

Educational psychologist **Julia Dunlop** outlines the key aspects of the role of the Special Educational Needs Coordinator in an early years setting...



FROM Planning TO *practice*

In the previous two articles, I have looked at ways in which early years practitioners can identify children's additional needs and begin to take action. Now it is time to see how this action can be planned and coordinated in order to offer the most effective provision for young children.

The original Code of Practice for Special Educational Needs (1994) only applied to schools and school age children. No mention was made of early years settings. Happily, the Revised Code of Practice for Special Educational Needs (2002) makes it clear that planning for children with SEN should begin as early as possible. It states that every early years provider must have a SEN policy and a designated practitioner with responsibility for special needs. There should be no expectation that this person should do all the direct hands-on work with every child in the setting who has additional needs. Rather, this person's purpose is to oversee the day-to-day implementation of the setting's SEN policy.

What does a SENCO do?

The Revised Code of Practice lists four main areas of responsibility for SENCOs in early years settings.

They are expected to:

- Collect and record all relevant background information

about individual children with additional needs – and make sure that this is kept up-to-date.

- Liaise closely with parents and professionals when identifying children's needs and planning for intervention and support.
- Give advice and support to colleagues within the setting.
- Make sure that Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are written, followed and evaluated (This doesn't mean that SENCOs have to write every IEP themselves!).

The Code of Practice also recommends that SENCOs should be part of a setting's senior management team and should have sufficient time allocated in which to carry out the role. In reality, this varies greatly from setting to setting.

Now you're a SENCO

Some practitioners long to take on the role of SENCO and feel confident that they will do a good job. Others are curious about the role, but aren't quite sure what it involves and whether they're up to it. All too often SENCOs end up in the role by default – because nobody else volunteered.

Whichever route they take to the role, all SENCOs want to do a good job.

An effective SENCO:

- has an understanding of their role and an awareness of the full range of responsibilities;
- knows which tasks to delegate and is supportive of colleagues;
- has good organisational skills;
- is able to stand back and take an overall view of a situation;
- anticipates well and plans ahead;
- is approachable;
- works in partnership with parents, others in the setting and outside agencies;
- seeks support and advice when required;
- makes the most of opportunities to network with SENCOs in other settings – at 'cluster' events or training sessions.

Key tasks for SENCOs

1 Implementing the SEN policy

The SENCO is likely to have had a lead role in developing and writing the policy and should be aware of what it contains. They then take the lead in ensuring that all staff are aware of its contents and work within the guidelines it provides. The SENCO will also find ways of making sure that parents are aware of the policy.

2 Record keeping

A key part of a SENCO's role is to decide what information to record about the developmental progress of a child with additional needs – and the format to be used. They will also need to be aware of the issues around information sharing and confidentiality.

SENCO survival tips

The role of SENCO in an early years setting can be challenging, but there are ways of making it much more manageable...

Don't try to do everything at once.

Step back and take an overview. Decide on your priorities. Make a timeline and take action step by step.

Don't try to do it all by yourself.

Delegate to colleagues – but make sure you explain clearly what they need to do. Speak to your Area SENCO. Ask therapists and advisory teachers for advice. Network with other SENCOs.

Communicate. Remember – this involves listening as well as expressing yourself.

Learn. Take up training opportunities when you can. Reflect on your own practice. Ask yourself, "What works well – and why?" see what works for others. Listen to parents – you can learn a lot from them.





SENCO qualities

- A belief in every child as an individual with the potential to develop.
- A passion for promoting equal opportunities for every child.
- Patience and tenacity.

