SEND

STRATEGIES FOR THE PRIMARY YEARS

Practical ideas and expert advice to use pre-diagnosis

GEORGINA DURRANT

BLOOMSBURY

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to my late grandad and grandma. My beautiful, kind and clever grandma was disabled and my wonderful grandad was her devoted carer. He was also a formidable advocate for disability rights, campaigning for disabled parking spaces, dropped kerbs and ramps into public buildings. I learned from him the importance of standing up for others.

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I would like to thank Bloomsbury, in particular my talented editor Emily Evans, for inviting me to pitch this book.

A huge thank you to everyone who helped inform this book. I am so grateful to the many people who provided me with their time, guidance, advice and expertise. Thank you to the families and teachers who spoke to me so openly about their difficult experiences with the current SEND system and to those people who let me include their words on this topic in the introduction. And a special thank you to the children and adults with lived experience of SEND, who shared their advice and experiences for the introductions of each chapter.

Thank you to my family. My amazing children, who make me the luckiest mummy, and my wonderful, supportive husband. And my brilliant mum, dad and brother. My mum has once again diligently read through the multiple draft copies of this book for me – I genuinely couldn't write my books without her!

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FOREWORD

Think of a child – a child who experiences the world in a different way to some of the other children in their class. Because of this difference, it is possible they find some things about daily life quite tricky.

On a good day, they are aware that things are different for them and they find some strategies – with support from adults in most cases – to make the best of it. They learn to play to their strengths and to muddle through the elements of their day (whether a morning routine, a curriculum activity or a trip to the shops) that are a bit harder for them.

On a not-so-good day, they are dysregulated, withdrawn or defiant. They think they are useless or stupid. They don't know their own value; they only feel their own difference.

This book has a dual audience, of both families and staff in schools. My experience is that both of these groups ultimately want the same thing for the child I describe above. They also both sometimes share a helplessness – a feeling that their own training, knowledge or life experiences haven't prepared them for the child's latest not-so-good day.

For the adults in this child's life, they will want to help that child to have more good days. I've never met an adult – whether a family member or school colleague – who didn't genuinely want the best for the child I described above.

But there is the vital question of what we do about it. Not just what we do about it on the good day I described above, but what we do about it when the child's last good day feels like a long time ago.

And sometimes, the answer lies in the highly technical, the deeply specialist and the frustratingly expensive. But also sometimes – I would argue a lot of the time – it lies in the fairly simple, pretty generalist and totally free. That doesn't make the answer easy, but it does at least make it within reach most of the time, for most people.

And that's what this book does so well. It doesn't ignore the very real frustrations around waiting times for assessment, difficulties

getting a diagnosis or delays to support. But it also doesn't get stuck with those problems. It talks first and foremost about children, not labels, and it talks about the things these children may experience differently.

Because, amongst the swamp of acronyms, paperwork, assessments and referrals, there is a child who, in their own way, is asking for something.

And that child may not need something that requires a PhD to set up; that child may not need something that requires grand budgets in order to deliver.

That child might actually quite enjoy doing a spot the difference, some finger painting or an obstacle course.

They might be really calmed by a visual timetable, a wobble cushion or a spot of mindfulness.

They might start to believe they can learn again when they play a vocabulary game, practise a spelling rhyme or have a little more time to complete a task.

This book aims to meet a dual audience – but it goes far beyond that. It is eminently useful for a SENDCo filling in some knowledge gaps, a parent who wants to better understand what might be going on for their child, a teacher looking for inspiration for lesson planning, or a home-schooling parent seeking some fresh ideas. It foregrounds the experiences of children and their families, maintaining a respectful tone and not looking to change the children in our lives, merely to support them towards more good days.

As we would expect from Georgina, play runs through much of what she is recommending. The activities and interventions listed might be about supporting access, changing the environment or developing a skill, but they are selected and featured in this book with respect for the individual throughout.

And it speaks a language we all understand. It introduces concepts carefully and offers ideas we can implement in practice. Where SEND can feel like a closed shop ('experts only'), Georgina reminds us that the greatest expert is often just the one who finds the time for the child they care about and thinks carefully about what they are telling us they need.

