



Engaging with Parent Carers

A free toolkit for West Northamptonshire Schools

Supporting schools to develop and strengthen positive relationships with Parents and Carers of children with SEND





This toolkit has been led by the Parent Carer Forum, West Northants Voices in Partnership, and co-produced in collaboration with West Northamptonshire schools who signed up to the pilot, parent carers of children and young people with SEND, and SEND services across West Northamptonshire.

Its development has been informed by robust evidence gathered through parent-perspective surveys, staff-perspective surveys, detailed interviews with parent carers and school staff (including Headteachers and SENCOs), written interview responses, and in-depth, unstructured discussions with parent carers and education professionals.

The toolkit is further strengthened by the integration of recent and relevant data collected through previous work, ensuring it reflects current experiences and priorities.

For further information, to discuss the toolkit, or to share feedback or ask questions, please contact the Project Lead, Amy Holland, at admin@wnvp.co.uk.



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DSL School

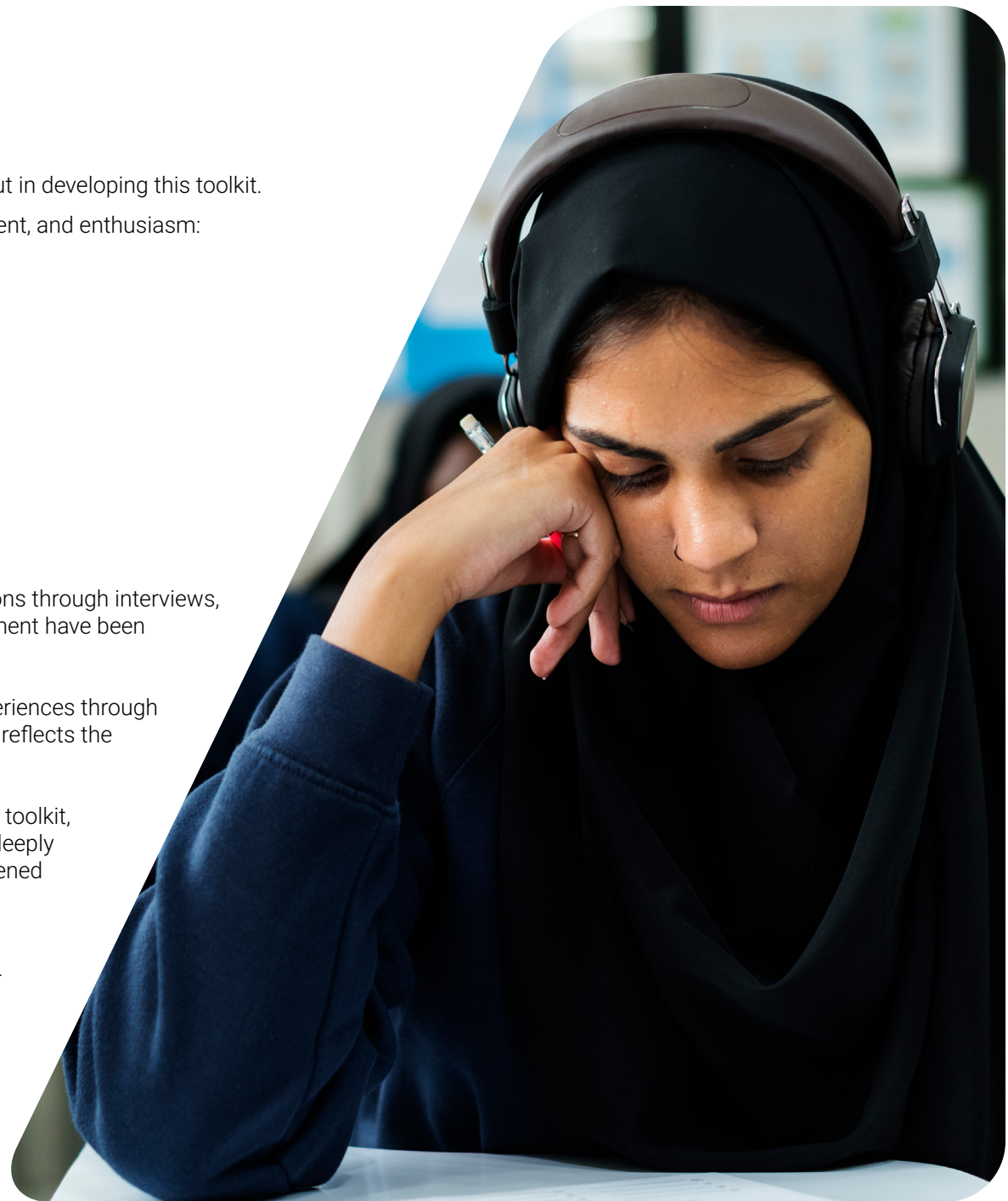
To the staff members from the participating schools, for your invaluable contributions through interviews, discussions, and completion of the survey. Your professional insights and commitment have been instrumental in shaping this resource.

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This toolkit would not have been possible without the collective support, collaboration, and commitment of everyone involved. Thank you for helping to make this resource a reality.



How To Use This Interactive Toolkit

This Toolkit is designed to be an interactive online resource. Throughout the document you will find many links to external resources and further reading.

The Toolkit has been intentionally designed for you to dip-in-and-out and to quickly navigate to the section that you wish to read, rather than read from cover-to-cover.

Each section has been designed as a page-per-view. Feel free to print and display any sections/pages that would aid your planning and implementation of strategies.

Below is some simple guidance to help you to navigate through the document.



The contents page is interactive. Click on a heading to be taken directly to that page



Click on the dedicated Home button on any page to go back to the contents page



Click on the left arrow to go back to the previous page



Click on the right arrow to go forward to the next page



Green ticks highlight positive feedback, practical tips, and good reflective practice



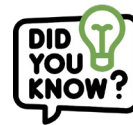
Red crosses highlight negative feedback, things to avoid, and common barriers



Orange question marks highlight key considerations and reflection questions



Mindful Thoughts appear throughout the Toolkit for your consideration



Other useful tips, links, and key messages appear throughout the Toolkit



Quotes from parent carers and teachers are featured throughout the Toolkit



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Section 1

About SEND in West Northamptonshire



Introduction

Building strong relationships with parents and carers is a fundamental part of everyday school life. Schools in West Northamptonshire regularly work with and consult parents for many reasons. Establishing a positive, trusting partnership with your parent community should be a priority for every school, regardless of setting, age range, or subject focus.

For pupils with SEND, engagement with parent carers is clearly defined in the [SEND Code of Practice](#), which recognises the vital role families play in every aspect of school life.

Parent carers often tell us they can feel isolated or on the margins of the wider school community. They may be perceived as anxious and frequently feel misunderstood or judged. This toolkit aims to help West Northamptonshire schools strengthen their understanding and engagement with parent carers. It includes practical ideas, best practice examples, and tools to support reflection on current approaches, explore alternatives, and most importantly, enable parent carers to be fully involved.

At the heart of this guide is co-production - the principle that schools should proactively involve parent carers as equal partners in shaping decisions and improving outcomes for children. Co-production goes beyond consultation; it is a shared process where parents and schools work together, not only on matters relating to individual children but across all aspects of school life.



“The most important people in any child or young person’s life are their parents. You know your children best of all. What you as parents think, feel and say is important. You should be listened to, and you need to be fully involved in decisions that affect your children.”

Edward Timpson - Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families, August 2014

*Foreword in Special Educational Needs and Disability:
A Guide for Parents and Carers*

“In particular, parents know their children best and it is important that all professionals listen and understand when parents’ express concerns about their child’s development.

“Consideration of whether special educational provision is required should start with the desired outcomes, including the expected progress and attainment and the views and wishes of the pupil and their parents.”

Chapter 6, SEND Code of Practice

“The relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement was found to be consistent across different grade levels and ethnic groups”

2014 Meta Analysis

Wilder 2014



Background and Rationale

The West Northants Voices in Partnership (WNVP) SEND Surveys (2024–2025) highlighted significant challenges in relationships between schools and families of children with SEND. Key issues included parents feeling unheard or dismissed, inconsistent understanding of SEND across settings, and limited flexibility to support neurodivergent pupils. Mental health and attendance concerns were often linked to school-based stress and unmet needs. Parents called for better communication, staff training, and collaborative problem-solving.

Schools have also reported challenges in managing expectations, balancing resources, and maintaining consistent engagement with families, particularly during transition points and periods of high need. These findings demonstrate the need for a locally co-developed framework that strengthens trust, improves communication, and supports positive relationships between schools and families.

This toolkit aims to provide practical strategies and a thought-provoking read for schools in West Northamptonshire to build strong positive relationships with parents and carers, ensuring that every child with SEND can thrive. It aligns with the SEND Code of Practice and local priorities, including preparing for adulthood from Year 9 onwards. Transition planning is a statutory requirement and should cover education, employment, independent living, community participation, and health.

Engagement and the Law

Engagement and inclusion are not optional - they are legal requirements embedded in the [Children and Families Act 2014](#), the [SEND Code of Practice \(2015\)](#), and the [Equality Act 2010](#). These laws set clear expectations for schools to work in partnership with parents and carers, ensuring that every child and young person has equal access to education and support.

The Equality Act 2010 places duties on schools towards staff, pupils, parents, and all users of school services. It covers all forms of discrimination, including disability, and underpins subsequent legislation such as the SEND Code of Practice. Schools must take proactive steps to prevent discrimination and promote inclusive practice.

Government guidance on the Equality Act provides practical advice for schools, summarising what teachers need to know and do to prevent and address inequalities. This includes understanding reasonable adjustments, anticipating needs, and embedding inclusive approaches into everyday practice.

The [Council for Disabled Children \(CDC\)](#) has also produced helpful guidance for schools, offering real-life examples of discrimination and strategies to avoid poor practice. Their Equality Act guide emphasises that inclusive practice benefits not only children with SEND, but the entire school community and society as a whole.

For West Northamptonshire schools, these principles are reinforced by local priorities set out in the [SEND and Alternative Provision Strategy \(2023–2026\)](#). This strategy commits to:

- Co-production with families and professionals
- Early identification and intervention for SEND
- Inclusive education environments where every child can thrive

By embedding these legal duties and local priorities into everyday school life, we create a culture where parent carers are valued partners, and children receive the support they need to achieve their potential.

“It made me think that there’s no point because they’re not going to be listening to anything that I say.”

West Northants parent



The World of SEND in West Northamptonshire

For many families, the journey into the world of SEND begins with uncertainty. In the early stages of diagnosis, parent carers often turn to schools for answers and reassurance. Everything feels new - terminology, processes, services; and it can be overwhelming.

The SEND system has its own language, professionals, and pathways. Families may feel bombarded with information and unsure where to start. Questions like "What does this mean for my child?" or "Where do I go for help?" are common. Without clear guidance, parents can feel isolated and anxious.

Schools play a vital role in helping families navigate this unfamiliar landscape.

Parent carers need:

- **Clear, accessible information about SEND processes and support.**
- **Signposting to local services, including the West Northamptonshire SEND Local Offer.**
- **Reassurance and empathy, especially when they feel lost or overwhelmed.**

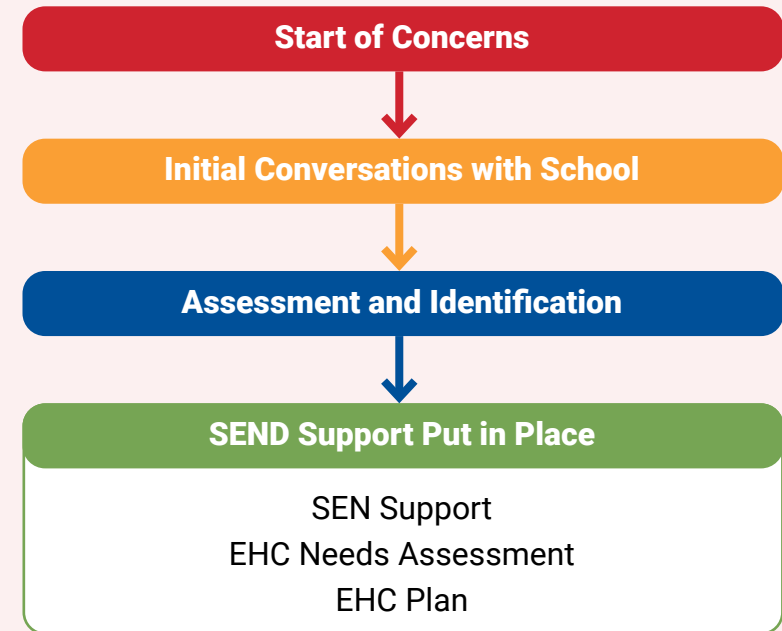
In West Northamptonshire, families may be introduced to multiple services, health, education, and social care, which can feel confusing. The West Northants Voices in Partnership (WNVP) annual surveys show that parents value schools that provide practical guidance and consistent communication. When schools take time to explain processes and listen to concerns, trust grows and collaboration improves.

This toolkit includes strategies to help schools:

- **Build positive relationships with parent carers from the start.**
- **Provide clear channels of communication.**
- **Share accurate, up-to-date information about local SEND support.**

By supporting families through this transition, schools can reduce anxiety, strengthen partnerships, and ensure children receive the right help at the right time.

SEND Journey Map Steps for Parent Carers



Parents value schools that provide practical guidance and consistent communication.



West Northamptonshire Quality Standards for Parent Carer Engagement

West Northamptonshire's quality standards for parent carer engagement are outlined in the [Carer Strategy 2024-2029](#) and [Family Help Strategy 2025-2028](#), emphasising support, communication, and empowerment.

Key standards include providing information and emotional support, ensuring accurate identification of carers, offering Carer's Assessments, and helping carers engage with employment or training. A local parent-carer forum, West Northants Voices in Partnership, also acts as a key engagement point, working with the council to ensure the needs of parent carers are met.

Key quality standards and practices

- **Information and support:** The council provides a range of support services, including the [West Northants SEND Information, Advice, and Support Service \(SENDIASS\)](#), [Inclusion and Intervention Support Team \(IIST\)](#), [Family Hubs](#), and the [Local Offer](#).
- **Identification:** There is a requirement to ensure carers are properly identified to access support.
- **Carer's Assessments:** Services include Carer's Assessments to evaluate how caring affects a parent's physical and mental health, work, and relationships.
- **Employment and training:** The strategy aims to help carers stay in, enter, or return to work, education, and training.
- **Emotional and social support:** The council provides psychological and emotional support and social community support for carers.
- **Empowerment and listening:** Parent carers should have their diverse needs recognised and their views listened to, which empowers them to support their family.
- **Parent-carer partnership:** [West Northants Voices in Partnership \(WNVP\)](#) is a free membership organisation for parents and carers of children with SEND that works with local authorities to improve services.
- **Involvement in service development:** The council has engaged parent carers to develop strategies, such as the [Carer Strategy](#) and the [Family Help Strategy](#).

"I feel that within schools when a parent has a concern regarding their child possibly showing signs of autism or ADHD schools don't seem to be interested in hearing what the parent is seeing and instead try to only take their own account of things at school."

"Parents do not reach out for nothing; they reach out to try to get that vital support."

West Northants parent



Working Together - A West Northamptonshire Approach

This guide demonstrates what can be achieved when schools, families, and local services collaborate effectively. The project has been led by West Northants Voices in Partnership: Parent Carer Forum, with funding provided by Department for Education (DfE): Intervention Support Fund, and co-produced with contributions from:

- West Northamptonshire schools
- West Northamptonshire Parent Carers
- West Northamptonshire Council SEND Services

Every partner involved has shared their expertise, ideas, and experiences, shaping the advice and ethos within this toolkit. The process has been a true example of partnership working - each voice has added value, and all participants have benefited from the experience.

We have included direct quotes from those involved, highlighting lived experiences and providing insight into their experiences.

This collaborative approach ensures the toolkit reflects real experiences and practical solutions for schools and families in West Northamptonshire. By working together, we can create stronger relationships, better understanding, and improved outcomes for children and young people with SEND.



Co-production

The principles set out in Chapter 1 of the [SEND Code of Practice 2015](#), and reinforced in Chapter 6, require schools to have regard to:

- “the views, wishes and feelings of the child or young person, and the child’s parents”
- “the importance of the child or young person, and the child’s parents, participating as fully as possible in decisions, and being provided with the information and support necessary to enable participation in those decisions.”

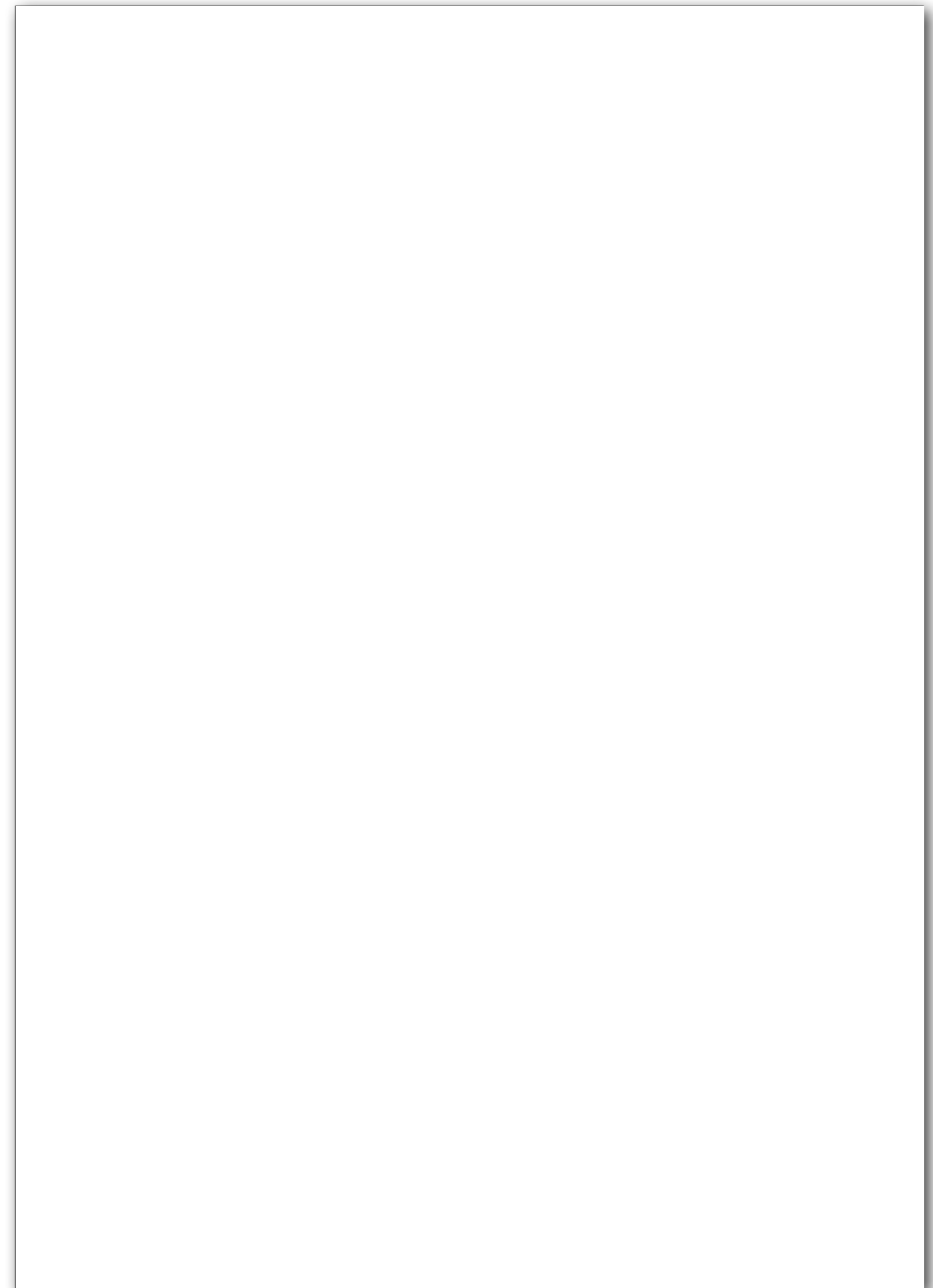
Engaging with parent carers through co-production leads to shared goals and better outcomes for children with SEND. It is essential to remember that parents know their children best. Many children with SEND mask their difficulties in school and only show their true selves at home. Without strong collaboration, schools may not see the whole child, and the right support may not be put in place.

