plan to review the support arrangements fully.

"They should record conversations so they can't get it wrong."

"Be honest with us!"



This resource is part of the Making Participation Work programme, a joint partnership between the Council for Disabled Children and KIDS, and funded by the Department for Education. For more information about the Making Participation Work programme, visit us at