Georgina understands where we need to get in relation to children with SEND in our society, but she knows we're not there yet. She has her eyes on the ideal but has written this book to support us with

where we are now – on what any of us can try, today, to help that child to have a good day. Whether a teacher, parent, SENDCo or other individual who cares about a child succeeding, you'll find a rich store of ideas in this book that might just make those good days a little more frequent.

Gary Aubin, Head of SEND for a Multi Academy Trust, Associate for SEND at the Education Endowment Foundation and author of *The Lone SENDCO: Questions and answer for the busy SENDCO*

INTRODUCTION

In an ideal world, this book would not sell a single copy. It would not be needed. It would sit on an empty shelf, gathering dust (sorry Bloomsbury!). And in this ideal world...

Teachers – you would have been given enough time and funding to have regular high-quality SEND training.

Early Career Teachers (ECTs) – you would have begun your teaching careers bursting with ways to support and teach children with SEND, after SEND training had been a key part of your teacher training. You would also get time to have this knowledge regularly topped up with high-quality, dedicated SEND training in school for all members of staff.

Special Educational Needs and Disability Coordinators (SENDCos) – you would be valued for your role and given sufficient time, resources, support and funding to ensure the best for every child with SEND in school.

Teaching Assistants (TAs) – you would be paid a salary that reflects your incredibly important work, and there would be sufficient time for teachers and TAs to plan together effectively.

Children – Quality First Teaching would ensure all children were always included. Targeted support would be effective and any children with SEND who needed more specialist support would be identified quickly. Waits for any external assessments and diagnosis would be very short, and children who need an Education, Health and Care plan (EHCP) would get them. EHCP deadlines would always be met by local authorities (LAs). EHCPs would always be well-written and specific to the child, and funding would be readily available. And children who need a specialist setting would easily get a place (and it would be near to home).

Parents/Carers – your children would be thriving and you would feel supported and valued as key partners throughout all processes.

But unfortunately, through no fault of teachers or schools, our current 'SEND system' appears to be miles away from this.

> *'I think it's sad that the gap between what we have and an ideal world scenario is so huge.'*
>
> **A SEND parent and SEND Learning Support Assistant (LSA), who is also neurodivergent herself**

And here are some statistics to back this up:

- According to Ofsted (2023), only a third of teachers have received SEND training since April 2021.
- According to the National Autistic Society (2023), 70 per cent of autistic pupils felt their teachers needed to know more about autism. Also, only 26 per cent said they felt happy at school.
- In England, LAs have 20 weeks from the date they get the request for an EHC assessment to give you the final EHCP, but according to National Statistics (2023), in 2022 only 49.2 per cent of EHCPs were issued within the 20-week deadline (which is even less than in 2021, which was 59.9 per cent).

However, statistics don't tell the whole picture. This is what some of the parents and teachers of children with SEND told me when I asked about wait times.

> *'My son waited four years for an autism diagnosis and my daughter waited three years for her autism diagnosis. Now my daughter is waiting for an ADHD assessment also, and it's been a year already with not so much as a letter about it.'*
>
> **Alice Sharp, parent**

> *'As a SENDCo, I'm shocked by the wait time. Local authorities vary but the wait for [Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services] (CAMHS), assessment and support is too long. I have parents who have managed to scrape together the money to go down the private route, but it's so expensive.'*
>
> **Anon, SENDCo**

> *'Gosh, I feel like all we ever do is wait. My nearly six-year-old waited 18 months for his autism diagnosis (every other medical diagnosis was very quick), a year for an occupational therapy referral only to be told his level of understanding wasn't compatible with their current therapy options, and three years for an assessment for home adaptations!'*
>
> **Jasmin Manley, parent**

> *'After that first [Speech and Language Therapy] (SALT) appointment, it took another year for him to be seen again, even though at the first appointment they said they wanted to see him every six months. So much changed with his speech in that year, and I wish he could have had more input. He's improved, but I'm left wondering how much further along his communication could be if he'd had regular input.'*
>
> **Leanne Hughes, parent**

> *'It is a constant fight, and it's exhausting.'*
>
> **Anon, parent**

I should point out that the Government has launched the *SEND and alternative provision improvement plan* (Department for Education, 2023) with an aim to improve the current SEND provision, but as I write this it is still a plan, so its impact is yet to be seen.