West Northants Co-production Charter

The [West Northamptonshire Co-production Charter](#) is the foundation for ensuring that co-production is not just a principle but a lived practice across education, health, and social care. It sets out clear expectations for schools and services to work in equal partnership with parents, carers, children, and young people.

By embedding the charter into everyday processes - such as policy development, service design, and individual planning, schools demonstrate their commitment to listening, valuing, and acting on the voices of families.

The charter provides practical guidance on transparency, shared decision-making, and accountability, ensuring that parent carers are not consulted as an afterthought but are integral to shaping inclusive strategies and improving outcomes for all SEND learners in West Northamptonshire.



Ordinarily Available Provision (OAP)

Every Local Authority is expected to provide Ordinarily Available Provision (OAP) guidance, which outlines the support, adjustments and good-quality teaching strategies that schools should routinely offer to all children, including those with SEND, without the need for an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). In West Northants they developed the Inclusive Provision Toolkit (IPT) to promote Ordinarily Available Provision.

This toolkit helps create a shared understanding between schools and parent carers about what support should be in place as standard, promoting transparency and reducing uncertainty.

When schools use the Inclusive Provision Toolkit proactively; by sharing it openly, referring to it in conversations about support, and involving parent carers in discussing how these strategies can be personalised, it helps to build trust and strengthen positive relationships. Parent carers feel reassured that their child's needs are recognised and consistently met, while schools benefit from clearer expectations and more collaborative problem-solving. Ultimately, the Inclusive Provision Toolkit becomes a practical tool for partnership, enabling families and schools to work together confidently and constructively to support children with SEND.

What is Ordinarily Available Provision (OAP)?

Support and adjustments that every school should routinely provide for all learners, including those with SEND, without needing an EHCP.

What does OAP include?

- Quality First Teaching
- Reasonable adjustments
- Differentiation
- Pastoral support
- SEND-friendly learning environment
- Targeted small-group strategies

Why does OAP matter?

- Clear expectations
- Early help
- Greater consistency across schools
- Strengthens parent - school relationships

How do families and schools use OAP together?

- Share the guidance
- Discuss what is in place
- Agree personalised strategies
- Review together regularly



West Northamptonshire's OAP - Inclusive Provision Toolkit

In May 2026, West Northampton Council launched its Inclusive Provision Toolkit for schools. This document is the [West Northamptonshire Inclusive Provision Toolkit / SEND Ranges 1 & 2](#), designed to guide mainstream schools and educational settings in providing inclusive, high-quality support for children and young people (CYP) with SEND. It explains what should be considered Ordinarily Available Provision - the universal and targeted support that schools are expected to provide as part of everyday practice before specialist or statutory provision is required.

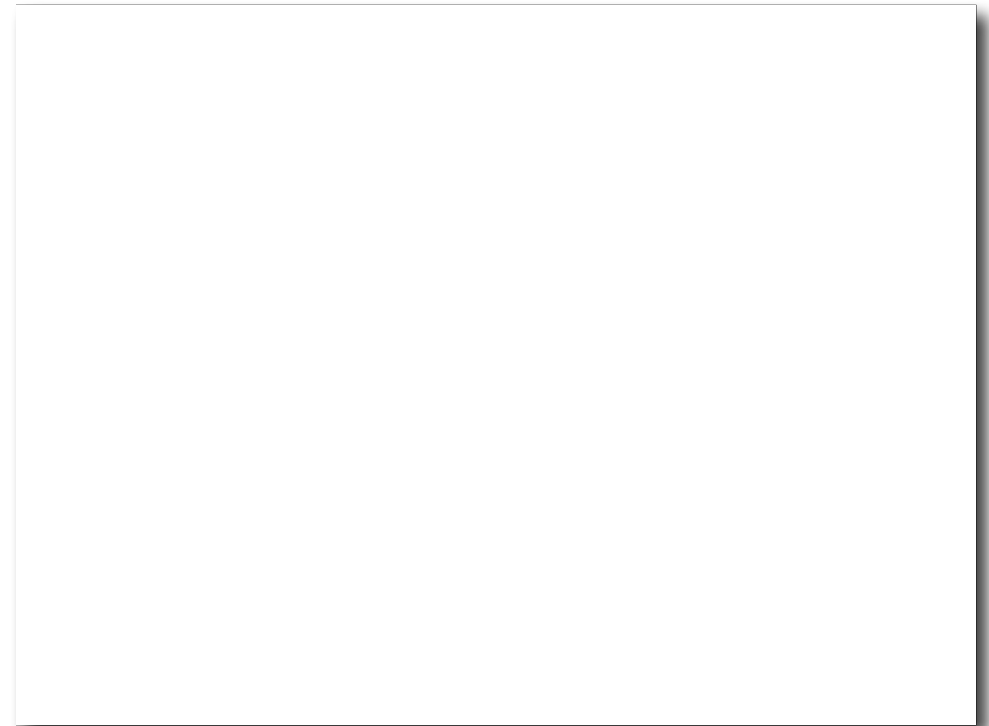
The toolkit is built around the principles of the SEND Code of Practice and the Equality Act 2010, emphasising:

- inclusive quality first teaching,
- adaptive teaching strategies,
- graduated response through the Assess–Plan–Do–Review (APDR) cycle,
- pupil voice and family engagement,
- accessible environments,
- and consistent support across the four broad areas of SEND need.

For schools, the document acts as a practical framework to:

- evaluate current SEND and inclusion practice,
- identify what support should routinely be in place for all learners,
- guide staff training and provision mapping,
- evidence inclusive practice,
- and ensure reasonable adjustments are embedded across the school environment and curriculum.

The toolkit makes clear that Ordinarily Available Provision starts with high-quality universal teaching (Wave 1), alongside targeted and specialist interventions where required, using a graduated approach to respond flexibly to pupils' changing needs.



Understanding West Northamptonshire SEND Ranges and its Role in Building Positive Relationships

The [West Northants SEND Ranges Guidance](#) is a comprehensive framework developed by West Northamptonshire Council to support children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) from birth to 25 years old. The document provides schools, settings, colleges, and professionals with a structured approach for identifying, assessing, planning, and supporting SEND through the graduated approach of Assess, Plan, Do, Review. It promotes inclusive practice, high aspirations, and the removal of barriers to learning so that children and young people with SEND can access education successfully and achieve positive long-term outcomes.

At the heart of the guidance is a strong emphasis on co-production and partnership working with families. The document repeatedly highlights that the “pupil and family voice is of paramount importance” and that schools must work in partnership with parent carers at every stage of decision-making. It outlines expectations for schools to create positive, collaborative relationships with families by ensuring communication is open, accessible, and meaningful.

Overall, the SEND Ranges can help schools develop a culture of inclusion, transparency, and partnership. When schools actively involve parent carers in planning and decision-making, relationships become more positive and collaborative. Families are more likely to feel listened to, respected, and confident in the school’s provision, while schools benefit from stronger home-school partnerships that improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

The pupil and family voice is of paramount importance and schools must work in partnership with parent carers at every stage of decision-making.



Schools can use the SEND Ranges as a practical tool to strengthen engagement with parent carers in several ways:

- By creating a shared understanding of a child’s needs through clear descriptors and consistent language across education, health, and care services. This helps parents feel informed, included, and reassured about the support their child is receiving.
- By involving parents in the graduated approach of assessment, planning, reviewing progress, and setting SMART targets. The guidance stresses that parents and carers should contribute to assessment processes, participate in reviews, and support agreed outcomes at home.
- Through regular, effective communication. The document identifies “good communication and effective communication between school and parent/carer” as a core expectation of inclusive practice. Schools are encouraged to ensure families understand available support, communication pathways, and the Local Offer.
- By offering both formal and informal opportunities for parent voice. The guidance recommends events, consultations, workshops, and review meetings where parent carers can share their views and contribute to decision-making. This collaborative approach helps build trust and mutual respect between home and school.
- Through careful transition planning. The document highlights that transition should be viewed as a process rather than an event, with parents fully involved in planning and preparation. This strengthens relationships by ensuring families feel supported during key stages of change.
- By recognising parents as experts on their child. The guidance encourages schools to listen to family concerns, value their insights, and work alongside them to shape personalised pathways for support and preparation for adulthood.



The Graduated Approach

Together, the Inclusive Provision Toolkit and The SEND Ranges form a graduated response providing a comprehensive framework to help practitioners embed inclusive high-quality teaching for all CYP. The Inclusive Provision Toolkit and The SEND Ranges offer a continuum of good practice, using universal strategies like visual aids, scaffolding, and other adaptive approaches through specific provisions and interventions to meet needs. Using both tools together ensures all settings have a clear pathway to escalating support when needed, as outlined in the SEND Code of Practice.

West Northamptonshire's Council's Inclusive Provision Toolkit (IPT) refers to the inclusive, high-quality teaching and support strategies all mainstream settings should routinely offer for all CYP and those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). It is envisaged that most CYPs needs will be met through the notional budget.

West Northamptonshire's Council's SEND Ranges guidance contains what is available for more complex needs, bridging the gap between universal provision and specialist help within a graduated support system (Assess, Plan, Do, Review). The SEND Ranges have been developed and updated with our multi-agency partners. IPT and The SEND Ranges provide dynamic, responsive, and fluid support for 0-25.

The SEND Ranges are not linear steps or fixed categories. They are designed to flex in line with a CYP's changing needs over time:

- CYP move between ranges as their strengths, needs, and circumstances change
- Support can be increased, adapted or reduced at different points
- Progress, not placement, determines the level of support required
- Inclusive Provision Toolkit remains the foundation at every range

Most importantly, SEND support adapts to the child and young person; the child and young person does not have to fit the range. This flexible approach ensures support remains proportionate, inclusive and effective, responding to development, progress, and well-being.



Important points to note when using the Graduated Approach

- **Needs-led, not label-led**
Decisions are based on current evidence of need, not diagnosis alone.
- **Graduated and responsive**
Support is adjusted through Assess-Plan-Do-Review, ensuring timely changes.
- **Blended provision**
Strategies from IPT/The SEND Ranges can operate simultaneously, rather than replacing each other.
- **Temporary or sustained**
Some CYP may need short term enhanced support, while others need longer term provision.

What this means in practice:

A CYP may:



Move into a higher SEND range during periods of difficulty



Move back towards IPT as independence increases



Sit across ranges, drawing on support from more than one range at the same time



Annual SEND Parent Carer Survey

Driving Strategic Change in West Northamptonshire

View our Parent Carer
Annual Survey Reports here

The Annual SEND Parent Carer Survey is a cornerstone of engagement in West Northamptonshire. It is created and owned by West Northants Voices in Partnership (WNVP), the official Parent Carer Forum for West Northamptonshire. This survey is not just a feedback tool - it is a mechanism for influencing strategic policy and driving real change across education, health, and social care.

The first annual survey was created in 2024 and will be repeated annually. The survey gathers the lived experiences of parent carers, asking for their views on services and support for children and young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). Examples of questions explored:

- How well parents feel their voices are heard and acted upon
- The quality and timeliness of communication from schools and services
- Experiences of processes such as Education, Health and Care (EHC) assessments

The findings are analysed and shared widely, forming an independent report that demonstrates transparency and accountability. These reports show how feedback has shaped improvements and inform the West Northamptonshire SEND and Alternative Provision Strategy, ensuring that parent voices are embedded in decision-making at the highest level.

Recent survey results highlight key priorities:

- Strengthening school-parent communication
- Ensuring parent views are central to EHC planning
- Addressing barriers to learning and attendance through collaborative approaches

When schools actively listen and understand the full profile of a pupil, outcomes improve. Co-production between schools and families helps remove barriers, supports attendance, and builds trust. Understanding why children may struggle with attendance or engagement is essential for improving outcomes; and these surveys provide the insight needed to make that happen.

Parent Carers feedback:



"I'd like school to communicate what is in place for my child and explain why and how it benefits my child and surely it doesn't take nearly a year to form an IEP."



"We've heard from the SENCO once since Christmas despite numerous emails from us."



"The school didn't even tell me when they've submitted paperwork, I have to ask. I have no idea what they're doing to support him. Have never even met the SENDCO."



"The school SENCO has not been helpful - we have felt extremely fobbed off every time we have had a meeting at school with them."



"There seems to be little joined up support at primary school level with the school not aware/not able to access support. I think there needs to be a single point of contact for signposting."



"Parents are their child's safe person and parents need to be listened to, parents see their child more than any professional and the parents' voice needs to start being listened to."



"More support is needed for our children and parents with face-to-face meetings not just links to websites that can't help."

**West Northants Voices in Partnership:
Parent Carer Annual Surveys 2024 and 2025**



Section 2

Strategies and Tools for Effective Communication



Establishing Effective Relationships and Communication

Building strong, positive relationships with parent carers is the foundation of successful SEND support in schools. Before trust can grow, there must be meaningful one-to-one interaction - a starting point that schools can build over time. This toolkit is designed to help schools in West Northamptonshire create those connections by highlighting key elements of effective engagement and how this differs from general parent communication.

Schools are a vital source of information, but so are parent carers. Families often look to schools for guidance and assume staff have all the answers. For this reason, schools must be approachable, empathetic, and clear. Effective communication begins with listening; understanding the real issue behind the presenting concern. Sometimes the challenge is not what appears on the surface; there may be underlying factors that only emerge through open dialogue.

Parent carers should feel they are equal partners in the process, not passive recipients of decisions. They hold essential knowledge about their child - what works, what doesn't, triggers, and strategies that have succeeded at home. Schools need this insight to provide tailored support. As the [West Northamptonshire SEND and Alternative Provision Strategy \(2023–2026\)](#) states, co-production and partnership are key to improving outcomes.

Local data reinforces this need. The [West Northamptonshire SEND JSNA \(2025\)](#) highlights that demand for SEND services is rising, and families report feeling disconnected from decision-making. In 2024, only 10% of Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) were completed within the statutory 20-week timeframe, leaving many families waiting over six months for support. This delay often erodes trust, making proactive communication even more critical.

Effective communication begins with listening; understanding the real issue behind the presenting concern.

Why positive engagement matters

Positive engagement transforms relationships. When parents feel respected and involved, trust grows, communication improves, and children thrive. These standards help schools in West Northamptonshire create a culture where families are partners in education - not just participants.



Mindful Thought...

A school website is often the first doorway a parent or carer walks through, but for families seeking SEND support, is that doorway clear, welcoming, and easy to navigate, or does it become another barrier at an already difficult time?

If a parent cannot quickly find statutory SEND information, including the Local Offer, West Northamptonshire SENDIASS, or West Northants Parent Carer Forum, then perhaps the question is not whether the information exists, but whether the school has truly made it accessible.

Accessibility is more than simply publishing the required information. Is your website written in clear, straightforward language, or is it full of educational jargon and lengthy policy documents? Have you considered how easy it is for parents and carers with English as an Additional Language (EAL) to understand the information? Could key pages be simplified, translated, or supported with visual signposting to help all families access the support available?

Why not take a few minutes to look at your website through the eyes of a parent or carer who is navigating the SEND system for the first time? How quickly can you find the information you need, and how easy it is to understand? A small change in language or layout could make a significant difference to a family's experience.



Benefits of Engagement

When parents and carers feel genuinely valued and actively involved, the impact on children and young people is profound. Engagement is not just about communication; it is about building trust, fostering collaboration, and creating a shared sense of responsibility for every child's success.



For schools in West Northamptonshire, strong engagement with families leads to:

- **Improved outcomes** for children and young people with SEND - When schools and parents work together, support strategies are more accurate and effective.
- **Better attendance and reduced exclusions** - Understanding barriers through open dialogue helps schools address challenges early.
- **Enhanced emotional wellbeing** - Families who feel heard and respected are more confident in the support their child receives, reducing stress and anxiety.
- **Stronger community relationships** - Engagement builds a culture of partnership, where schools are seen as inclusive and approachable.

Research and feedback from the West Northants Voices in Partnership annual surveys (2024 & 2025) show that parents value clear, consistent communication and opportunities to co-produce decisions. When schools listen and act on parental input, trust grows, and this trust is the foundation for positive outcomes.

Engagement is not a one-off event; it is an ongoing process that requires commitment, transparency, and flexibility. By embedding these principles into everyday practice, schools in West Northamptonshire can create environments where every child thrives, and every parent feels empowered.

Why engagement matters

When relationships between parents and schools deteriorate, children feel the consequences most deeply, even if they cannot express them. A breakdown in trust or communication can create emotional, behavioural, and academic ripple effects.