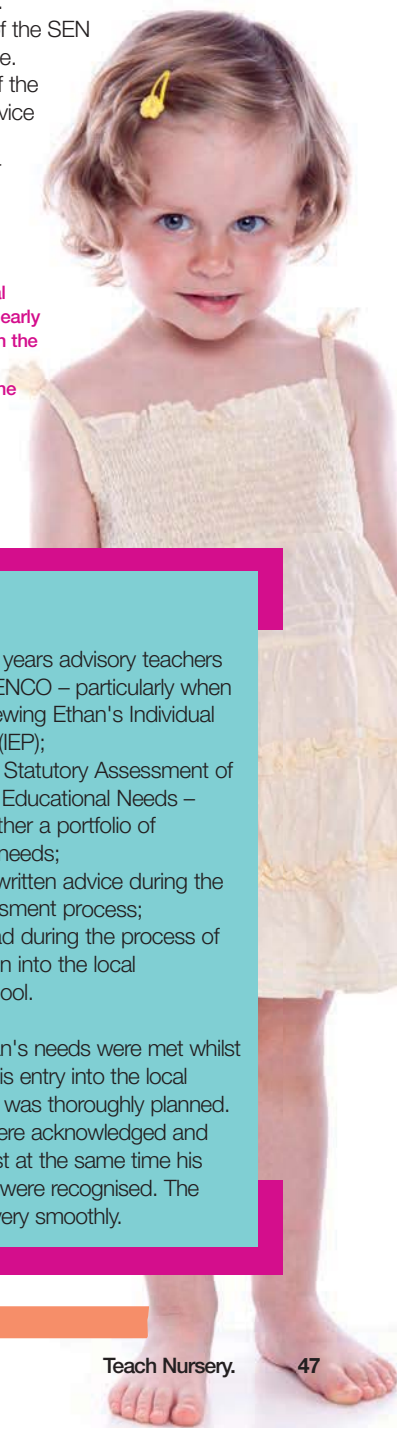
SENCO expertise

- Time management.
- Communication skills.
- The ability to use observation to inform assessment and planning.
- The ability to plan and organise.

What a SENCO needs to know

- Thorough knowledge of child development.
- Knowledge of the needs of children with SEN – gained through experience.
- Awareness of effective strategies and techniques.
- Knowledge of the SEN Code of Practice.
- Awareness of the support and advice which may be offered by other agencies.

Julia Dunlop was, for 12 years, a senior educational psychologist and early years specialist. In the next issue of *TN*, Julia will look at the issues involved in working with the parents of young children with additional needs.



3 Coordinating people and processes

An individual child with additional needs may have regular input from up to a dozen people (and sometimes more!). Whilst the child is attending the early years setting, the SENCO is responsible for making sure that this input is coordinated – although they are likely to be supported in this by local authority advisory staff.

parents should be put at ease. Each representative will make their contribution and the person in the chair will conclude by summarising the agreed actions and the people to carry these out.

4 Meetings

A central task within the SEN process is setting up meetings. It is something which often creates anxiety in SENCOs, but good planning will help things run smoothly. First it's important to know the purpose of the meeting – this will help the SENCO invite the relevant people. Someone should be asked to chair the meeting and keep everyone focused. Someone else should take notes. Introductions will need to be made and

SENCO or superhero?

Most SENCOs in early years settings carry out their duties in addition to an already busy schedule as a key worker or supervisor. They often wonder how they will find time to do all the things that need to be done – as a SENCO once said to me, "I feel I need to be like Wonder Woman!" But I've never yet met a SENCO who didn't think that the effort was worth it. It is a key role and it brings appreciation from colleagues, parents and from the children themselves.

A superhero SENCO will have a number of qualities, a range of expertise and a bank of specialist knowledge.

Case study Ethan – age 4 years

Ethan has Down's Syndrome – this was diagnosed soon after birth. Before entering nursery at the age of three he'd had input from the multi-disciplinary team at the local child development centre and he'd had weekly home visits from a Portage worker.

The SENCO for his nursery took the lead in coordinating Ethan's support by:

- Gathering together all existing information before Ethan started nursery;
- Anticipating Ethan's needs by bringing parents and key professionals together for a meeting prior to his admission;
- Making sure that other practitioners in the setting, especially his key worker, were aware of professional advice and recommendations;
- Linking closely with the key worker,

therapists, early years advisory teachers and the Area SENCO – particularly when writing and reviewing Ethan's Individual Education Plan (IEP);

- Requesting a Statutory Assessment of Ethan's Special Educational Needs – having put together a portfolio of evidence of his needs;
- Contributing written advice during the Statutory Assessment process;
- Taking the lead during the process of Ethan's transition into the local mainstream school.

In this way, Ethan's needs were met whilst in nursery and his entry into the local Reception class was thoroughly planned. His difficulties were acknowledged and anticipated whilst at the same time his many strengths were recognised. The transition went very smoothly.