This brings me to the purpose of this book. I may not have the resources to change the system, sort the funding problem, slash the waiting times or build a system that works for every child, but I can funnel my anger that many children with SEND in the UK are being let down into creating a book that can support you as teachers and parents/carers to make a difference to the children with SEND in your care, while we wait (and shout!) for a system that works.

The challenge is not to point out the problems. That's easy! The challenge is to say how you would do things better.

LIMITATIONS OF THE BOOK

As teachers and parents/carers, we cannot diagnose children with specific SEND and we must not make presumptions about diagnoses. I have therefore purposefully taken the advice not to divide the book by specific SEND but by areas of need instead.

If you suspect a child has a specific SEND, it is important to speak to the school's SENDCo. They will have a process for gathering information about a child's needs (through discussion with class teachers, the child and their family, as well as observations in lessons). They may then seek advice and referral for assessments from external agencies. While expensive, some families who can afford it opt for private referrals instead due to the lengthy waiting times for some of these assessments.

While we cannot diagnose, there is still a lot we *can* do in the classroom and at home to make things better for children with SEND while they are waiting. For example, if you have a child in your care who is struggling with concentration and who may go on to get a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), you don't have to wait for that diagnosis before you can help them find ways to concentrate more easily. Regardless of a diagnosis, and while waiting for it, if a child is struggling to concentrate, needing more movement or finding it a real challenge to stay seated during lessons, there are techniques that you can try. The same goes for a child who is finding spelling very difficult. They may well get a dyslexia diagnosis later on (or they might not!), but in the meantime, we can still give them strategies to support their spelling.

This is what my book is for, to look at the common areas of need for children with SEND, or with potential SEND, and highlight some strategies and support you can put in place tomorrow, to make a difference in your classroom or at home.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

I have divided the book into seven chapters, focusing on the following specific areas of need, for you to dip in and out of as needed:

1. Speech, language and communication skills
2. Literacy skills
3. Numeracy skills

4. Motor skills
5. Sensory processing differences
6. Emotional regulation
7. Concentration and organisation skills

Each chapter includes:

- **CASE STUDY** – Each chapter starts with the words of children and adults with lived experience of neurodivergence and SEND, who reflect on what they find/found difficult at primary school and what did/did not help to support them.
- **OVERVIEW OF NEEDS** – I explain the areas of need that the chapter focuses on, what these areas of need mean, as well as which specific SEND may make some children find these skills inherently more difficult.
- **WHAT YOU MIGHT NOTICE** – While we cannot diagnose a child, I explain how you may notice children who perhaps don't have a specific diagnosis (or are waiting) but may have difficulties in these areas. For example, a child who has a Speech, Language and Communication Need (SLCN) may initially present as being disengaged and frustrated in lessons.
- **STRATEGIES** – I give you practical strategies (as well as things you can tweak or change) to help support children in school and at home with this area of need.
- **RESOURCES** – I have recommended a wealth of specific resources to help support children with that area of need.
- **ACTIVITIES** – Each chapter includes activity ideas you can do at home and in lessons, as well as ten suggested intervention activities to support the area of need. Each intervention activity has an accompanying QR code that you can scan to watch a video of me demonstrating it.
- **FURTHER READING AND SUPPORT** – At the end of each chapter, I highlight other books, websites and resources that may be useful.

I want to stress that all the strategies are neuro-affirming. What I mean by that is that we are not trying to make neurodivergent children become neurotypical. We are not trying to change their way of being. Instead, we should be supporting neurodivergent children in suitable ways to help them thrive while fostering a positive neurodivergent identity.

I have created this book in consultation and conversation with many adults with SEND, families of children with SEND, SENDCos, teachers, TAs, headteachers, Educational Psychologists (EPs), Occupational Therapists (OTs), Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs) and many more.

I am incredibly grateful to the children and adults featured in the case studies for their time and honesty in helping to inform this book. You may notice from these case studies that a common theme appears: many of the contributors share the wish that their needs had been identified and supported much earlier on. The importance of early identification and support is a key driver in the motivation behind this book.