Typical impacts on children when relationships deteriorate:

- **Increased anxiety** - Children sense tension between adults and supporting them
- **Confusion about expectations** - Different messages at home and school make routines feel unpredictable
- **Reduced confidence** - Children may feel they are the "cause" of the conflict
- **Avoidance or school refusal** - Emotional safety erodes when adults are not aligned
- **Escalation of behaviours** - Stress shows up through distress, shutdowns, or acting out
- **Loss of stability** - Consistency between home and school is a protective factor; its absence is destabilising

For children with SEND, the impact is amplified

Children with SEND often rely heavily on:

- Predictability and emotional co-regulation from adults
- Trust in routines and clarity of expectations
- Strong relational scaffolding

When the adults around them are misaligned, the child loses key anchors that support their wellbeing.

A child thrives when the adults in their world are connected, communicative, and aligned. When relationships break down, it is the child who carries the emotional load. Rebuilding trust is not simply relational; it is safeguarding their wellbeing.



Power Dynamics

Power dynamics refers to the balance of authority and influence between parents and schools. When this balance feels unequal; such as when schools hold most of the decision-making power, parents may feel undervalued or hesitant to voice concerns. Conversely, if parents dominate discussions, schools may struggle to implement consistent policies.

These dynamics can affect trust, communication, and collaboration. Recognising and addressing power imbalances helps create a partnership where both sides feel respected and heard, ultimately supporting the child's best interests.



Practical tips for schools:

Create inclusive spaces:

Invite parents to participate in decision-making committees or feedback sessions.

Use transparent communication:

Explain policies and decisions clearly to avoid perceptions of secrecy or control.

Acknowledge expertise:

Recognise parents as experts on their child and value their input in planning and support.

Balance authority with empathy:

Maintain professional boundaries while showing flexibility and understanding.



Invite parents to participate in feedback sessions



The Power of Empathy

Empathy is one of the most powerful tools in building trust between schools and families of children with SEND. It is not about agreeing with everything a parent says; it is about seeing the situation through their lens and responding in a way that acknowledges their emotional reality.

In SEND practice, empathy is not an optional soft skill. It is a relational intervention that directly affects parental trust, child wellbeing, and the success of the partnership.

“They’re very keen to try and squish your child into one of those boxes instead of thinking about the nuance of a situation.”

West Northants parent

“They [the parents] need to feel validated and free to share concerns. Being listened to without defence. Team approach and honest.”

West Northants teacher

What empathy looks like in practice

- Listening without interruption
- Naming emotions (“I can hear how stressful this has been.”)
- Validating experiences (“It makes sense that you’re worried.”)
- Demonstrating understanding of the child’s challenges
- Being curious rather than defensive
- Slowing down communication rather than speeding past concerns

What empathy is NOT

- Allowing unacceptable behaviour
- Agreeing with inaccurate information
- Making unrealistic promises
- Minimising professional judgement
- Avoiding difficult conversations

Why empathy builds trust

- De-escalates fight-or-flight responses
- Reduces defensiveness
- Helps parents feel seen and valued
- Creates psychological safety
- Encourages open communication
- Builds connection, even when decisions are challenging



What is Transparency?

Transparency in schools is often understood as providing information: policies are published, newsletters are sent, portals are updated, and meetings are held. From the school's perspective, this feels open and accountable.

From a parent's perspective, however, transparency is less about the existence of information and more about clarity, honesty, timeliness, and trust. Parents may technically receive information, yet still feel confused, excluded, or surprised by decisions that affect their child.

In addition, there is a growing shift in what parents expect to understand about schools. Increasingly, parents are seeking greater transparency around the context in which schools operate; particularly in relation to SEND provision. It has become more widely recognised that a child's academic experience and outcomes can be influenced by factors such as funding levels, staffing capacity, and the number and needs of pupils requiring additional support. While this level of "behind the scenes" information was not commonly requested or shared in the past, many parents now value this insight. When communicated appropriately, it can help families better understand the realities of the school environment, support more informed conversations, and strengthen trust. Staff should be mindful of this shift and consider how to share contextual information clearly and constructively, while remaining within appropriate professional and confidential boundaries.



Mindful Thought...

True transparency is not just about sharing information; it requires schools to consider how information is framed, when it is shared, what is left unsaid, and how power and emotion shape what parents can hear and understand.

Being fully transparent answers not only "What are we doing?" but also:

- "Why are we doing it?"
- "What does this mean for my child?"
- "What can I expect next?"



Transparency is more about clarity, honesty, timeliness, and trust



Transparency - Key Things to Consider

1

Transparency is experiential, not intentional

Transparency is defined by how it is **received**, not how it is **intended**. A school can act in good faith and still be experienced as unclear or evasive if parents feel:

- Information arrives too late
- Decisions feel pre-determined
- Language is overly technical or guarded
- Questions are answered defensively or indirectly

Reflection: How might this land for a parent who is anxious, busy, or already feeling uncertain?

2

Information without context isn't transparency

Sharing policies, data, or outcomes without explanation can increase mistrust rather than reduce it.

Parents need:

- Rationale behind decisions
- Trade-offs and constraints acknowledged
- Clear explanations of what influenced a choice

Transparency includes the "why," not just the "what."

3

Silence is also communication

When schools delay sharing information; especially around change, difficulty, or conflict, parents often fill the gap themselves, usually with worst-case interpretations.

Common parent interpretations of silence:

- "They're hiding something."
- "They don't value our role."
- "We're being managed, not partnered."

Being transparent sometimes means saying:

- "We don't know yet."
- "This is still being worked through."
- "Here's what we can share right now, and here's when we'll update you."

4

Transparency requires emotional honesty

Parents are not just information-receivers; they are emotionally investing advocates for their children.

Transparent communication:

- Acknowledges uncertainty and impact
- Names difficulty without defensiveness
- Avoids overly polished or corporate language

When communication feels too careful, parents may perceive it as strategic rather than sincere.

5

Consistency builds credibility

Transparency breaks down when:

- Messages differ between staff
- Verbal reassurances don't match written policies
- Past experiences contradict current promises

Consistency over time is one of the strongest signals of trustworthiness.



Effective Meetings with Parents and Carers

Building strong, positive relationships with families is essential for supporting children and young people with SEND. Throughout a pupil's time in your school, you will hold regular meetings to review progress, discuss strategies, and plan for the next steps. These meetings are not just procedural - they are opportunities to strengthen trust, share information, and co-produce solutions that help the child thrive.

Before the meeting, take time to prepare. Think about the questions you want to ask to understand the family's perspective and any concerns they may have. Demonstrate active listening during the meeting by reflecting back on what parents say and checking your understanding. This shows respect for their views and helps build confidence in your partnership.

For pupils with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), the Annual Review is a statutory requirement and a vital part of the process. It should follow the Assess, Plan, Do, Review cycle and include updated advice from professionals. Families must receive all paperwork and reports in advance, in an agreed format, so they have time to prepare. This ensures that the meeting is meaningful and inclusive.

As children grow older, meetings should also cover transition planning and preparing adulthood, which becomes a formal requirement from Year 9 onwards. This includes discussing aspirations and planning for education, employment, independent living, community participation, and health.

Sharing resources can empower families. [West Northants Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities Information Advice and Support Service \(SENDIASS\)](#) provides impartial advice, and fact sheets that schools can signpost to parents. These tools help families understand processes and feel supported.

Effective meetings are about collaboration, transparency, and empathy. By preparing well, listening actively, and planning together, schools can create a positive experience for families and improve outcomes for children with SEND.

Meetings are opportunities to strengthen trust, share information, and co-produce solutions



Considering the Meeting Environment

The environment in which conversations take place can have a significant impact on how comfortable, open, and engaged parent carers feel.

While schools may naturally assume that meetings should take place on school premises, it is important to consider whether the setting is the most appropriate environment for every family. A school building may be familiar and comfortable for some parents, but for others it can create anxiety, stress, or feelings of being judged.

Many parent carers have their own experiences of education that may influence how they engage with schools. Some may have experienced bullying, exclusion, unmet needs, discrimination, or other difficult experiences during their own time in education. For these individuals, returning to a school environment can be emotionally challenging and may trigger feelings of vulnerability or distrust. In addition, parents of children with SEND may have experienced repeated meetings focused on difficulties, concerns, or challenges, which can further heighten anxiety before a meeting has even begun.

Schools should therefore think carefully about where and how meetings are held. Offering flexibility can help families feel more at ease and support more productive conversations. In some situations, a meeting in a community venue, a quiet café, a family hub, a virtual meeting, or even a walk-and-talk conversation in an outdoor space may help create a more relaxed and collaborative atmosphere. For some families, a home visit may be appropriate, provided this is agreed by all parties and carried out in line with school policies and safeguarding procedures.

The physical set-up of a meeting is equally important. Sitting opposite a parent behind a desk can unintentionally create a power imbalance, reinforcing the perception that the school holds authority while the parent is there to justify concerns or receive decisions. Similarly, offering the parent a child's chair whilst you sit on an adult sized chair can also create a feeling of submission. Small changes can make a significant difference. Consider sitting side-by-side or around a table together, removing physical barriers where possible, offering refreshments, and ensuring the meeting space is welcoming and private. Introducing everyone clearly, explaining the purpose of the meeting, and emphasising that all participants bring valuable expertise can help establish a sense of partnership from the outset.

A trauma-informed approach recognises that behaviour and communication are often influenced by previous experiences. Rather than asking, "Why is this parent difficult?" practitioners should consider, "What experiences may be shaping this parent's response?" By being mindful of the environment and creating psychologically safe spaces for conversations, schools can strengthen relationships, reduce defensiveness, and promote genuine co-production with families.



Meeting environment checklist

- ✓ Where is the most appropriate place for the meeting?
- ✓ Consider the physical set-up of the meeting
- ✓ Consider sitting side-by-side or around a table to remove physical barriers rather than sitting opposite
- ✓ Ensure the same sized chair is available for everyone
- ✓ Ensure the meeting space is welcoming and private
- ✓ Offer refreshments
- ✓ Introduce everyone clearly
- ✓ Explain the purpose of the meeting
- ✓ Explain that all participants bring valuable expertise



The First Meeting of the School-Parent Carer Relationship

The first meeting with a parent carer is one of the most important steps in building a positive, trusting relationship. This initial conversation should feel like a “getting to know you” session, where the focus is on understanding the child, listening to the family’s experiences, and setting the tone for collaboration.

When schools invest time in these early conversations, they lay out the foundation for a strong partnership that benefits the child, the family, and the school community.

In West Northamptonshire, feedback from the WNVP annual surveys shows that parents value schools that take time to listen and explain processes clearly. Many families report feeling anxious or overwhelmed during the early stages of SEND support, so the first meeting is an opportunity to reassure and build confidence.

“My son’s teacher was outstanding, set meetings with me to discuss his ILP and gave me updates throughout.”

West Northants parent

Why the first meeting matters

- The level of support a family need will change over time, but regular meetings within the Assess-Plan-Do-Review cycle are essential for achieving positive outcomes.
- Getting the first meeting right helps parents feel comfortable asking for help, sharing what works at home, and working with the school to introduce interventions quickly.



Best practice for the first meeting:

Create a welcoming environment

Make sure the meeting is relaxed and accessible.

Use clear, inclusive language

Avoid specialist terminology, educational jargon, and acronyms wherever possible. When these terms are necessary, explain them clearly and check that parents and carers understand. Using plain English helps ensure everyone can participate confidently, including families with English as an Additional Language (EAL).

Listen actively

Allow parents to share their story and concerns without interruption.

Clarify roles and responsibilities

Explain who to contact, how decisions are made, and what support is available.

Agree communication preferences

Ask how parents want to receive updates (email, phone, face-to-face).

Capture key information

Parents know their child best - what works, what triggers challenges, and what has helped in the past.

Build trust

Do what you promise, follow up promptly, and show that you value their input.





Preparation and Execution of Parent Carer Meetings

1

Preparation before the meeting

- Review the child's SEND profile, recent progress, and any assessments.
- Gather examples of strengths and challenges (academic, social, emotional).
- Prepare support strategies currently in place and any proposed changes.
- Ensure privacy and confidentiality arrangements are in place.
- Allocate enough time for discussion without rushing.

2

Opening the conversation

- Welcome warmly and thank the parents for attending.
- Explain the purpose of the meeting clearly (e.g., progress update, review of support plan).
- Reassure that the goal is collaboration for the child's best interest.

3

Share positive observations first

- Highlight the child's strengths, achievements, and progress.
- Use specific examples (e.g., "They've improved in group work by...").

4

Discuss current support and needs

- Outline current interventions and accommodations.
- Share data or observations on what's working and what needs adjustment.
- Invite the parent's perspective:
 - "How do you feel these strategies are working at home?"
 - "Have you noticed any changes?"

Address challenges constructively

- Frame challenges as areas for growth, not deficits.
- Avoid jargon; use clear, parent-friendly language.
- Be honest but empathetic:
 - "We've noticed reading comprehension is still difficult. Let's explore ways to support this."

6

Listen and validate

- Give parents time to share concerns or ask questions.
- Acknowledge feelings:
 - "I understand this can feel overwhelming."
- Take notes to show their input matters.

7

Agree on next steps

- Summarise agreed actions (school and home).
- Discuss timelines for review and how progress will be monitored.
- Provide contact details for ongoing communication.

8

Close positively

- End with encouragement and reassurance.
- Thank them for their partnership and commitment.

9

Follow-up

- Send a written summary of the meeting
- Ask for agreement/consensus on summary/minutes to check all have the same understanding on summary/minutes and outcomes.
- Share any resources or referrals discussed.
- Schedule the next review date.





Effective Meetings: Using Assess-Plan-Do-Review

Regular meetings with parents and carers are essential for reviewing progress, planning next steps, and ensuring the child's needs are met. For pupils with an EHCP, Annual Reviews must follow the **Assess-Plan-Do-Review** cycle. Below are sample questions schools can use to structure these conversations effectively:

1

Assess

Understanding Current Situation

- What progress have you noticed at home since our last meeting?
- Are there any new concerns or challenges you'd like to share?
- How is your child feeling about school and learning right now?
- Have there been any changes in health, routines, or family circumstances that we should be aware of?

2

Plan

Agreeing Next Steps

- What strategies have worked well so far, and what could we improve?
- Are there any additional resources or support you think would help?
- What goals would you like us to focus on for the next term?
- How can we work together to support attendance and wellbeing?

3

Do

Implementing Support

- Which interventions or adjustments will we put in place immediately?
- How will we communicate progress and updates with you?
- Are there any home-based strategies we can share to complement school support?

4

Review

Monitoring and Reflecting

- How will we measure success for these agreed actions?
- When should we meet again to review progress?
- Is there anything we can do differently to make these meetings more helpful for you?



Tip:

Always send paperwork and professional reports to families in advance, in an agreed format, so they have time to prepare. Meetings should be collaborative, transparent, and person-centered.





Use this checklist as a practical guide in your school to strengthen relationships with parent carers.

Before the meeting:

- ☐ Do I know the parent/carer and family context?
- ☐ Am I using the correct names and pronouns?
- ☐ Have I considered any reasonable adjustments needed to enable full participation (e.g. communication needs, accessibility requirements, interpreter, sensory considerations)?
- ☐ Have I shared a clear agenda and purpose for the meeting in advance?
- ☐ Have I fully explained who will be attending the meeting and why they will be there?
- ☐ Have I informed the parent/carer that they may bring a friend, family member, advocate, or supporter if they wish?
- ☐ Have I considered whether the meeting location, environment, and timing are appropriate and accessible for the parent/carer?
- ☐ Have I offered flexible meeting options, including virtual attendance where appropriate?

Remember!

Trust takes time; especially if families have had negative experiences in previous settings. Schools must invest in building trust through consistency, empathy, and openness. When parents feel heard and respected, collaboration flourishes, and children benefit from a joined-up approach that removes barriers to learning and improves attendance.

During the meeting:

Introductions

- ✓ Everyone explaining who they are and what their role is
- ✓ Allow parent carers to introduce themselves

Know your parent/family

- ✓ Use correct pronouns
- ✓ Be aware of parent/family needs & accommodations

Actively listen

- ✓ Give parents/family time to speak without interruption
- ✓ Clarify understanding before responding

Be transparent

- ✓ Explain processes clearly (EHCP steps, support options)
- ✓ Share timelines and keep parents informed & updated on changes

Deliver on promises

- ✓ Do what you say you will do
- ✓ Communicate promptly if plans/timelines need to be changed

Respect communication preferences

- ✓ Ask parents for their preferred method of communication
- ✓ Provide written summaries for those who need time to process

Recognise parent expertise

- ✓ Invite parents/family to share what works for their child
- ✓ Use their insight to inform strategies

Provide consistent contact

- ✓ Identify a consistent point of contact
- ✓ Inform parents proactively if this needs to change

Show empathy

- ✓ Acknowledge challenges families face
- ✓ Validate feelings, emotions, and avoid judgemental language

Share feedback loops

- ✓ Use "you said, we did" updates to share impact
- ✓ Celebrate success together

Embed equality

- ✓ Consider additional needs of parents under the Equality Act
- ✓ Provide reasonable adjustments for communication and participation



Communication in Annual Reviews (EHCPs)

Annual Reviews (ARs) are both a statutory requirement and a key opportunity to strengthen relationships with parent carers. Clear, timely communication throughout the process is essential to building trust and enabling meaningful participation.

Timeliness and Preparation

Schools must follow statutory timelines, ensuring:

- Parent carers and professionals are invited with sufficient notice
- Reports are requested and shared in advance
- Parents should not receive information for the first time in the meeting. Sharing paperwork early allows time to process and contribute effectively.

Clear and Ongoing Communication

Keep parents informed throughout:

- Confirm who is attending
- Share the purpose and structure of the meeting
- Clarify how their views will be recorded

This reduces uncertainty and supports confidence in the process.

After the Annual Review

Follow-up is critical:

- Share the written summary and all paperwork promptly
 - Submit documentation within statutory timescales
 - Communicate clearly if there are delays
- Silence after a meeting can lead to anxiety and mistrust.

Mindful Thought...



Effective communication in Annual Reviews is not just about compliance; it is about ensuring parents feel informed, involved, and valued as partners. Consider how you could use the Annual Review meeting to strengthen the relationship.



Supporting Parent Carers to Participate

A key aim of the West Northamptonshire Parent Engagement Toolkit is to ensure engagement is inclusive, accessible, and meaningful for all parent carers. Schools play a vital role in removing barriers and creating opportunities for families to have a voice in decisions about SEND provision.

Accessibility

- Parent carers should be able to participate regardless of personal circumstances.
- Transport can be a challenge, especially in rural areas, consider virtual options or community venues.
- Meeting times should be flexible: some parents prefer school-day sessions, other evenings or weekends.
- Factor in childcare or caring responsibilities; providing a crèche or allowing children to attend can make a big difference.

