



# UNIT-4

## Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs

### Learning Outcomes

**By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:**

- ✓ Understand the importance of pupil involvement when supporting children with special educational needs.
- ✓ Discuss how teachers and parents alike should actively seek the input and opinions of SEN pupils.



## Unit 4

# Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs

### SEN Support: Pupil Participation

*“Local authorities must ensure that children, young people and parents are provided with the information, advice and support necessary to enable them to participate in discussions and decisions about their support. This should include information on their rights and entitlements in accessible formats and time to prepare for discussions and meetings.”*

**Source: UK Gov, SEN Codes of Practice**

#### Introduction

Where a child is capable of forming their own views and opinions, they are legally entitled to participate in the process of determining the appropriate interventions and support needed to ensure a quality education. Their thoughts and opinions must be both sought and taken into account to the appropriate extent, in accordance with their capabilities, their maturity level and their age.

This is in order to comply with the terms set out in Articles 12 and 13 of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The rights of all children and young people must be acknowledged, understood and appreciated by educators and support providers at all levels. It is essential to be aware of the fact that children and young people who have special educational needs have a uniquely in-depth knowledge of their own circumstances and requirements, along with their preferences with regard to the help they require and would like.

It is therefore important to ensure that, where possible, children and young people with special educational needs are encouraged to actively participate in all decision-making processes involving their education and development.

Key decisions that should be made with the involvement of children and young persons (where possible) include establishing goals and objectives, the specifics of the learner’s IEP, their preferred school/learning environment and the assessed effectiveness of the programme on a regular basis. Children should be made to feel that their views are respected and that they are being listened to.

However, educators and support providers must also be extremely careful not to overburden children and young people with special educational needs, who may not have the appropriate knowledge, experience of maturity necessary to make informed and appropriate decisions on their own behalf.

#### Difficulties Ascertaining SEN Pupils’ Views

For many reasons, ascertaining the views and preferences of a child with special educational needs can be challenging. If the pupil in question is very young or has advanced communication difficulties, it may be extremely difficult (or impossible) for them to share their views and thoughts. Though in all instances, clear and decisive efforts should be made to ensure that their thoughts and preferences are factored into every key decision making process.

#### Pupils and Parents

*“All children should be involved in making decisions where possible right from the start of their education. The ways in which children are encouraged to participate should reflect the child’s evolving maturity.”*



*Participation in education is a process that will necessitate all children being given the opportunity to make choices and to understand that their views matter. Very young children can be encouraged to choose and to share their wishes and feelings with families and staff. Confident young children, who know that their opinions will be valued and who can practice making choices, will be more secure and effective pupils during the school years."*

**Source: SEN Codes of Practice, Crown Publishing**

Clear policies and procedures should be developed by schools for the purpose of actively encouraging pupil participation. Ensuring the fair and appropriate involvement of pupils is simpler to achieve where explicit and clearly documented procedures are in place, which concern both the pupil and their parents.

Agreements between the home and school help parents and pupils alike understand their responsibilities and rights, with regard to the education and support of the child.

It is not uncommon for parents to demonstrate a certain amount of reluctance, where pupil involvement is concerned. They may not believe that their child has the capacity or maturity to make such important decisions on their own behalf, based on all relevant and important factors. They may also be concerned that the views of the child will be shown greater priority than their own, when voiced to educators and support staff.

All such concerns must be acknowledged, understood and accepted in a respectful and empathetic manner. Parents must be provided with all the support they need to ensure they understand the equal importance of every contributor involved in supporting their child. Where views, opinions and preferences differ, the final decision made should reflect the child's best interests and be based on logic, reasoning and facts.

Nobody's views, opinions or preferences are more important than anyone else's, though nobody is in a better position to provide key insights and information than the pupil in question.

**Obtaining the Views of Children and Young People**

The process of obtaining the views of children and young people with special educational needs can be challenging. This is primarily due to the fact that children with SEN experience a broad spectrum of conditions and developmental issues, which may affect their communication skills and decision-making capacities in different ways. The uniqueness of each pupil with SEN means that an equally unique approach must be adopted each time, in order to ascertain their views and opinions.