ACRONYMS YOU MAY FIND IN THIS BOOK AND THEIR DEFINITIONS

- AAC – Augmentative and Alternative Communication
- ADHD – Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
- ASC – Autism Spectrum Condition (formerly ASD – Autism Spectrum Disorder)
- ACE – Adverse Childhood Experience
- BSL – British Sign Language
- CAMHS – Child and Adolescence Mental Health Services
- DCD – Developmental Coordination Disorder (also known as dyspraxia)
- DLD – Developmental Language Disorder (formerly SLI – Specific Language Impairment)
- EAL – English as an Additional Language
- EDS – Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome
- EP – Educational Psychologist
- EHCP – Education, Health and Care Plan
- FAS – Foetal Alcohol Syndrome
- FXS – Fragile X Syndrome
- GDD – Global Developmental Delay
- GLP – Gestalt Language Processing
- LA – Local Authority
- OT – Occupational Therapist
- PDA – Pathological Demand Avoidance
- SEMH - Social, Emotional and Mental Health
- SEND – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

- SENDCo – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator
- SLCN – Speech, Language and Communication Needs
- SLT – Speech and Language Therapist
- TA – Teaching Assistant

WHO AM I AND WHY HAVE I WRITTEN THIS BOOK?

My name is Georgina Durrant. I am a former teacher and SENDCo, director of a tutoring service for children with SEND and host of the UK's most popular SEND podcast 'SEND in the experts with Georgina Durrant' (which I host for Twinkl Resources). A few years ago, I founded 'The SEN Resources Blog' (www.senresourcesblog.com) – a website for parents and teachers of children with SEND. It initially started as my little corner of the internet to share recommended resources, advice and learning activities with some of the families of children with SEND that I tutored, but then it became something a lot bigger than I expected. My blog now has a strong following on social media of over 35,000 people.

On the back of the success of my blog and its loyal, lovely readership, I was able to start writing books. My first book is called *100 Ways Your Child Can Learn Through Play* and was published in 2021. It is for parents and teachers of children with SEND and provides lots of fun, play-based activities that help develop key skills for children with SEND. In 2022, my second book *How to Boost Reading and Writing Through Play* was published. This book, like the first, shares play-based activities to support learning – but it has a strong focus on literacy, an area that I've found many children find difficult.

Last year, I was fortunate enough to be asked to sit on a parliamentary round table to discuss the problems with the SEND system and it lit a bit of a fire in me, one that play-based books were not going to extinguish. It became more and more apparent to me that there are some real problems with the current SEND system and the lack of support for children with SEND in the UK and I want to do something about it. So, on the foundations of frustration with the current SEND system, I wanted to write this book to hopefully make an impact. I really hope that it helps to make a difference to children with SEND in your household or classroom. I have never worked so hard on something in my entire life!

Georgina x

CHAPTER 1

SPEECH, LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

CASE STUDY



ELLISE HAYWARD'S EXPERIENCE WITH SPEECH, LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION DIFFICULTIES

Ellise is non-speaking due to her cerebral palsy. She works as a motivational/public speaker and uses eye gaze technology to deliver her speeches through a high-tech communication aid. Here she describes how she was supported as a child in a mainstream school to communicate.

'I'm very proud to have attended mainstream schools. I have used different types of ways to communicate.

When I was just three years old, I was visited by the Physical Impairment and Medical Support communication advisor. She assessed me, and then I was given a communication book. This was a personalised book of symbols. It had lots of pages with

a menu and the vocabulary categorised so that it was easier to access. To support my access, my communication partner would verbally scan each row/column, interpret where my eyes were looking on the page *or* I was able to use my fist to touch the picture. When I started school, staff had to be trained in how to model and use my book with me.

It was also at this point that I started to use switches with curriculum software such as Clicker to support my access to literacy. Using switches was an extremely time-consuming and slow process. My mind worked so much faster than I was able to record... I remember the frustration, but I kept my cool, and managed to show everyone what I was capable of! I was then able to move on to using a joystick to access the computer. This made things a little quicker, although my accuracy was not great and mistakes were quite frequent, so what I gained in speed in one way, I lost in another through having to make corrections.