Language and Jargon

- The SEND world is full of acronyms and technical terms; avoid jargon and use plain, parent-friendly language.
- Clear communication helps parents feel confident and included, whether in written materials or face-to-face conversations.

Inclusion

Certain groups are less likely to engage and therefore risk being unheard.

Target efforts to include:

- Families with disabilities or learning difficulties
- Black and minority ethnic communities
- Traveller families
- Substance misusers
- Teenage parents
- Working parents and fathers
- Families in disadvantaged areas

Work with your school community to co-design strategies that make participation easier for these groups.



Assumptions about Intentions

Misunderstandings in SEND relationships often arise not from actions, but from assumptions about intentions. When stress is high and communication is unclear, both schools and parent carers can begin to fill in the gaps with their own interpretations.

Common School Assumptions About Parents

Schools may (often unintentionally) assume that a parent:

- Is overreacting or being confrontational
- Doesn't understand the system or isn't giving school strategies enough time
- Is distrustful by nature, not because of past experiences
- Is challenging decisions rather than seeking clarity
- Is focused only on their child without recognising wider pressures on staff

These assumptions can make schools defensive, cautious, or overly formal in communication.

Common Parent Assumptions About Schools

Parents may assume that:

- Information is being withheld
- Staff don't see what the child is experiencing at home
- Decisions are already made before meetings
- Concerns are being dismissed or minimised
- Requests for help will be interpreted as criticism
- The school views them as "difficult"

These assumptions usually reflect previous lived experiences, not a lack of trust in an individual teacher.

Why assumptions can be problematic



Assumptions can quickly become:

- Barriers to communication
- Emotional triggers
- Sources of conflict
- Reasons for escalation
- Explanations for behaviour that isn't rooted in fact

In SEND relationships, assumptions fill the space where transparency, empathy, or clarity are missing.



Schools can reduce harmful assumptions by:

- Checking understanding before responding
- Asking clarifying questions ("Can I check I've understood what you meant?")
- Naming emotion safely ("I can hear this is worrying for you; let's work through it together.")
- Avoiding defensive language ("We haven't ignored this; here's what we've done so far.")
- Providing early, proactive updates to prevent gaps forming



Awareness of Individual Barriers

Parent carers often face a range of personal, practical, and emotional barriers that make engaging with school challenging. Recognising these barriers is essential for creating inclusive opportunities and building trust. By understanding what might prevent participation, schools can take proactive steps to remove obstacles and encourage meaningful involvement.

[West Northamptonshire's SEND Strategy](#) prioritises inclusive engagement and co-production. Schools should actively work to remove barriers and ensure all families can participate in shaping SEND provision.



Strategies to overcome barriers

- **Plan:** Give plenty of notice for meetings and provide clear agendas.
- **Offer flexibility:** Provide options for virtual meetings, out-of-hours sessions, and childcare support.
- **Use plain language:** Avoid jargon and explain acronyms clearly.
- **Create a welcoming environment:** Reduce the number of unfamiliar people in meetings and introduce attendees beforehand.
- **Provide reassurance:** Make sure that meetings are collaborative, not judgemental.
- **Accessibility:** Offer translated materials, visual aids, and alternative formats for families with literacy or language barriers.
- **Transport solutions:** Explore community transport options or virtual alternatives for rural families.
- **Build trust:** Start with positive communication and celebrate successes before addressing challenges.



Common barriers identified by parent carers

- **Past negative experiences** with schools (with this child, siblings, or their own schooling).
- **Fear of authority** or feeling intimidated by teachers and formal settings.
- **Low confidence and fear of judgement**, leading to reluctance to attend meetings.
- **Anxiety about formal meetings**, especially when unfamiliar people are present.
- **Language and literacy challenges**, including EAL or difficulty processing written information.
- **Overuse of jargon and acronyms**, making communication unclear.
- **Practical barriers** such as lack of transport, cost of travel, work commitments, or caring responsibilities.
- **Safety concerns**, such as reluctance to travel after dark.
- **Cultural differences** affect comfort levels in school settings.
- **Social anxiety**, fear of speaking in public, or needing extra time to process information.
- **Feeling that engagement won't make a difference** leads to disengagement.
- **Concerns about being blamed** for a child's progress or behaviour.
- **Fear of being asked to do something they don't know how to do.**
- **Lost invitations or short notice**, making planning difficult.



Parent Carers in Fight or Flight Response

Many parent carers in West Northamptonshire describe their experience of navigating SEND systems as a constant battle, fighting for assessments, chasing responses, and advocating for basic support. This prolonged stress often triggers a fight or flight response, a survival mechanism that keeps parents in a heightened state of alert. While this response is understandable given the systemic challenges, it can significantly impact relationships with schools.

When parents are in fight mode, interactions with school staff may feel tense or confrontational. They may come across as demanding or mistrustful, not because they want conflict, but because they feel unheard and fear their child's needs will be overlooked. Conversely, parents in flight mode may withdraw, stop engaging, or avoid meetings altogether, which can lead to missed opportunities for collaboration.

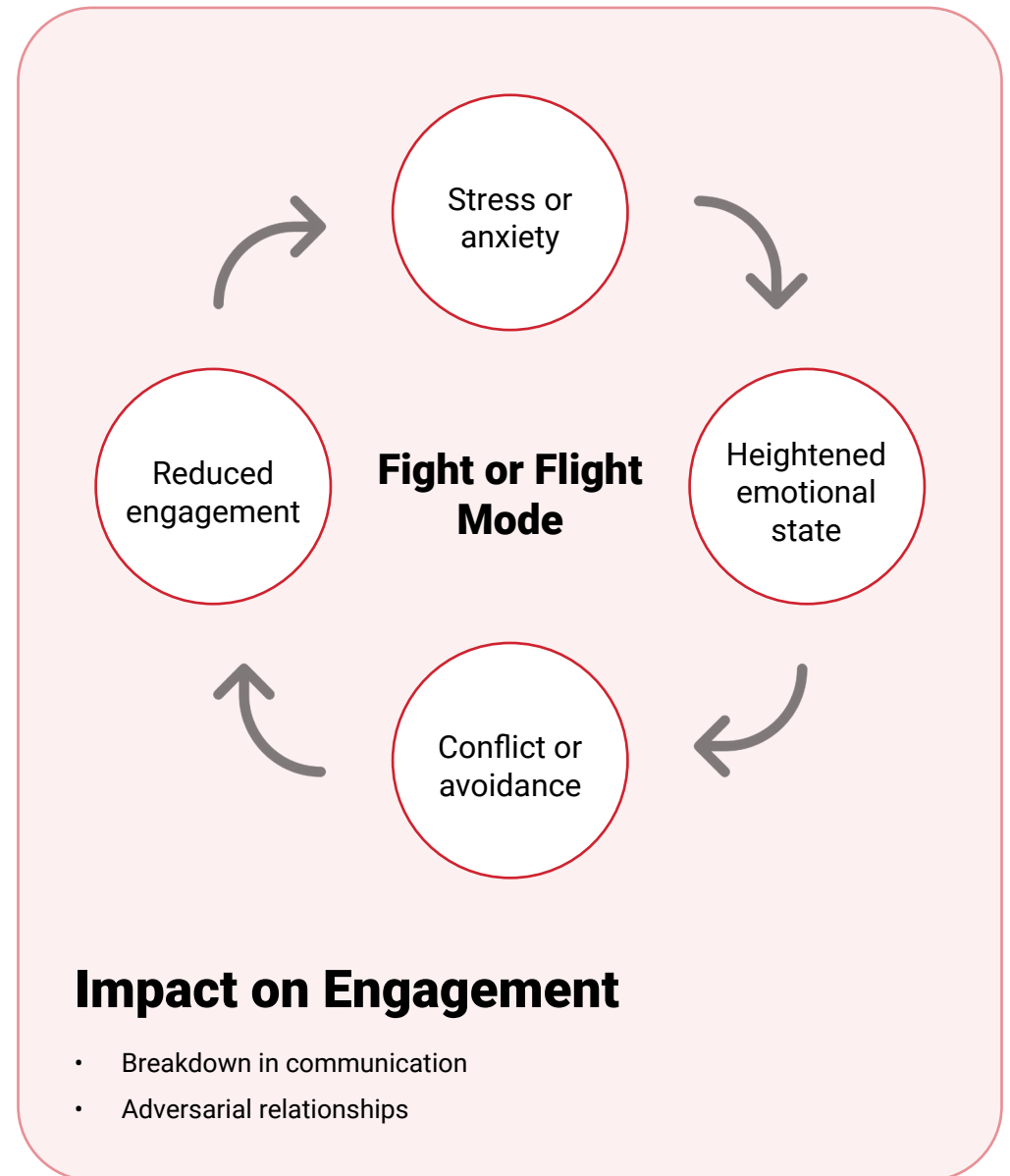
For schools, recognising these stress signals is crucial. Building trust through clear, timely communication, listening without judgement, and providing transparent updates can help de-escalate anxiety. Simple actions: such as acknowledging emails promptly, explaining decisions clearly, and involving parents in planning, can shift the dynamic from adversarial to partnership. When schools create a safe, respectful space for dialogue, parents are more likely to move out of survival mode and into constructive engagement, ultimately benefiting the child.

"I still to this day can't tell you who the SENCO is at school."

West Northants parent

"I've never really been provided with a contact at school."

West Northants parent



How Emotionally Available Is This Parent?

When schools are working to understand and support families, it can be helpful to consider not only what a parent is doing, but also how emotionally available they are able to be.

Emotional availability is not about how much a parent loves their child. It is about their capacity, at a particular moment in time, to notice, understand, and respond to their child's emotional needs.

Many parents are navigating significant pressures alongside parenting. Financial difficulties, housing instability, mental health challenges, trauma, caring responsibilities, relationship difficulties, physical health conditions, or ongoing stress can all affect a parent's emotional capacity. Even the most caring and committed parent may find it difficult to remain emotionally present when they are overwhelmed by their own circumstances.

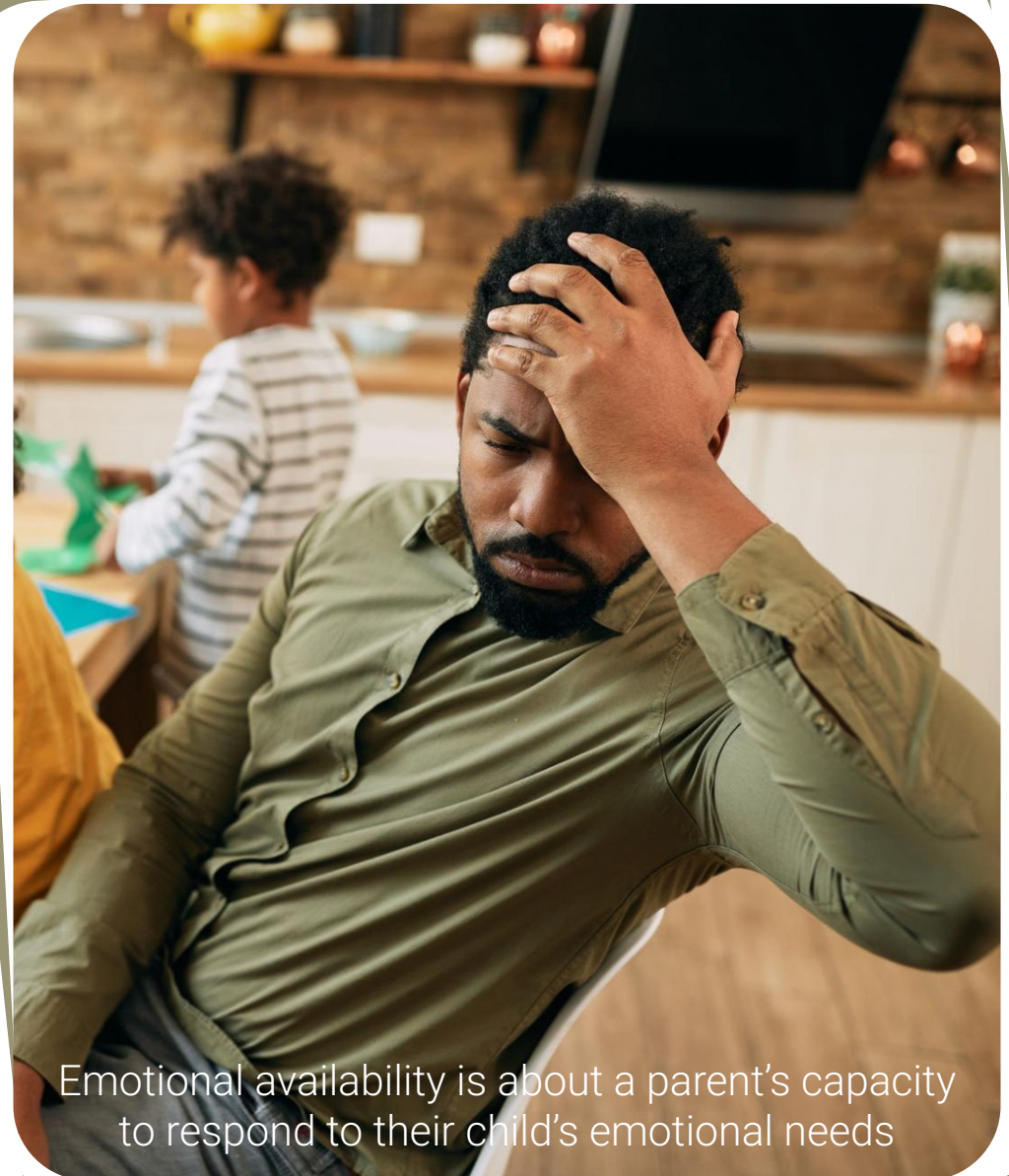
From a school perspective, it can be easy to focus on a child's presentation without considering the demands being placed on the adults caring for them.

A parent who appears distracted, disengaged, or inconsistent may not lack care or concern. They may simply be carrying so much emotional load that little capacity remains for responding to additional demands.



Things to Consider:

- What pressures might this parent be experiencing outside of school?
- How much emotional energy is required simply to get through each day?
- Is this parent currently in a position to absorb new information, concerns, or requests?
- Does the parent appear emotionally present during conversations, or are they overwhelmed by other worries?
- What strengths and connections are still visible despite the challenges they face?



Emotional availability is about a parent's capacity to respond to their child's emotional needs



How Emotionally Available Is This Parent?

It is important to recognise that emotional availability can fluctuate. A parent may be highly responsive and engaged at one point in time and struggle significantly during periods of increased stress or crisis.

School staff may notice signs such as:

- Difficulty engaging in conversations about their child's emotional needs.
- Seeming preoccupied, distracted, or overwhelmed.
- Struggling to follow through on agreed actions.
- Responding only to immediate crises rather than longer-term concerns.
- Limited capacity to reflect on their child's experiences or perspective.

These observations should not automatically be interpreted as a lack of care. Instead, they can prompt curiosity.

A parent who appears distracted, disengaged, or inconsistent may not lack care or concern. They may simply be carrying so much emotional load that little capacity remains for responding to additional demands.



Reflective Practice for School Staff...

Before making assumptions about a parent's commitment, consider:

- What might be reducing this parent's emotional capacity right now?
- Are we seeing the impact of stress rather than a lack of care?
- How can we communicate information in a way that feels manageable and supportive?
- Have we acknowledged the challenges this parent may be facing?
- What opportunities can we create to strengthen trust and connection?

When parents feel emotionally safe with professionals, they are often better able to engage in conversations about their child's needs.

A parent's emotional availability is not fixed. It can be strengthened through supportive relationships, reduced stress, increased confidence, and experiences of being understood rather than judged.

Sometimes the most helpful question is not, "Why isn't this parent responding?" but rather, "What might be affecting this parent's capacity to be emotionally available right now?"

Approaching families with curiosity, compassion, and an awareness of the pressures they may be carrying can help schools build stronger partnerships and create more supportive outcomes for children.



Parental Instincts to Protect Their Children

For many parents; especially parent carers of children with SEND - advocacy is not a choice; it is an instinct. This instinct to protect is biologically and emotionally driven, and becomes stronger when:

- Information is unclear
- Needs are unmet
- A child is distressed at home or school
- Systems are slow or complex
- Parents have previously felt dismissed

Why this matters for schools

A parent's protective instinct may look like:

- Intense questioning
- Frequent emails or calls
- Emotionally charged communication
- Hesitation to trust
- Requests for more detail or evidence
- Advocacy that appears forceful

But underneath these behaviours is almost always fear, not anger. Fear that:

- Their child will struggle
- Their concerns will be overlooked
- They will miss something important
- School will not act without pressure
- Their child's difficulties won't be understood

When parents feel their child is safe and understood, advocacy softens; trust grows.



Schools can support this instinct in a healthy way by:

- Framing parents as partners, not problems
- Reassuring parents early ("You don't need to fight for us to listen.")
- Showing the link between adjustments and the child's wellbeing
- Offering clarity before parents need to chase
- Providing realistic timescales for actions
- Validating parental insight ("You see things we can't.")

"The feeling that I got was I was just a whingy parent."

West Northants parent

"I felt very dismissed."

West Northants parent



Behaviour at Home vs School

Maintaining trust and understanding

A common and sensitive challenge arises when parent carers report high levels of distress or dysregulated behaviour at home, which are not observed in school. While this can be confusing for staff, it can be deeply upsetting for parents and, if not managed correctly, can quickly damage trust.

When a parent hears “we don’t see that in school,” it can unintentionally feel like:

- They are not believed
- Their experience is being minimised
- They are being judged or blamed

“I felt like they thought I was exaggerating”

West Northants parent

Understanding the Difference

Differences between home and school behaviour are common, particularly for children with SEND.

Children may mask difficulties in school, using significant emotional energy to cope, and then release that stress at home.

Both experiences can be true at the same time. The child who appears to be settled in school may still be struggling.

Responding with Empathy

Start by validating the parent’s experience:

- “Thank you for sharing this; we know it’s not easy.”
- “What you’re describing sounds really difficult.”

This builds trust and keeps the conversation open.

Working Together

Shift the focus from “seen vs not seen” to shared understanding:

- What might the child be holding in during the school day?
- Are there differences in demand, routines, or triggers?
- What strategies are working at home or at school?

Parents provide essential insight into the full picture of the child.

Talking about Timeframes

Interventions often take time (typically around six weeks) to embed and show impact. However, this must be communicated carefully.

Instead of asking parents to “wait,” say:

- “We’ll give this approach time to work, but we’ll stay in close contact.”
- “We’ll review regularly and adjust if needed.”
- “Please let us know how things are at home, we want to support you.”

This reassures parents that they are not being left to cope alone.