It's only when you successfully establish the views of the child or young person that you can truly build an accurate picture of the kind of support and assistance they need. Though doing so isn't always possible – particularly where younger children and those with more advanced communication issues are concerned. In any case, official SEN Codes of Practice in the United Kingdom state that children and young people with special educational needs should be:

- encouraged to have their say in all key decisions
- directly involved in case assessments and reviews
- consulted directly prior to important decisions being made
- listened to and considered an invaluable contributor

For the school, ensuring all of the above requirements are met can be made easier by following a few good practice guidelines. Examples of which include the following:

- interviewing and conversing with SEN pupils regularly
- working hard to build a sense of trust and rapport
- shadowing SEN pupils to see what their daily life looks like



- encouraging pupils to discuss the pros and cons of their school day
- conducting general satisfaction surveys
- giving pupils the opportunity to interview staff
- continuously asking pupils to share their thoughts and suggestions

Ideally, efforts to encourage the participation of SEN should be woven into the fabric of everyday life at school. Not conducted in the form of isolated events or occasional efforts, outside everyday norms.

### **Hearing the Voices of Pupils with SEN**

According to the findings of a survey carried out by the Children's Commissioner's Office, the vast majority of children and young people with special educational needs have strong feelings about their views and opinions being acted upon (or overlooked). Teachers and educators often find it difficult to hear the voices of pupils with SEN, for the simple reason that they may struggle to communicate coherently and have issues with social interaction.

In instances where children are unable to make their voices heard or their views are simply overlooked, it can have a direct and wide-reaching impact on both their education and their wellbeing. Hence, teachers and educators are expected to do everything they can to involve *all* SEN pupils in the development and optimisation of their education and support programs.

Additional good practice guidelines to consider include the following:

- Always involve pupils in their annual reviews and assessments
- Provide regular feedback, focusing predominantly on the positives
- Ensure goals and targets are set as a joint effort with SEN pupils
- Provide ample time to think and consider – never rush or pressure the pupil
- Make it clear why you are seeking their views and why it matters
- Ensure children know that there are no right or wrong answers or opinions
- Avoid discussing sensitive issues when the child is upset or anxious
- Take the time to get to know the pupil and gain their trust
- Use questionnaires and ask for explanations for each answer

The uniqueness of each individual case makes it difficult to compile any kind of universally applicable 'checklist'. Above all else, it's a case of getting to know the child at the deepest possible level and ensuring they understand both the importance of their input and the fact that it is valued by everyone involved in their support.

### **Involving Pupils in Assessments and Decision Making**

Where a child or young person is involved in an assessment or when making a key decision, a degree of confusion and anxiousness is to be expected. They may have concerns regarding the consequences of making the 'wrong' decision, or their views may be swayed by the potential stigma attached to the additional support they will subsequently be provided with.

It is therefore important for the school to do everything it can to help the SEN pupil understand the agreed outcomes of any intervention, along with the vital role they will play in ensuring the objectives are achieved. While doing so, it is also important to acknowledge how stressful and daunting assessments and decision-making processes can be for children and young people. Demonstrating empathy and an understanding of their situation is key to gaining their trust, while instilling them with the confidence to play an active role in the process.



Parents can also assist in this area, by reinforcing the same positive message regarding the benefits and importance of their participation. There will also be instances where a pupil is far more willing to open up to a parent and voice their true feelings than would be the case with an educator or support worker. A further reflection of the importance of schools and parents working together as a cohesive partnership in the child's education and development.

### **Providing Special Support**

Important decisions should never be made on the basis of assumptions, regarding the decision-making capabilities and levels of understanding of any given child or young person. Irrespective of the extent of their learning, sensory or communication difficulties, every effort must still be made to include them in all important decision-making processes. Though additional help and support may be needed, in order to enable them to make their wishes and views known.

Efforts must therefore be made by the school to ensure this help is provided, should it be required.

### **Further Reading:**