At this point, I was loaned an electronic communication device called a Mobii. It had been personalised and programmed just for me. I accessed it through switch-scanning, which was very slow and highly labour-intensive. Both my communication book and the Mobii had to be updated regularly with new vocabulary so that I could access my lessons and socialise with my peers. I could only write what was programmed in. When I was finally given the opportunity to trial eye gaze at the age of eleven, I thought that it was amazing! Initially, it was tricky to make sure that I only clicked on things that I wanted to click on, but I discovered I was a quick learner, and I soon mastered this new form of control. By this time, I was able to read and write at a similar level to the rest of the pupils in my mainstream class. I used an onscreen keyboard, and although typing was obviously much slower for me using my eyes, I managed to complete work which was set by the teacher, and often I would produce more work than some of the pupils who were writing by hand!

In secondary school, I was allocated a laptop to use with my eye gaze camera. I had the Mind Express 4 communication software, funded by the Physical Impairment and Medical Support Team. I used this for all my communication and curriculum access.'

OVERVIEW OF NEEDS

I am not going to leap straight into a chapter about the difficulties children in your school might be having with their speech, language and communication. First, we need to consider what 'speech', 'language' and 'communication' actually are, so that when we discuss children struggling with one or more of these, we understand what is actually going on.

SPEECH

Simply put, speech is how we use sounds to make words. We use these words to share meaning and express our thoughts.

LANGUAGE

Language is a method or system of communication. Languages have set rules for how and when to use words, symbols and signs to give meaning. There are thousands of different languages across the world and not all of them are spoken languages (for example, sign language). In 2022, I (like many others) was delighted with the news that (at last) a bill had been passed to make British Sign Language (BSL) a recognised language!

Language can be split into two categories: expressive and receptive. We use expressive language to communicate what we need, feel and/or think. Receptive language is understanding and making sense of the words we hear (or see signed).

COMMUNICATION

Communication is how people interact with others and share information. This does not have to be through speaking. People can communicate in many other ways, including through sign language, Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices like Ellise uses, voice recognition software, assistive technology, writing, text-to-speech software, and so on. Subtle communication also happens through body language, gestures and facial expressions. As teachers and parents, you are probably very aware of this – we use lots of non-verbal communication with children, whether it be a smile to tell children how proud you are of them or raised eyebrows to get them to think about what they are doing and whether it is the right choice.

WHAT ARE SLCN?

This is a huge area to cover in just one chapter, so I urge you to also look at the links I've put at the end of the chapter for further reading.

SLCN are among the most common reasons for a child to have SEND. I don't know about you, but I find it staggering that, as teachers, we are not given more training on this!

SLCN is often referred to as an umbrella term: as an umbrella covers you from the rain, this term covers a number of different needs. A child can have SLCN alone, or their SLCN may be related to another SEND such as ADHD or autism. Depending on the reasons for the SLCN, it can be transient (for a period of time) or life-long.

SLCN does not just refer to children who are struggling to speak clearly. While there will be children whose speech is affected this way by their SLCN, it is definitely not the only way speech, language and communication can be impacted. For example, SLCN also includes children who find it difficult to understand what others are saying to them (part of receptive language), children who find it tricky to choose the correct words and put them in the right order when speaking (part of expressive language), and those who find social communication challenging.

In my experience, it is often a lot easier to notice if a child has difficulties with their speech than it is to identify a child whose difficulties lie with other areas of speech, language and communication, such as their receptive language (their understanding of language). This is because it is more obvious if you can't understand *them* than if they can't understand *you*. This is one reason why SLCN are often referred to as 'hidden disability'.

WHAT DOES SLCN INCLUDE?

- **Speech sound disorder and delay** – Difficulties in articulation (making the correct sounds) or phonology (using the sounds correctly). Children may have a speech sound delay and/or disorder. Speech sound delay is when a child's development of speech sounds is slower than their peers. Speech sound disorder is when their development of speech sounds isn't on the same trajectory as their peers.
- **Verbal dyspraxia** – A speech disorder that makes it difficult for children to make and coordinate the movements needed by the