Consistency without Blame

Consistency between home and school is important, but should be framed as a shared goal:

- “If we align our approaches, it gives your child the best chance of success.”
- “We can share what’s working in school to support you at home.”



Key Message

A difference between home and school behaviour is not a contradiction; it is valuable information. Handled with empathy and transparency, these conversations strengthen relationships and lead to better support for the child.



Managing Difficult Conversations with Parents and Carers

Schools often ask themselves: Why do some conversations escalate so quickly, even when staff feel they are trying to help?

Through discussions with families and professionals across West Northamptonshire, one message emerges consistently: parents rarely enter difficult conversations looking for conflict. Most arrive carrying worry, exhaustion, frustration, or fear that their child is not fully understood. What schools may experience as confrontation is often a parent operating from advocacy, anxiety, or past experiences of not being listened to.

Difficult conversations are not simply about the topic being discussed; they are about how safe, informed, and included a parent feels during that interaction. A conversation about behaviour, attendance, provision, or unmet need can quickly become relational if families feel dismissed, blamed, or unheard. Equally, even highly sensitive conversations can strengthen trust when approached with empathy, honesty, and transparency.

Schools should reflect an important question:
Are we preparing to deliver information, or are we preparing to build understanding?

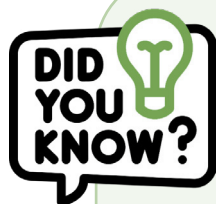
Parents do not expect schools to have all the answers immediately. However, they do expect openness, consistency, and reassurance that concerns are being taken seriously. Families are more likely to remain engaged when schools communicate early, avoid defensiveness, and work alongside parents rather than positioning themselves opposite them.

Difficult conversations should therefore be viewed not as moments to “manage” parents, but as opportunities to strengthen relationships through calm, collaborative, and emotionally aware communication.



Things to Consider:

- Parents may remember how a conversation made them feel long after they forget the exact words used.
- Delaying difficult conversations to avoid discomfort can often increase anxiety and mistrust.
- Parents who appear angry or defensive may actually be operating from fear, stress, or advocacy fatigue.
- Transparency reduces escalation; surprises often increase it.
- Consider whether school language feels collaborative or unintentionally authoritative.
- Avoid focusing solely on problems; discuss strengths, successes, and possibilities alongside concerns.
- Mixed messages between staff can quickly damage trust and increase frustration for families.
- Listening without interruption can be more powerful than immediately offering solutions.
- Families are more likely to engage positively when they feel involved in decision-making rather than informed after decisions have already been made.
- Sometimes the most relationship-building phrase a school can say is: “We may not have all the answers yet, but we want to work through this together.”



Did You Know?

West Northamptonshire SENDIASS and the Parent Carer Forum have worked in partnership to co-design and co-deliver a professional workshop focused on positive communication with parent carers. The training explores relational approaches, transparency, active listening, and strategies to strengthen trust between schools and families.





Tools to Support Difficult Conversations with Parents and Carers

Helpful Relationship-Building Phrases:

The language schools use can either reduce anxiety or unintentionally increase defensiveness.



Consider using phrases such as:

- "We wanted to speak early so we can work through this together."
- "You know your child best, so your perspective is really important."
- "I can see this has been stressful for you."
- "Can you help us understand what things look like at home?"
- "We may not have all the answers yet, but we are committed to working alongside you."
- "Let's agree some next steps together."
- "What would feeling supported look like for you right now?"



Avoid phrases that may feel dismissive or defensive, such as:

- "That doesn't happen in school."
- "We've done everything we can."
- "You need to..."
- "Calm down."



Reflection Questions for Staff:

Before entering a difficult conversation, staff may find it helpful to reflect on the following:

- What might this parent be feeling before the meeting even begins?
- Have previous experiences with school or services shaped this interaction?
- Am I preparing to explain, or preparing to listen and understand?
- Have we communicated concerns early enough, or might this feel like a surprise?
- Does our language sound collaborative or directive?
- What strengths and positives can we genuinely acknowledge?
- Have all staff involved shared consistent information?
- What would help this parent leave the conversation feeling reassured and included?

The Pause Principle:

When conversations become emotionally heightened, staff should remember:

- Not every silence needs filling immediately.
- Parents may need time to process information emotionally.
- Responding calmly is often more effective than responding quickly.
- Listening without interruption can help de-escalate anxiety and build trust.

Sometimes a short pause and reflective statement such as: "I can see this is really important to you" can significantly change the tone of a conversation.





A Simple Framework for Difficult Conversations

Schools may find it helpful to structure conversations around four key stages:

1

Connect

Start relationally before moving into concerns.

- Welcome warmly
- Acknowledge positives
- Clarify the shared goal of supporting the child

2

Listen

Allow space for the parent's perspective.

- Listen without interruption
- Clarify understanding
- Validate emotions where appropriate

3

Explore

Discuss concerns collaboratively.

- Share observations honestly
- Use clear, non-judgemental language
- Focus on problem-solving together

4

Agree

End with clarity and reassurance.

- Summarise agreed actions
- Clarify next steps and timescales
- Ensure parents know who to contact moving forward

Signs a conversation may need pausing:

Occasionally, conversations may become too emotionally heightened to remain productive.

Consider pausing and rearranging if:

- communication becomes unsafe or aggressive
- emotions prevent active listening from either side
- there is significant misunderstanding or confusion
- staff feel unable to respond calmly and constructively

Pausing a meeting should always be framed positively:

"I want to make sure we give this conversation the time and care it deserves. Perhaps we could pause and arrange another time to continue together."

After the conversation:

The relationship is often shaped just as much by what happens after the meeting as during it.

Helpful follow-up actions include:

- sending a written summary of agreed actions
- checking understanding
- following through on promises made
- communicating proactively if plans change
- recognising improvements and positive moments, not only concerns

Consistency builds trust over time.



Internal Communication:

When schools feel aligned but parents experience confusion

Schools often assess their internal communication by whether systems exist for staff meetings, emails, notes on student management systems, handovers, and informal conversations. From an internal perspective, this can feel sufficient and functional.

Parents, however, experience internal communication only through its outcomes. When one staff member agrees to an adjustment, reassurance, or action for a student; and another staff member is unaware of it - the result is confusion, inconsistency, and frustration that lands squarely with the family.

What feels like a small internal breakdown can feel to parents like:

- Mixed messages
- Broken promises
- A lack of care or coordination
- Being asked to repeatedly re-explain their child's situation

In these moments, parents are not judging the system; they are judging the school's reliability as a team around their child.

"My son was temporarily allowed to use the lift due to medical reasons, but this was not internally communicated and the headteacher did not ask for further information. He just assumed he shouldn't be using it and told him off."

"As he is a 'non rule breaker' he was mortified, didn't tell anyone until he came home and had spent the day using stairs even though it was dangerous for him."

West Northants parent



Internal Communication - Key Things to Consider

1

Internal communication is external trust

Parents don't separate "internal processes" from "external experience." If the school is not aligned internally, it appears unreliable externally.

From a parent's perspective:

- "You are one school."
- "What one staff member says represents all of you."

When internal alignment breaks down, parents often feel they are carrying the coordination burden on the school's behalf.

2

Good intentions don't travel without systems

A staff member may act thoughtfully, compassionately, and appropriately in response to a parent or student; but if that action is not clearly documented and shared, it effectively doesn't exist for the rest of the team.

Common friction points include:

- Informal agreements made in hallways or phone calls
- Adjustments trialled without a clear review point
- Notes added inconsistently or not at all
- Assumptions that "someone else will pass it on"

Care that isn't communicated becomes invisible.

3

Students are often caught in the middle

When staff are not aligned, students may:

- Be told conflicting expectations
- Feel blamed for "not following rules" that were adjusted
- Be asked to explain or justify agreed changes
- Lose trust in adults' ability to work together

Parents then step in - not to challenge authority, but to protect their child from inconsistency.

4

Repetition signals breakdown, not engagement

When parents have to repeat the same information to multiple staff members, it rarely feels collaborative. It feels like:

- The school isn't listening
- The school doesn't talk to itself
- The parent must manage the system

This is a fast way to turn cooperative parents into frustrated or defensive parents.

5

Small misalignments escalate quickly

What starts as a minor internal gap can escalate into:

- Parent complaints
- Loss of confidence in staff
- Escalation to leadership
- Long-term damage to the relationship

Often the issue is not the original decision; but the lack of shared understanding around it.



Key Transitioning Points

Transition points are important stages in every child or young person's educational journey. These periods of change can bring opportunities for growth and development, but they may also create uncertainty or anxiety for children, young people, and their families. For children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), effective planning, communication, and support are essential to ensure transitions are positive, inclusive, and well-coordinated.

The [SEND Code of Practice](#) highlights the importance of preparing children and young people for transitions at every stage of education. Schools, early years settings, colleges, and support services should work closely with parents, carers, and professionals to plan, share information, and ensure continuity of support. Every transition should be person-centred, focusing on the child or young person's strengths, aspirations, and individual needs.

Key transition points may include:

- Moving into an early years setting or nursery
- Starting primary school
- Transitioning from infant to junior school
- Moving from primary to secondary school
- Changes between schools or educational placements
- Transitioning into post-16 education, training, or employment
- Preparing for adulthood and moving into adult services

Good transition planning should begin early, with children, young people, and families fully involved in decision-making. This may include additional visits, transition booklets, social stories, meetings with new staff, phased transitions, or multi-agency planning meetings where appropriate. Sharing clear information and listening to the views of families helps to reduce anxiety and build confidence during periods of change.

For young people with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), planning for adulthood becomes a formal part of the annual review process from Year 9 onwards. However, developing independence, confidence, communication, and life skills should be encouraged throughout childhood and adolescence. Successful transitions are not only about moving between educational settings, but also about preparing children and young people to participate in their communities, develop relationships, and achieve positive long-term outcomes.

In West Northamptonshire, schools and services are encouraged to work collaboratively with families and partner agencies to ensure transitions are carefully planned and well-supported. A graduated, coordinated approach helps children and young people feel safe, included, and ready to succeed at each stage of their educational journey.

Good transition planning should begin early, with children, young people, and families fully involved in decision-making.



Transition Points and Preparing for Adulthood in West Northamptonshire

Transition between phases of education; such as moving from primary to secondary school - and preparation for adult life are key stages where schools must actively engage with parents and carers. The [SEND Code of Practice](#) makes it clear that schools have a duty to support these transitions effectively. Every meeting with families is an opportunity to share information, listen to concerns, and work together to achieve positive outcomes for the child or young person.

As children grow older, families need clear, timely information about future options and pathways into adulthood. In West Northamptonshire, this planning begins early and becomes a formal requirement from Year 9 onwards, when the Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) annual review must include a Preparing for Adulthood section. This covers four key areas:

- Education and employment beyond 16
- Independent living
- Community participation and friendships
- Health and wellbeing

Effective transition planning is person-centered and starts with the young person's aspirations, even if these seem ambitious. Good communication and co-production with families are essential to ensure smooth transitions and better life outcomes.

West Northamptonshire has developed a comprehensive Preparing for Adulthood offer, co-produced with local partners including West Northants Voices in Partnership, health services, and colleges. This includes the Future Destinations platform, which helps young people explore post-16 education, training, and employment options. The local SEND strategy (2023–2026) identifies Preparation for Adulthood as one of its six priority areas, aiming to improve independence, inclusion, and long-term outcomes for young people with SEND.

For detailed guidance, resources, and planning tools, visit the official [West Northamptonshire Preparing for Adulthood page](#). This page provides practical advice on transition planning, post-16 education, independent living, and health support, ensuring families have the information they need to prepare for the future.

Every meeting with families is an opportunity to share information, listen to concerns, and work together to achieve positive outcomes for the child or young person.



Transitioning Families Through Term Time:

Reading Beyond the Record

When a child and family move between schools, information from the previous setting can be valuable in helping staff understand history, identify support needs, and avoid families having to repeatedly tell difficult stories. However, records should be viewed as one perspective at one point in time; not as a complete or fixed truth.

A West Northamptonshire parent recently described this challenge as “third-party gossip”; where a new school forms impressions based solely on what has been written or reported by others before having an opportunity to build its own relationship with the family. Whilst previous records may contain important information, they should never replace curiosity, empathy, and direct engagement.

A trauma-informed approach recognises that experiences, relationships, and circumstances change. Families who may have experienced communication difficulties in one setting should not arrive at a new school carrying a permanent label. Instead, transition offers an opportunity for a fresh start and a new partnership.





Transitioning Families Through Term Time:

Reading Beyond the Record

Mindful reading of previous records

When reviewing reports, notes, or communication logs from another school, consider:

- What might have been happening for this family at that time?
- Which parts of this information are factual, and which parts are interpretation or opinion?
- Are there alternative explanations for behaviours, attendance patterns, or communication difficulties?
- Have we heard the family's perspective?
- What strengths, resilience, and positive relationships are reflected in the records?
- How might our assumptions influence the way we welcome this family?

Moving from judgement to partnership

Rather than beginning with what went wrong elsewhere, schools can begin with curiosity and collaboration:

"I can see there were some communication challenges in the past. We'd really like to understand what happened from your perspective. What can we do together to make communication work well in this school?"

Other helpful questions include:

- "What has worked well for your family in previous settings?"
- "What would you like us to know about your child?"
- "How do you prefer us to communicate with you?"
- "What can we do to help build trust from the beginning?"
- "If difficulties arise, how would you like us to approach them?"
- "What would a successful partnership look like for you?"

Creating a trauma-informed transition

Schools can strengthen transitions by:

- Treating historical information as context rather than conclusion.
- Giving equal weight to the family's voice.
- Looking for strengths as well as challenges.
- Avoid deficit-based language and labels.
- Being aware of unconscious bias created by previous reports.
- Establishing clear, respectful communication from day one.
- Recognising that trust is built through current interactions, not inherited from previous relationships.
- Allowing families the opportunity to redefine themselves in a new setting.
- Focusing on "What happened?" and "What is needed now?" rather than "What is wrong?"
- Seeing transition as the start of a new relationship rather than the continuation of an old narrative.

Reflective practice for staff

Before making assumptions based on previous records, ask:

"If I had never read this file, how would I approach this family today?"

Every transition presents an opportunity to build a new story. Trauma-informed practice encourages schools to honour past information while remaining open to present realities, recognising that positive relationships are often the most powerful factor in changing outcomes for children and families.



Looking Beyond Engagement:

Understanding Parent Confidence

When schools think about parental engagement, it is easy to focus on what can be seen: attendance at meetings, responses to emails, completion of forms, or involvement in school events. However, these visible behaviours do not always tell us how confident a parent feels in their role, either as a parent or as a partner in their child's education.

Parent confidence can have a significant impact on the relationship between home and school. A parent with high levels of confidence is often more comfortable asking questions, sharing concerns, seeking clarification, and working collaboratively with school staff. They are more likely to view challenges as something that can be worked together.

In contrast, a parent with low confidence may appear disengaged, defensive, avoidant, or even confrontational. These behaviours are often interpreted as a lack of interest or unwillingness to work with the school. However, they may instead reflect feelings of uncertainty, previous negative experiences, fear of being judged, or a belief that they are not capable of helping their child succeed.

For some parents, school environments can trigger memories of their own educational experiences. If those experiences involved failure, exclusion, bullying, criticism, or feeling misunderstood, entering a school building or attending a meeting may evoke feelings of anxiety and vulnerability.



Things to Consider:

- Does this parent feel that their views are valued?
- Do they believe they have something worthwhile to contribute?
- Do they feel confident discussing their child's needs?
- Have previous experiences with professionals left them feeling judged or blamed?
- How comfortable are they asking for help or admitting they are struggling?



Mindful Thought...

- A parent who repeatedly misses meetings may not be uninterested. They may be worried about being criticised.
- A parent who becomes defensive during conversations may not be unwilling to listen. They may be anticipating the blame.
- A parent who rarely contacts school may not lack concern. They may doubt their ability to communicate effectively or fear getting it wrong.
- When school staff become curious about confidence rather than focusing solely on behaviour, opportunities for stronger relationships emerge.



Reflective Practice for School Staff...

Before making assumptions about a parent's level of engagement, consider:

- What might this parent's experience of school have been?
- What strengths are they already demonstrating?
- How can we communicate in ways that build confidence rather than reinforce feelings of inadequacy?
- Are we creating opportunities for success and positive feedback?
- Have we acknowledged the efforts this parent is already making?

Building parent confidence is not about lowering expectations. It is about creating relationships where parents feel respected, heard, and capable.

When parents feel confident, they are more likely to engage. When they feel valued, they are more likely to collaborate. When they experience school as a place of partnership rather than judgement, positive outcomes for children become more achievable.

Sometimes the most powerful question a practitioner can ask is not, "Why isn't this parent engaging?" but rather, "What might be affecting this parent's confidence to engage?"



Supporting Families Where There Are Language Barriers

Clear, accessible communication between schools and parent carers is essential to building trust and supporting children effectively. Where families speak English as an additional language, communication barriers can unintentionally lead to misunderstandings, reduced engagement, or families feeling excluded from decision-making. Schools can take proactive steps to ensure all parent carers feel informed, valued, and able to participate fully.



Key Principles

- Avoid assuming a lack of interest or engagement is due to parental choice; language barriers are often a hidden obstacle.
- Use inclusive, strengths-based approaches that respect families' cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
- Prioritise clarity, consistency, and accessibility in all communications.

By recognising language barriers early and responding with empathy, flexibility and practical solutions, schools can strengthen partnerships with parent carers, improve trust, and ensure children receive consistent, joined-up support across home and school.

"I have a parent that speaks little to no English - she finds communication very frustrating and feels we don't talk to her often. The trust provided a translator and the Head, myself as teacher and the mum all met to discuss any problems."

West Northants teacher

"[Communication was challenging] when the parents do not speak English and their child is translating and you have no idea what the child is telling their parent."

West Northants teacher





Practical Strategies to Reduce Language Barriers

Use clear and accessible language

- Avoid jargon, acronyms, and overly formal wording where possible.
- Break information into short sections and use plain English.
- Check understanding by inviting parents to summarise or ask questions, rather than asking "Do you understand?"

Embrace technology

- Use and embrace translation tools (such as Google Translate or Microsoft Translator) to support written communication, with the understanding that translations may not be perfect but are often better than no access at all.
- Share key information digitally so families can use built-in translation features on their own devices.
- Consider short voice notes or videos alongside written messages, which can be easier to translate and understand.

Offer translated or supported communication where possible

- Provide translated versions of key documents (e.g. school routines, SEND processes, behaviour policies) where there is a known need.
- Use interpreters for important meetings, reviews, or discussions where sensitive information is being shared.
- Where interpreters are unavailable, allow extra time for meetings and provide follow-up summaries in writing.

Build trusting relationships

- Take time to understand families' preferred methods of communication.
- Acknowledge and respect cultural differences in communication styles.
- Reassure parent carers that asking for clarification or support is welcomed and encouraged.

Support two-way communication

- Create opportunities for parent carers to share information in ways that feel accessible to them, such as surveys with simple language, visuals, or translated options.
- Encourage the use of photographs, examples, or home observations to support understanding.
- Be flexible in how feedback is gathered, recognising that written English may not be a parent's strongest communication method.

Whole-School Considerations

- Ensure all staff understand the school's approach to supporting EAL families and are confident using available tools.
- Reflect on whether current communication systems unintentionally exclude some families.
- Involve parent carers in reviewing and improving communication practices, using feedback to shape future approaches.





Practical Strategies to Support Cultural Differences

Develop cultural awareness and understanding

- Recognise that families' beliefs, values, and experiences may influence how they engage with education, support services, and decision-making.
- Avoid assumptions based on background, appearance, or language, and treat each family as individuals.
- Be open to learning and reflect on your own cultural perspectives and potential biases.

Use culturally respectful communication

- Be mindful that communication styles vary across cultures (e.g. levels of directness, eye contact, or attitudes to authority).
- Explain processes, expectations, and roles clearly, as these may differ from families' previous experiences.
- Check understanding in a respectful way and invite questions, recognising that some families may feel uncomfortable challenging professionals.

Adapt practice to be inclusive and flexible

- Where possible, adapt routines, meetings, and support plans to take account of cultural or religious practices (e.g. festivals, prayer times, dietary needs).
- Be flexible with engagement approaches, recognising that attendance at meetings or events may be affected by work patterns, caring responsibilities, or cultural expectations.
- Consider how school policies and practices may impact families from different cultural backgrounds.

Build trust and strong relationships

- Take time to build relationships with families and show genuine interest in their experiences and perspectives.
- Acknowledge and respect cultural differences in parenting styles, family structures, and approaches to learning and behaviour.
- Reassure parent carers that their views are valued, and that partnership working is encouraged.

Encourage shared understanding and collaboration

- Create opportunities for families to share cultural information that may support their child's wellbeing and learning.
- Use community links, cultural mediators, or trusted organisations to support engagement where appropriate.
- Ensure families feel confident contributing to discussions and decisions about their child.

Whole-School Considerations

- Ensure staff receive training/guidance on cultural awareness and inclusive practice.
- Reflect on whether school policies, communications, and expectations are culturally inclusive.
- Work with families and community groups to review and improve approaches to supporting cultural diversity.
- By recognising and valuing cultural differences, schools can foster inclusive environments, strengthen relationships, and ensure support is respectful, effective, and responsive to every child's needs.



Using Artificial Intelligence (AI): Guidance for School Staff

Effective Use and Professional Considerations

AI tools are increasingly shaping communication between schools and families. Used well, they can support clearer, more consistent communication, help manage workload, and improve accessibility for parents. For staff, AI can assist with drafting responses, summarising information, identifying recurring themes in correspondence, and ensuring messages remain professional and aligned with school policies.

At the same time, AI has changed the nature of how parents engage with schools. Staff should expect an increase in AI-assisted or fully AI-generated emails from parents. These messages may appear more formal, structured, or legalistic than in the past. It is important that staff do not make assumptions or judgements about a parent's intent, understanding, or level of concern based solely on the tone or style of an email. The use of AI often reflects a parent seeking clarity, confidence, or support in communication; not necessarily escalation or conflict.

AI-generated content can, however, introduce challenges. Messages may include inaccuracies, incomplete context, or interpretations that do not reflect the full picture. This can sometimes lead to concerns appearing more complex or escalated than they might otherwise be discussed informally. As AI does not hold lived context or relationships, it cannot replace professional judgement, school knowledge, or direct human dialogue.

Strong relationships remain central to effective school practice. AI should be used to support clarity and consistency, while preserving the human connection that underpins trust between schools and families.



Key Considerations for School Staff

- Use AI as a support tool to enhance efficiency and consistency, not as a substitute for professional judgement or relational communication.
- Approach all parent communication, AI-assisted or not, with curiosity, neutrality, and a focus on understanding the underlying concern.
- Prioritise early, informal conversations to clarify issues before they develop into formal complaints.
- Check out any AI-assisted responses for accuracy, tone, and alignment with school values and policies before sending.
- Maintain a focus on factual clarity, transparency, and respectful dialogue at all times.
- Clearly communicate school processes, including how correspondence (including AI-assisted submissions) will be managed.



Practical Ways School Staff Can Use AI Effectively

Supporting clear, professional communication

Staff can use AI to draft or refine responses, so they are calm, clear, and solution focused. This can be particularly helpful when responding to complex or emotionally charged correspondence.

Managing high volumes of communication

AI can assist in summarising long email threads, identifying key concerns, and helping staff prioritise responses efficiently while maintaining consistency.

Clarifying tone and intent

Before sending replies, staff can use AI to review how a message might be received, helping to avoid unintended escalation and ensuring language remains collaborative.

Improving accessibility for families

AI can help translate policies, reports, or SEND documentation into plain language, making information more accessible and inclusive for a wider range of families.

Preparing for meetings

Staff can use AI to generate structured agendas, summarise key points, and produce clear follow-up notes, reducing the risk of misunderstanding.

Identifying patterns and themes

Across multiple communications, AI can help highlight recurring concerns or trends, supporting more proactive and strategic responses at a whole-school level.

Reducing administrative burden

Routine tasks such as drafting standard responses, formatting documents, or organising information can be streamlined, allowing staff to focus more on relational work.

Maintaining reflective practice

AI can support staff in reviewing their own communication for clarity, tone, and fairness, but should always be used alongside professional judgement and contextual understanding.

Mindful Thought...

When used thoughtfully, AI can strengthen communication and reduce pressure on staff. However, it must be applied with care, ensuring that empathy, professionalism, and human understanding remain at the centre of all interactions.



Responsiveness When Schools Feel Busy But Parents Feel Ignored

Schools are busy, with high-demand environments. Emails arrive constantly, phone messages stack up, and competing priorities mean responses are often delayed with the best of intentions. From within the school, this can feel understandable and unavoidable.

For parents, however, responsiveness is one of the clearest signals of care, respect, and accountability. When emails go unanswered or calls are not returned, parents don't usually assume staff are busy; they assume their concern is not important, not understood, or being avoided. What feels like a delay to a school can feel like a dismissal to a parent.

Responsiveness Equals Respect

Parents often judge the health of their relationship with the school not by outcomes, but by response. A timely response communicates:

- "We see you."
- "Your concern matters."
- "We take responsibility."

A lack of response often communicates the opposite, even when that isn't the intent.

Silence Creates Stories

When parents don't hear back, they fill the gap themselves. Common parent interpretations include:

- "They don't care."
- "They're hoping this will go away."
- "They're protecting the school, not my child."
- "I have to escalate to be taken seriously."

Once these narratives form, trust erodes quickly and is difficult to rebuild.

Acknowledgement Matters as Much as Resolution

Parents don't always expect immediate solutions; but they do expect acknowledgment.

A short response such as:

- "I've received your message."
- "I need some time to look into this."
- "I'll get back to you by [time/day]."

can prevent days or weeks of anxiety and speculation. No response feels worse than an incomplete one.

Delays Increase Emotional Intensity

Unanswered communication doesn't pause concern; it amplifies it.

As time passes, parents may:

- Become more anxious or frustrated
- Send multiple follow-up messages
- Escalate to leadership
- Shift from collaborative to defensive

What might have been a simple conversation becomes emotionally charged due to delay alone.

Responsiveness Is Especially Critical in Moments of Vulnerability

When parents reach out, it is often because:

- Their child is distressed
- Something has gone wrong
- They feel unsure or worried
- They are advocating after hesitation

A slow or absent response at these moments can feel deeply personal and damaging to the relationship.



Supporting Quiet Voices to Become Confident Voices

Not all parents feel able to “shout the loudest.” Many families, particularly within SEND communities; may feel intimidated by systems, uncertain about their rights, or worried that raising concerns could negatively affect their child. Some parents may have their own additional needs, language barriers, past negative experiences, or a lack of confidence engaging with formal processes. Their quieter voices do not reflect lower need, lower entitlement, or lower importance.

Empowering the disempowered parent is a key part of building fair, trusting relationships between schools and families.



Schools and systems should consider that:

- Confidence, time, language, and familiarity with the system are unevenly distributed.
- Parents who are calm, hesitant, or unsure may still be experiencing significant unmet need.
- The ability to navigate education and SEND systems is often linked to access to knowledge, not commitment or care.

Some parents may have their own additional needs



Guidance for Empowering Disempowered Parents

Empowerment does not mean encouraging conflict or volume. It means ensuring every parent, regardless of confidence, communication style, or personal circumstance; has access to the knowledge, tools, and reassurance they need to advocate for their child.

Strong relationships are built when systems listen just as carefully to quiet voices as to loud ones.

Making rights visible and accessible

- Provide clear, plain-language information about SEND rights, relevant law, and school duties (e.g. reasonable adjustments, graduated response, and EHCP processes).
- Avoid assuming parents already understand terminology, thresholds, or timelines.

Normalising advocacy as a right, not a confrontation

- Reinforce that asking questions, requesting support, or disagreeing respectfully is a legitimate and protected part of partnership working.
- Frame advocacy as collaboration, not complaint.

Using AI as an equalising tool

- AI can help parents understand complex legislation, policies, and processes in accessible language.
- Parents can use AI to help draft emails or questions that clearly state their child's needs and legal entitlements without feeling aggressive or confrontational.

Encouraging informed confidence

- Sharing key knowledge (such as what schools must do, what evidence can be requested, and how decisions are made) supports parents to engage with confidence rather than fear.
- Knowledge empowers parents to speak up earlier, more calmly, and more effectively.

Valuing lived experience

- Parents do not need to be experts in law or education to be experts in their child.
- Schools should actively create space for quieter parents to share insights and concerns without needing to escalate or formalise.



Acknowledging the Parent Who Supports You and Your School

In schools, particularly within SEND practice, it is easy for relationships with parents to become centred around challenges, concerns, and problem-solving. Many parents are carrying significant emotional and practical burdens as they navigate assessments, waiting lists, provision gaps, family pressures, and concerns about their child's future. It is important to remember that every parent arrives at school with their own experiences, worries, and expectations.

Occasionally, however, you may encounter a parent who, despite carrying these pressures themselves, is able to recognise the challenges faced by the professionals around them. They notice when a SENCO is managing an overwhelming caseload. They recognise when a class teacher is trying their best despite limited resources. They understand that school staff are human beings who can also feel frustrated, exhausted, worried, and emotionally invested in outcomes for children.

These parents often become valuable partners in the truest sense of the word. They may offer practical suggestions, share strategies that work at home, provide constructive feedback, or help identify solutions when discussions become difficult. They may encourage a teacher after a challenging meeting, reassure a SENCO who feels they have run out of options, or support other parents by sharing knowledge and experiences. When conversations become emotionally charged, they are often able to help refocus attention on the next achievable step.

Such contributions should not go unnoticed.

However, schools must be careful not to position these parents as the benchmark for how all parents should engage.

Every family's journey is different. Some parents have experienced years of fighting to have their child's needs recognised. Others may be dealing with trauma, exhaustion, financial pressures, their own additional needs, or a history of feeling unheard by professionals. A parent's presentation during a meeting or conversation may be shaped by factors that are not immediately visible to school staff.

The parent who is able to offer encouragement today may have been distressed and overwhelmed six months earlier. Equally, the parent who appears angry, defensive, or disengaged may simply be carrying burdens that have not yet been understood.

Acknowledging parents who support school staff should therefore never lead to comparisons between families. Instead, it should remind us that positive relationships are built through mutual understanding, empathy, and respect.

Schools should celebrate collaboration when it occurs, while remaining committed to understanding every parent's individual circumstances, communication style, and relationship with the school. The goal is not to seek a particular type of parent, but to create the conditions in which every parent feels heard, valued, and able to engage in a way that is right for them.

When schools acknowledge the parents who support them, whilst continuing to support those who are struggling, they model the very partnership they hope to build with all families.



A simple acknowledgement can be powerful

Let parents know when their collaborative approach has made a difference.

Thank them for their honesty, creativity, patience, or willingness to work alongside the school. Recognising these strengths helps build trust and reinforces the shared commitment to achieving the best outcomes for children and young people.



Acknowledging the Parent Who Supports You and Your School

It can be tempting to view a collaborative parent as simply having a positive attitude or an easy disposition. However, strong parent-school relationships rarely happen by chance. They are often the result of deliberate relational practice, built through trust, transparency, responsiveness, and mutual respect.

Rather than asking, “Why can’t all parents be like this?”, a more useful question is:

“What can we learn from this relationship that will help us build stronger partnerships with all parents, particularly those who may currently feel unheard, frustrated, or disconnected from school?”

Good practice is often already present within your school. The challenge is recognising it, understanding it, and intentionally replicating it.

“You almost have a little cry in with the teacher and she’s like, it’s alright, you’re doing your very best.” This contributes to trust, safety, and resilience.

West Northants parent



Reflection Question for Schools:

When you think about a parent who is able to support you, collaborate with you, and remain solution-focused during difficult conversations, pause and reflect:

What have you and your school done to help this parent feel safe enough, valued enough, and listened to enough to engage in this way?

Consider:

- How has the school-built trust with this parent over time?
- What experiences has the parent had with staff that have enabled a positive relationship to develop?
- How have staff demonstrated empathy, honesty, and consistency?
- What communication approaches have worked particularly well?
- How has the school responded when concerns have been raised?
- In what ways has the parent felt heard, respected, and included in decision-making?
- What can be learned from this relationship and applied to support other parents and families?



Sustaining Nurture:

Strengthening Parent-School Relationships in Secondary SEND

As children move from primary into secondary education, many parents, particularly parents of children with SEND - describe a profound shift in how they feel by the school.

In primary settings, relationships are often close, visible, and relational. Parents may have regular informal contact with staff, clearer lines of communication, and a stronger sense that their knowledge of their child is welcomed and valued. There is often an embedded culture of nurture: adults know the child well; adjustments are discussed collaboratively, and parents feel part of a shared team around the child.

When children transition to secondary school, this experience frequently changes. Secondary systems are necessarily larger and more complex. Staff roles are specialised. Contact points are structured. Independence is encouraged. However, without intentional relational scaffolding, this shift can leave parents; particularly those navigating SEND, feeling less connected, less heard, and less valued.

Through parent voice work, common themes emerge:

- Communication becomes more formal and less relational
- Contact is often triggered by concerns rather than connection
- Parents feel they must “re-explain” their child repeatedly
- The depth of understanding present in primary school feels diluted
- There is uncertainty about who holds oversight of their child’s needs

For parents of children with SEND, this loss of relational continuity can feel especially destabilising. They are not only supporting a child through adolescence; they are often continuing to coordinate provision, advocate for reasonable adjustments, monitor wellbeing, and interpret complex social and emotional changes.

While secondary education rightly promotes growing independence, for a young person with SEND, independence is not achieved through the withdrawal of support. It is built through a secure, collaborative partnership between home and school.

This toolkit recognises that strengthening relationships with parents of children with SEND in secondary settings requires intentional design.



Key Principles to embed include:

- Maintaining relational visibility
- Valuing parental expertise
- Shifting from reactive to proactive communication
- Acknowledging the parental transition
- Preserving nurture within high expectations

See the next page for an in-depth look into each key principle.



Sustaining Nurture:

Key Principles

Maintain relational visibility

Parents benefit from knowing who has oversight of their child's needs and how information is shared across staff. Clear, named points of contact reduce anxiety and prevent parents from feeling lost within systems.

Value parental expertise

Parents hold longitudinal knowledge of their child's profile, triggers, strengths and successful strategies. Structured opportunities to listen to and incorporate this knowledge to communicate respect and partnership.

Shift from reactive to proactive communication

Where contact occurs only when there is a concern, trust erodes. Scheduled, strength-based updates help sustain collaborative relationships.

Acknowledge the parental transition

The move to secondary school is a developmental transition for parents as well as children. Explicitly recognising this; and offering guidance on what partnership looks like in this phase; reduces uncertainty.

Preserve nurture within high expectations

High academic standards and relational care are not opposites.

Adolescents, particularly those with SEND, require emotionally attuned adults around them. When parents feel supported, they are better able to provide co-regulation and consistency at home.

Strengthening school-parent relationships in secondary settings does not mean replicating primary structures. It means evolving nurture to match developmental needs.

For children with SEND, consistent relational partnership across home and school is not an optional enhancement - it is a protective factor.

When parents feel heard, informed and valued:

- Communication becomes solution-focused rather than adversarial
- Trust increases
- Early concerns are raised before escalation
- Young people experience greater emotional stability

The transition from primary to secondary should not signal the end of nurture. Within SEND practice, it must signal a re-commitment to collaborative partnership; ensuring that as systems grow larger, relationships remain strong.



A Final Reflection

It is easy to say that we value partnerships with parents and carers. It is much harder to examine whether our actions consistently demonstrate it.

The true measure of a school's commitment to working alongside families is not found in mission statements, policies, newsletters, or consultation events. It is found in the experiences of the parents and carers who walk through your doors, attend your meetings, read your emails, and place their trust in your care every day.

For many families of children and young people with SEND, the relationship with school can profoundly shape their experience of education. A positive relationship can build confidence, trust, and hope. A strained relationship can leave families feeling isolated, unheard, and exhausted.

The question is not whether relationships matter. The question is whether we are prepared to do the work required to strengthen them.

This work asks us to listen when feedback is uncomfortable. To remain curious when we disagree. To acknowledge when systems work for the organisation but not for the family. To recognise that good intentions do not always translate into positive experiences. Most importantly, it asks us to reflect honestly on the difference between involvement and partnership.

Are we inviting parents into a process that has already been decided, or are we genuinely sharing responsibility for shaping outcomes? Are we hearing families, or are we truly listening? Are we seeking compliance, or collaboration?

If every parent and carer of a child with SEND were asked today how valued, respected, informed, and involved they feel within your school community, what would they say?

And perhaps the more important question is: Would you be prepared to hear the answer?

As you leave this toolkit, resist the temptation to view relationship-building as another initiative to implement or another box to tick. Instead, see it for what it is: an ongoing commitment to creating a culture where families feel that they belong, that their knowledge matters, and that their voice has influence.

Because when parents and carers trust schools, children benefit.

When families feel respected, children benefit.

When relationships are strong, even difficult conversations become possible.

And when schools have the courage to reflect, adapt, and grow alongside families, children and young people with SEND are given the very best chance to flourish.

The challenge now is not simply to agree with the principles in this toolkit. The challenge is to leave this page and ask: What will we do differently tomorrow?

A positive relationship can build confidence, trust, and hope. A strained relationship can leave families feeling isolated, unheard, and exhausted.



Section 3

Approaches to Help Build Relationships with Parent Carers



Communicating Effectively with Parent Carers

As part of this project, schools were asked to reflect on the communication methods they use with parent carers and consider how successful these approaches have been. Effective communication is not just about sending information - it's about building trust, ensuring clarity, and creating opportunities for two-way dialogue. Before choosing a method, think carefully about the message you want to convey and the most appropriate way to share it.

Starting as you mean to go on:

Schools invest significant time and care in welcoming children and families through open days, individual family meetings, extended transition arrangements, home visits, and other relational approaches. These practices should not be seen as time-limited or solely linked to transition. If they are effective in building trust and confidence at the start, they are equally important throughout the school year. Schools should plan intentionally for how this level of communication, accessibility and responsiveness will be sustained beyond the initial settling-in period.

When early openness and personalised support fall away, families can feel uncertain, disconnected, or less confident in raising concerns. Maintaining consistent, relationship-based communication all year round demonstrates that partnership with families is ongoing, not conditional, and reinforces a shared commitment to the child's wellbeing, inclusion and success.

One-Way Communication

Methods such as newsletters, text alerts, and letters are useful for sharing general information or reminders with large groups. However, these approaches do not allow parents to ask questions or clarify details, which can lead to misunderstandings. Schools should always provide a clear route for follow-up questions when using one-way communication.

Two-Way Communication

Face-to-face conversations remain the most powerful way to build rapport and check understanding. They allow for immediate clarification and help strengthen relationships quickly. However, this isn't always practical or appropriate, depending on the nature of the information. Virtual meetings via platforms like Microsoft Teams or Zoom can be useful, but schools report mixed success; some families find them less personal or harder to engage with.

Written two-way communication, such as email or secure messaging apps, offers flexibility and gives parents time to process information. This can be particularly helpful for families' juggling work or caring responsibilities. However, it may present challenges for parents with English as an Additional Language (EAL) or literacy difficulties, so schools should consider accessibility and offer alternatives where needed.



Key Principles for Successful Communication

- **Prioritise in-person dialogue** for sensitive or complex issues.
- **Establish clear, consistent channels** that are easy for families to use.
- **Offer real-time access** where possible; apps and email can be helpful for parents who cannot take calls during the day.
- **Check understanding** and invite feedback, especially when using written or one-way methods.
- **Be inclusive**, consider language needs, literacy levels, and accessibility.

In West Northamptonshire, strong communication is central to improving SEND outcomes and building trust between schools and families. The SEND Code of Practice and local priorities emphasise co-production and partnership working.



New School Transition Fact-Finding Event

Description:

Host a dedicated fact-finding event for families and pupils who are preparing to join the school.

This session provides a welcoming, supportive space for children and their families to share information, raise questions, and discuss any concerns ahead of transition. The event should focus on building positive relationships, understanding individual needs, and ensuring the school is fully informed before the child starts.

The session can include key staff such as the class teacher, pastoral lead, SENDCO, and where appropriate, senior leaders.

Schools have found that early fact-finding meetings help reduce anxiety, strengthen trust with families, and ensure appropriate support is in place from day one. The emphasis should be on collaboration; understanding the child's strengths, interests, routines, and any barriers to learning, as well as agreeing practical next steps to support a smooth start.



Things to consider:

- Schedule the event well in advance of the child's start date to allow time for planning and adjustments.
- Offer flexible formats (face-to-face, virtual, or blended) to ensure accessibility for all families.
- Provide a simple pre-meeting questionnaire so families can reflect on strengths, needs, medical information, friendships, and any worries.
- Ensure key staff attending have reviewed any existing records (e.g. previous school reports, support plans, external professional reports).
- Create opportunities for the child's voice to be heard, for example, through a short pupil profile, drawing activity, or informal conversation.
- Allow time for families to tour key areas of the school (classroom, toilets, dining hall, quiet spaces) where appropriate.
- Clearly outline the next steps following the meeting, including who to contact and how ongoing communication will be maintained.

This approach supports a proactive, child-centred transition process where families feel listened to, valued, and reassured as their child joins the school community.



Whole-School Transition and Information Evening

Description:

Host a whole-school fact-finding and information evening for families whose children are joining the school.

This event provides an opportunity for school leaders to clearly present key information about the school's vision, values, expectations, policies, and day-to-day procedures, while also creating space for parents and carers to ask questions and seek clarification.

The session should focus on transparency, partnership, and shared understanding. Senior leaders can outline the school's ethos, behaviour policy, safeguarding procedures, attendance expectations, curriculum approach, and communication systems. This ensures families feel well-informed and confident about what to expect, while reinforcing the importance of consistent messages between home and school.

Schools have found that hosting a structured information evening before pupils start helps to build trust, reduce misconceptions, and proactively address common concerns. It also establishes clear expectations from the outset and strengthens the home-school partnership.



Things to consider:

- Clearly communicate the purpose and agenda of the evening in advance, so families know what will be covered.
- Include key staff such as the Headteacher, DSL, SENDCO, pastoral leads, and phase leaders to present relevant sections.
- Provide an overview of key policies (e.g. behaviour, safeguarding, attendance, uniform, communication) and explain the rationale behind them.
- Allow dedicated time for questions, either through an open Q&A session or smaller breakout discussions.
- Consider offering translated materials or interpreter support where needed.
- Provide handouts or a digital information pack summarising key policies and contact details.
- Offer flexible access options, such as recording the presentation or providing virtual attendance for those unable to attend in person.
- Gather feedback at the end of the session to inform future events.

This approach supports clarity, consistency, and collaboration, ensuring families feel informed, heard, and aligned with the school's expectations as their child begins their journey in the school community.



An In-School Parent Carer Forum

Description:

Establish an in-school Parent Carer Forum to provide a dedicated space for parents and carers of children and young people with SEND to share their experiences, views, and suggestions.

Regular meetings can help strengthen relationships between families and the school, encourage meaningful participation in decision-making, and provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of SEND provision and wider school practices.

An in-school Parent Carer Forum can support co-production by enabling parents and carers to work alongside school leaders to identify priorities, develop solutions, and improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND.



Things to consider:

- Clearly define the purpose of the forum and communicate how parent and carer feedback will influence decision-making and school improvement.
- Ensure meetings are welcoming, inclusive, and accessible to all families, considering factors such as timing, venue, childcare, and virtual attendance options.
- Establish clear terms of reference, including expectations around confidentiality, respect, and constructive discussion.
- Seek representation from a diverse range of families to ensure different experiences and perspectives are heard.
- Share agendas in advance and provide feedback after meetings so parents and carers can see how their contributions are being considered.
- Ensure there is a named member of staff, such as the SENDCO or senior leader, who can facilitate discussions and champion actions arising from the forum.
- Regularly review the effectiveness of the forum and adapt the format or focus based on feedback from participants.
- Utilise when necessary, your local Parent Carer Forum to support, assist, Chair, and/or offer to independently hold survey data and write reports on parent carer experiences.



SEND Specific Parent Evenings

Description:

Offer dedicated parent evenings for families of children with SEND that allow for longer, more meaningful conversations about individual needs, progress, and support strategies.

These sessions provide a calmer, less rushed environment than whole-school parent evenings and can include key staff such as the SENDCO, class teacher, and relevant support professionals.

Schools in West Northants have found SEND-specific parent evenings particularly effective when structured around collaboration, focusing on what is working well, agreeing on next steps, and how school and home can work together.



Things to consider:

- Allow longer appointment times than standard parent evenings to support in-depth discussion.
- Consider offering flexible formats, such as face-to-face, virtual, or blended appointments, to meet family needs.
- Clearly communicate the purpose of the evening in advance, so parents know what to expect.
- Ensure staff attending are familiar with the child and any current plans (e.g. SEN Support Plans or EHCPs).
- Build in time for parents to ask questions and share insights about what works well at home.



SEND Coffee Mornings or Evenings

Description:

Organise informal sessions for families of children with SEND to meet, share experiences, and build connections.

These can be face-to-face in school or virtually to increase accessibility.

Schools in West Northamptonshire have found these sessions more engaging when linked to something positive, such as showcasing a class project, or themed around a relevant topic like “Let’s Talk About Sleep” or “Managing Transitions”.

SEND coffee mornings or evenings are also a great way to invite SEND services in; for example, the Parent Carer Forum, West SENDIASS, and/or Inclusion & Intervention Support Team.



Things to consider:

- Virtual sessions often attract parents who may not feel comfortable coming into school.
- Evening sessions can work better for working parents - consider offering both daytime and evening options.
- Timing matters: avoid scheduling immediately after long assemblies or presentations.
- Encourage networking by mixing year groups so parents can learn from those with older children.
- Use name labels that include the parent’s name, their child’s name, and class for easy introductions.



Coffee and Cake Open Day Sessions

Description:

Combine a child's transition visit with a relaxed coffee session for parents.

While children explore the school, parents meet staff (including the SENDCO), chat with other families, and enjoy refreshments.

This is an excellent opportunity to introduce SEND Parent Champions if your school has them and to create a welcoming, non-threatening environment.



Things to consider:

- Offer multiple sessions; one during the day and one in the evening - to ensure inclusivity.
- Prepare a SEND-specific discussion point or Q&A to make the session purposeful.



Book and Biscuit Stay and Share Sessions

Description:

Pair a child-friendly reading activity with an informal stay-and-share for parents.

Children enjoy stories and simple book-based activities with staff, while parents sit in, chat with teachers (including the SENDCO), and connect with other families over biscuits and a warm drink.

This gentle, low-pressure session helps families feel confident in supporting reading at home and builds positive relationships between home and school.



Things to consider:

- Offer sessions at different times (morning and after school) so more families can attend.
- Choose inclusive, accessible texts and provide prompts or tips for supporting reading at home, including SEND-specific strategies if appropriate.



EAL Teaching and Learning Mentors

Description:

For schools with a high proportion of families with English as an Additional Language (EAL), consider employing a bilingual TA or mentor within the Learning Support Team.

They can help bridge language gaps during drop-ins, meetings, and SEND information sessions, ensuring families fully understand processes and feel included.



Things to consider:

- There is a cost implication, but the impact on engagement and trust can be significant.
- Explore community volunteers or partnerships with local organisations if staffing is a challenge.



Electronic Apps

Description:

Use secure school apps to share updates with parent carers, including photos of classroom activities or projects.

Where possible, involve pupils by allowing them to upload their own pictures or short comments about what they've been learning. This creates a sense of inclusion and helps parents feel connected to their child's day.



Things to consider:

- Decide on a consistent schedule for sharing updates (e.g. weekly or termly) and stick to it.
- Choose an app that meets the needs of your school community; consider accessibility, ease of use, and safeguarding features.
- Be mindful of cost implications and digital exclusion for families without smartphones or reliable internet access.
- Popular options include Class DoJo, Marvellous Me, and ScholarPack (not an exhaustive list or endorsement).



Emails

Description:

Provide clear email channels for communication, such as dedicated year-group addresses or individual teacher/SEND/CO emails.

Inform parents of expected response times (e.g. within 24 hours during the working week). Email is particularly helpful for parents who need time to process information or those who work during school hours.



Things to consider:

- Multi-recipient emails can end up in spam - advise parents to check junk folders.
- Keep messages clear and concise; avoid jargon and explain how parents can respond.
- Be aware of barriers for families with EAL or literacy challenges - offer alternatives where needed.
- Ensure your school has an email policy outlining what should and shouldn't be discussed via email.
- Emails only work for families with reliable internet and an active email account.



Family Learning Events

Description:

Organise workshops or learning sessions for parents of children with SEND.

These can cover a range of topics, from supporting literacy at home to managing anxiety. Sessions can be open to all parents or targeted based on need.

Linking workshops to what children are learning in school makes them more relevant and engaging.



Things to consider:

- Involve children where possible - sessions that include pupils tend to be more successful.
- Ask parents what topics they would find most useful.
- Avoid purely online or non-interactive sessions; schools report these are less effective.
- Make sessions practical and hands-on, with opportunities for discussion and sharing strategies.



Family Support Professional

Description:

Employing a dedicated Family Support Professional can significantly strengthen relationships with families of children with SEND.

This role provides a non-teaching link between home and school, offering practical support, advice, and guidance to vulnerable families. They can help parents navigate SEND processes, access local services, and feel more confident in engaging with the school.



Things to consider:

- There are cost implications for employing additional staff, so schools should explore funding options or partnerships with local services.
- Provide clear role boundaries and support mechanisms for the worker, including supervision and access to training in SEND and safeguarding.
- Consider how this role will integrate with existing staff such as the SENDCO and pastoral team to avoid duplication and ensure a joined-up approach.
- Promote the role to families so they understand how the Family Support Professional can help and how to contact them.



Gathering Pupil Voice

Description:

Gathering pupil voice helps children feel heard, valued, and included in decisions about their learning and school experience.

Creating regular opportunities for pupils to share their thoughts, feelings, preferences, and ideas can support wellbeing, build confidence, and strengthen relationships between staff and pupils.

Pupil voice can be gathered in many different ways, including informal conversations, visual choice boards, surveys, emotion check-ins, circle time discussions, or through creative activities such as drawing and storytelling. For some children, especially those with communication differences, alternative communication methods and trusted adults may help them express themselves more comfortably.

Sharing pupil voice outcomes with families and acting on children's suggestions where possible helps pupils recognise that their opinions matter and can create positive change within school.



Things to consider:

- Use a range of communication methods to ensure all pupils can participate meaningfully.
- Keep questions simple, clear, and accessible.
- Allow children time to process and respond in ways that feel comfortable for them.
- Consider using visuals, symbols, or emotion scales to support understanding and expression.
- Make pupil voice a regular and ongoing process rather than a one-off activity.
- Celebrate and acknowledge children's contributions to show that their voices are valued.
- Share examples of how pupil feedback has influenced classroom or school practice.



Home Postcards

Description:

Sending home positive messages in the form of postcards is a simple but powerful way to strengthen relationships with families.

These can be handwritten and decorated by the child, highlighting something positive that happened during the day, or include a photo of the child with a piece of work and a short note from the staff.

Virtual postcards sent via email or school apps are also an option.



Things to consider:

- Involve the child in creating the postcard - this makes it more meaningful and encourages them to share it with their parents.
- Consider inviting families to create their own postcards to send back to school, fostering two-way positivity.
- Paper postcards can be lost or overlooked, so digital alternatives may be more reliable for some families.



Blank Home Postcards

Description:

Blank Home Postcards are a simple and meaningful way to strengthen the connection between home and school.

These postcards are sent home for parents, carers, or siblings to write and share something positive about their child; such as a proud moment, an achievement at home, a kind act, or something they love about them.

Children can also join in by decorating the postcard, adding drawings, or helping to write messages. Once returned to school, these postcards can be shared with the class, displayed, or celebrated during circle time to help build confidence, belonging, and positive relationships.



Things to consider:

- Keep the postcards simple and accessible so all families feel comfortable taking part.
- Encourage siblings and extended family members to contribute messages.
- Offer examples or prompts such as:
 - “Something that made us proud this week...”
 - “At home we loved it when...”
 - “A kind thing they did was...”
- Allow children to decorate or personalise the postcard before taking it home.
- Celebrate all responses equally to encourage continued engagement from families.
- Some postcards may not return, so consider offering digital versions or alternative ways for families to contribute.



Inclusion Network Groups

Description:

Support parents to set up a SEND Inclusion Network Group, run by parent carers for families in the school community.

These groups provide a safe space to share experiences, discuss school practices, and advocate for improvements.

Sessions can be topic-led with invited speakers such as Educational Psychologists or local SEND services.

Feedback from the group should be shared with a nominated staff member (e.g. SENDCO or Headteacher).



Things to consider:

- The school should help set up the group initially but allow parents to lead.
- Encourage informal networking and peer support.
- Parents may want to create a private Facebook group or online forum - support them with safeguarding advice.



Information Leaflets

Description:

Produce clear, accessible leaflets on SEND-related topics for parents.

These can cover areas such as EHCP processes, preparing for adulthood, or managing anxiety.

Make them available in multiple formats - downloadable from the school website, email, and printed copies.



Things to consider:

- Co-produce content with parents to ensure relevance and clarity.
- Review leaflets regularly to keep information up to date.
- Consider language and literacy barriers - use visuals and translations where needed.



Newsletters

Description:

Include a dedicated SEND section in your school newsletter to share updates, resources, and upcoming events.

Newsletters can be digital or printed and should also be available on the school website.



Things to consider:

- Decide on frequency (weekly, fortnightly, or termly) and whether newsletters should be whole-school or tailored to year groups.
- Digital-only editions can exclude families without internet access - offer paper copies where needed.
- Keep language clear and concise; avoid jargon.



Out-of-Hours Events

Description:

Hosting events outside normal school hours can help engage working parents or those with caring responsibilities.

Options include evening drop-in sessions, weekend workshops, or virtual meetings scheduled after children's bedtime.

These sessions can cover SEND topics, provide Q&A opportunities, or simply create space for informal conversations.



Things to consider:

- Ask parents what times work best - don't assume evenings suit everyone.
- Virtual evening sessions can attract parents who struggle to attend during the day.
- Ensure staff availability and consider safeguarding when hosting out-of-hours events.



Paper Communication

Description:

Use paper-based communication for individual updates (e.g. pupil diaries) or general information (letters about trips or visitors).

This can complement digital methods and support families who prefer physical copies.



Things to consider:

- Discuss preferred communication formats with parents when their child joins the school and review annually.
- Paper communication can be lost or overlooked - consider a return slip system for important messages.
- Be mindful of literacy and language barriers; use clear language and visuals where possible.



SEND Parent Ambassadors/Buddies

Description:

Work with your parent carer forum or inclusion network to develop SEND Parent Ambassadors.

These volunteers provide peer support on the playground before and after school, helping new families feel welcome and offering practical advice.

Ambassadors can wear lanyards and be introduced in newsletters with names and photos.



Things to consider:

- SEND ambassadors are often a helpful first point of contact for parents who feel nervous approaching staff.
- Provide clear guidance and safeguarding training for ambassadors.
- Promote the role widely so families know who they can approach.



Parent Surveys or Questionnaires

Description:

Conduct annual or regular surveys to gather parent feedback on SEND provision, communication, and overall school experience.

Surveys help track progress over time and identify areas for improvement.



Things to consider:

- Co-produce the survey with your Parent Carer Forum to ensure questions reflect what parents want to answer. If required, West Northants Voices in Partnership can create a tailored parent carer survey for your school, distribute it to your families, and provide a clear report summarising the responses and key insights.
- Offer both digital and paper versions to include families with limited internet access.
- Decide whether the survey will be anonymous; this can encourage honesty but limit demographic data collection.
- Support parents with literacy or language barriers by involving SEND Parent Ambassadors, EAL staff, or forum members.



Playground Presence

Description:

Have key staff (SENDSCO, Headteacher, Deputy Head, or Head of Year) visible on the playground at drop-off or pick-up times.

Having key staff visible on the playground creates informal opportunities for parents to raise concerns or share positive feedback.



Things to consider:

- This works best in primary schools and is usually done at the end of the day to avoid disrupting lessons.
- Staff should only approach parents to share positive news; private concerns should be scheduled for a meeting.
- Consider allocating specific days for SENDSCO availability and publicise these to parents.



Pupil Passport/Profile

Description:

A one-page, person-centred profile outlining the pupil's strengths, needs, and key strategies for support.

It should be easily accessible to staff and updated regularly.



Things to consider:

- Review the passport with parents, the pupil, and SENDCO as part of the Assess-Plan-Do-Review cycle.
- Encourage pupil ownership - this promotes engagement and understanding of their learning strategies.
- Share updates with parents to maintain transparency and collaboration.



Social Events

Description:

Organise informal social events such as school fairs, quiz nights, bingo, or cultural food evenings.

These create a welcoming environment for families and encourage engagement with the school community.



Things to consider:

- Ask families what events they would enjoy, consider cultural diversity and inclusivity.
- Provide opportunities for private conversations if needed but keep the focus on building relationships.
- Be mindful of accessibility; quiz nights, for example, can be adapted with picture rounds or music clips to include families with EAL or literacy challenges.
- Offer a mix of times (after school, evenings, weekends) to suit different schedules.



Social Media

Description:

Many schools use platforms like Facebook, Instagram, or X (formerly Twitter) to share updates, celebrate achievements, and promote events.

To strengthen SEND engagement, consider creating a closed SEND-specific Facebook group for your school community, where families can access information and resources in a safe space.



Things to consider:

- Monitor content and comments regularly - have a clear social media policy in place.
- Ensure safeguarding guidelines are followed for any photos or pupil-related content.
- This method relies on families having internet access and social media accounts, so always offer alternative communication channels.



Targeted Drop-Ins

Description:

Host regular or one-off drop-in sessions focused on SEND topics.

Examples include weekly SENDCO drop-ins, or themed sessions on areas like Speech and Language, sleep strategies, or preparing for transitions.

Drop-ins provide an informal opportunity for parents to ask questions, share concerns, and collect resources.



Things to consider:

- Ask parents for topic suggestions to ensure relevance.
- Consider booking systems for one-to-one discussions or keep sessions open for informal chats.
- Partner with local services such as West Northamptonshire SENDIASS to offer expert-led sessions.
- Offer a mix of times (daytime and evening) to include working parents.
- Allow curriculum leads to offer a breakdown and understanding of different parts of the curriculum they lead on.



Telephone Calls

Description:

Direct phone calls remain an effective way to communicate urgent or sensitive information.

Schools should provide parents with relevant contact numbers and indicate the best times to call. Parents should also keep their contact details up to date and share preferred times for calls.



Things to consider:

- Be mindful of parents' working hours, avoid calling during times they are unlikely to answer.
- For families with EAL or processing difficulties, avoid unexpected calls; consider scheduling calls in advance.
- Document key points from calls for consistency and follow-up.



Text Messages

Description:

Text messaging is useful for reminders, quick updates, and urgent notifications.

Some systems allow two-way messaging, enabling parents to respond at a convenient time.



Things to consider:

- Include a text message policy in school procedures, outlining response times and appropriate use.
- Parents need a mobile phone and credit to reply; numbers can change frequently, so keep records updated.
- Messages can be misinterpreted - avoid complex information and provide a follow-up option for clarification.



Utilising and Signposting your Local Parent Carer Forum: West Northants Voices in Partnership

Description:

Partner with West Northants Voices in Partnership, to strengthen engagement with families of children with SEND.

Regular coffee mornings, drop-in sessions, or themed engagement events can provide valuable opportunities for parents and carers to share their experiences, views, and feedback on SEND provision and school practices.

As an independent parent-led forum, West Northants Voices in Partnership can facilitate discussions, gather feedback from parent carers, and help schools better understand the experiences of local families. The forum also has established links with professionals and services across the local area and can invite organisations such as SENDIASS and other support services to attend events where appropriate.

In addition to supporting engagement between schools and families, West Northants Voices in Partnership offers a range of free opportunities for parent carers, including workshops delivered by professionals on topics relating to SEND, education, health, wellbeing, and local support services. The forum also hosts free parent carer engagement events, enabling families to connect with one another, share experiences, and contribute to the development of local services. Throughout the year, the forum organises free family events that provide inclusive opportunities for children, young people, parents, carers, and siblings to come together, access information, build support networks, and enjoy activities in a welcoming environment.



Things to consider:

- Work collaboratively with West Northants Voices in Partnership to plan engagement activities that meet the needs of your parent carer community.
- Consider offering a range of engagement opportunities, such as coffee mornings, drop-in sessions, and themed discussions, to encourage participation from a diverse group of families - the Parent Carer Forum can be very flexible.
- Ensure events are accessible and inclusive, taking into account factors such as timing, location, childcare needs, and virtual attendance options.
- Be clear with parents and carers about how their feedback will be used and communicate any actions or changes that result from their contributions.
- Make use of the Parent Carer Forum's established links with local professionals and services to provide parents with access to information, advice, and support.
- Encourage open and honest dialogue by creating a welcoming environment where parent carers feel listened to, valued, and respected.
- Use insights gathered through the forum to inform school improvement planning, SEND provision, and wider family engagement strategies.

If you want to contact your local Parent Carer Forum, you can email them at admin@wnvp.co.uk. To learn more about them visit their website www.wnvp.co.uk



Utilising Pastoral Support to Strengthen School-Parent Relationships

Description:

Pastoral support can play a key role in building positive, trusting relationships between schools and families.

By creating open communication, offering emotional support, and providing a consistent point of contact, pastoral teams can help families feel welcomed, listened to, and valued within the school community.

Strong school-parent relationships are built through regular communication, shared understanding, and collaborative support around the child. Pastoral staff can help bridge communication between home and school, support families during challenging times, and celebrate successes alongside parents and carers.

Providing approachable and accessible pastoral support can encourage families to engage more confidently with school, helping to create a stronger partnership that benefits the child's wellbeing, attendance, and learning experience.



Things to consider:

- Ensure families know who the pastoral team are and how they can access support.
- Create regular opportunities for informal communication and relationship building.
- Use pastoral support proactively, not only when concerns arise.
- Recognise and celebrate positive moments and achievements with families.
- Offer flexible communication methods to meet the needs of different families.
- Approach conversations with empathy, understanding, and a non-judgemental attitude.
- Encourage collaborative problem-solving between home and school to support the child consistently.



Walk-In Wednesdays

Description:

Host monthly sessions where parents are invited into classrooms at the end of the day to celebrate learning.

Children share their work and explain what they've been doing, creating a positive and inclusive atmosphere.



Things to consider:

- Involve all teachers and invite all families, but consider SEND-specific sessions for smaller, more focused discussions.
- Ensure staff are available to answer questions and provide support in a welcoming environment.
- Promote these sessions in advance to encourage attendance.



Website

Description:

Every school should have an up-to-date website with a clear SEND section.

This area should include the school's SEND Policy, resources for families, and links to local support such as the West Northamptonshire Local Offer.

A well-maintained website allows parents to access information at a time that suits them, especially those who work or have other caring responsibilities.



Things to consider:

- Co-produce the SEND section with parents to ensure it meets their needs.
- Assign responsibility for regular updates - outdated content reduces trust and engagement.
- Provide clear navigation and share direct links via newsletters or emails to help parents find key pages easily.
- Consider accessibility: use plain language, visuals, and translations for EAL families.
- Recognise that some families may have limited internet access - always offer alternative formats.



Working Document

Description:

For pupils with high levels of need, some schools create a live working document (e.g. an Excel sheet) that tracks daily activities, progress and wellbeing indicators such as anxiety levels or whether the child ate lunch.

Parents receive a secure link to view updates in real time, reducing anxiety and unnecessary phone calls.



Things to consider:

- Agree with parents' what information should be included, focus on what matters most to them.
- This approach is labour-intensive, so it may only be suitable for a small number of pupils.
- Ensure data security and GDPR compliance when sharing live documents.
- It should complement, not replace, direct communication for urgent issues.
- Parents need reliable internet access and devices to use this system.



Section 4

Appendices



SEND Glossary

Annual Review – If your child has an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP), the Local Authority (West Northamptonshire Council) is required to review it at least once a year. This review considers your child's progress, checks that the support remains appropriate, and ensures the plan is kept up to date.

CAMHS – Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services provide assessment and treatment for children and young people who are experiencing significant mental health challenges. Visit [CAMHS](#) for more information.

Carer – A carer is a person who provides unpaid support to a family member, partner, or friend who would struggle to manage without their help.

Code of Practice – A set of written guidelines and ethical standards that tell people in a specific job, trade, or organization how to behave and work.

CYP – Children and Young People.

DLA – Disability Living Allowance is a benefit available to families of children who meet the eligibility criteria, helping to cover the additional costs associated with a disability. Click [here](#) for more information.

Early Help – Early Help involves providing support to a child, young person, or their family as soon as a need for additional assistance is identified, helping to prevent issues from escalating. Click [here](#) for more information.

EHCA – An Education, Health and Care Assessment may be requested when a school or educational setting is unable to meet a child's needs through the support normally available. The Local Authority may then assess the child's needs and, where appropriate, develop an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).

EHCP – An Education, Health and Care Plan is for children and young people with SEND who require support beyond what is ordinarily available. It outlines their educational, health, and social care needs and details the additional provision required to meet those needs.

EP or Ed Psych – An Educational Psychologist is a professional who supports children and young people experiencing barriers to learning. These difficulties may relate to behaviour, social interaction, emotional wellbeing, or learning needs.

Graduated Response – Educational settings support children and young people with SEND through a Graduated Response. This approach follows a cycle of assessing needs, planning support, implementing interventions, and reviewing progress. West Northamptonshire Council has adopted this model and provides guidance to help improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

Inclusive Provision Toolkit - The Inclusive Provision Toolkit (IPT) is West Northamptonshire's ordinarily available provision guidance. Ordinarily available provision means the support all schools should be able to give to every child, every day, including those with SEND. Click [here](#) for more information.

Local Authority (LA) – A Local Authority is the local government organisation responsible for delivering a range of services within a specific area. In this context, the Local Authority is West Northamptonshire Council. www.westnorthants.gov.uk

Local Offer – The SEND Local Offer is a website that provides information about the education, health, and social care services available to children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, including those who do not have an EHCP. Click [here](#) for more information.

Ordinarily Available Provision (OAP) – OAP refers to the support, resources, and reasonable adjustments that schools and colleges are expected to provide from their existing resources to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND, without the need for an Education, Health and Care Plan. In West Northamptonshire, further information can be found in the [Inclusive Provision Toolkit](#).

Occupational Therapist (OT) – Paediatric Occupational Therapists support children and young people whose disability or difficulties affect their everyday activities. This may include self-care, play, learning, handwriting, organisation, and other school-related skills.

Parent Carer – A parent carer is someone who has parental responsibility for a child or young person with a Special Educational Need and/or Disability and provides care and support for them.

Parent Carer Forum (PCF) – A Parent Carer Forum is a group of parents and carers of disabled children who work alongside local authorities, education providers, health services, and other organisations to help shape services and ensure they meet the needs of families. [West Northants Voices in Partnership \(WNVIP\)](#) is the Parent Carer Forum for West Northamptonshire and receives Department for Education (DfE) funding.



SEND Glossary

PIP – Personal Independence Payment is a benefit for individuals aged 16 and over who have a long-term physical or mental health condition or disability. Click [here](#) for more information.

Reasonable Adjustments – Schools have a legal responsibility to reduce or remove barriers that may disadvantage a child or young person because of their disability. The steps taken to achieve this are known as reasonable adjustments.

SEND Code of Practice – The [SEND Code of Practice](#) is statutory guidance that explains the duties and responsibilities of local authorities, educational settings, health services, social care providers, and others in identifying, assessing, and supporting children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

SEN Information Report – All schools must publish information on their website outlining how they identify and support pupils with Special Educational Needs. This information should be regularly reviewed and updated.

SEN Support – When a child or young person is identified as having Special Educational Needs, schools and educational settings should put appropriate support in place to address barriers to learning and ensure effective provision. This is referred to as SEN Support.

Sensory Impairment Team – The [Sensory Impairment Team](#) consists of specialist professionals employed by West Northamptonshire Council who work with schools and settings to promote inclusion and positive outcomes for children and young people with visual, hearing, or multi-sensory impairments.

Signposting – Signposting is the process of directing individuals to services, organisations, charities, or professionals who can provide additional advice, support, or assistance.

SEN – Special Educational Needs.

SENCO or SENDCO – The Special Educational Needs (and Disabilities) Coordinator is the member of staff responsible for overseeing the identification, planning, delivery, and monitoring of support for children and young people with Special Educational Needs within an educational setting.

SENDIASS – Special Educational Needs and Disability Information, Advice and Support Service provides free, impartial information, advice, and support to children, young people, and families on all aspects of SEND. Click [here](#) for more information.

SEND – Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities.

SEND Ranges - The SEND Ranges are a practical framework that helps schools, settings, families, and professionals understand the level of support a child or young person with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) may need to achieve their best outcomes.

SaLT – Speech and Language Therapy support children and young people who experience speech, language, or communication difficulties, as well as those who have challenges with eating, drinking, or swallowing.

TAC or TAF – Team Around the Child or Team Around the Family is a coordinated approach that brings together the child or young person, their family, and the professionals involved in their support to plan and deliver effective help.



School Self-Reflection Worksheet:

Parent Carer Engagement (SEND Focus)

School Name:

Date:

Completed by:

Remember!

Effective parent carer engagement is an ongoing process. By building strengths, addressing gaps, and working in partnership with families, schools can create meaningful, inclusive relationships that improve outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

1. Current Practice - What Are We Doing Well?

Reflect on your existing approaches to engaging with parent carers of children and young people with SEND.

- What strategies or activities are working effectively?
- How do we know they are working? (e.g. feedback, attendance, outcomes)
- What do parents respond positively to?

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2. Identifying Weaknesses

Consider areas where engagement may not be as strong or consistent.

- Where do we see low participation or engagement?
- Are there groups of parents we struggle to reach?
- Are there communication challenges (tone, clarity, accessibility)?

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3. Gaps in Provision

Think about what may be missing from your current approach.

- Are there opportunities for engagement we are not offering?
- Do we provide a range of flexible and accessible options (in-person, virtual, informal)?
- Are we moving beyond consultation towards co-production?

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4. Understanding Parent Carer Needs

Reflect specifically on the needs of families with SEND.

- How do we adapt our approach for parents facing additional challenges?
- Do we actively seek and respond to parent's voice?
- How well do we explain school context (e.g. SEND provision, resources, processes)?

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5. Strengthening Communication

Evaluate how communication supports engagement.

- Is our communication clear, timely, and two-way?
- Do parents feel heard, respected, and understood?
- Do we offer multiple communication channels?

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6. Moving Towards Co-Production

Consider how you involve parents as partners.

- Do we involve parents in decision-making or just gathering feedback?
- How are we embedding co-production principles in practice?
- How can we strengthen partnerships with parent carers?

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7. Action Planning - Addressing Weaknesses and Gaps

Area for Development:

Action to be Taken:

Who is Responsible:

Timescale:

Success Measure:

8. Building a Culture of Trust and Collaboration

Reflect on your overall approach.

- How do we create a welcoming and inclusive environment for all parents?
- Do we provide a variety of engagement opportunities (e.g. coffee mornings, forums, virtual meetings)?
- How do we ensure engagement is ongoing rather than one-off?

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9. Review and Next Steps

Top 3 priorities moving forward:

1.
2.
3.

When will we review progress?

1.
2.
3.

Mindful Thoughts Recap



Mindful Thought...School website

A school website is often the first doorway a parent or carer walks through, but for families seeking SEND support, is that doorway clear, welcoming, and easy to navigate, or does it become another barrier at an already difficult time?

If a parent cannot quickly find statutory SEND information, including the Local Offer, West Northamptonshire SENDIASS, or West Northants Parent Carer Forum, then perhaps the question is not whether the information exists, but whether the school has truly made it accessible.

Accessibility is more than simply publishing the required information. Is your website written in clear, straightforward language, or is it full of educational jargon and lengthy policy documents? Have you considered how easy it is for parents and carers with English as an Additional Language (EAL) to understand the information? Could key pages be simplified, translated, or supported with visual signposting to help all families access the support available?

Why not take a few minutes to look at your website through the eyes of a parent or carer who is navigating the SEND system for the first time? How quickly can you find the information you need, and how easy it is to understand? A small change in language or layout could make a significant difference to a family's experience.

Mindful Thought...Annual Reviews

Effective communication in Annual Reviews is not just about compliance; it is about ensuring parents feel informed, involved, and valued as partners. Consider how you could use the Annual Review meeting to strengthen the relationship.

Mindful Thought...Being Transparent

True transparency is not just about sharing information; it requires schools to consider how information is framed, when it is shared, what is left unsaid, and how power and emotion shape what parents can hear and understand.

Being fully transparent answers not only "What are we doing?" but also:

- "Why are we doing it?"
- "What does this mean for my child?"
- "What can I expect next?"

Mindful Thought...Parent Engagement

- A parent who repeatedly misses meetings may not be uninterested. They may be worried about being criticised.
- A parent who becomes defensive during conversations may not be unwilling to listen. They may be anticipating the blame.
- A parent who rarely contacts school may not lack concern. They may doubt their ability to communicate effectively or fear getting it wrong.
- When school staff become curious about confidence rather than focusing solely on behaviour, opportunities for stronger relationships emerge.

Mindful Thought...Using AI

When used thoughtfully, AI can strengthen communication and reduce pressure on staff. However, it must be applied with care, ensuring that empathy, professionalism, and human understanding remain at the centre of all interactions.



Engaging with Parent Carers

A free toolkit for West Northamptonshire Schools

Supporting schools to develop and strengthen positive relationships with Parents and Carers of children with SEND

