

## Chapter 4

# Identifying and assessing children who need extra support

### Introduction

The early identification of children who may need some kind of extra support is very important, as children whose needs are not being met are essentially in danger of losing out. They may not be able to play alongside others or experience the learning benefits of play and feel part of the setting. This chapter looks at how you might observe and identify children who may need additional support or resources.

### Early identification is not about 'sorting' children

It is important to understand that early identification is not about sorting children into groups of 'less able' and 'more able', nor about labelling children. Early identification should be about considering how we can best meet children's needs. A child whose needs have not been noticed may not be able to access the curriculum fully and so is effectively being discriminated against.

In some cases it is the parents who may bring their concerns to us hoping that we will listen to them and look out for their child. In other instances, it is an early years practitioner who notices or has a 'hunch' about a child. The observation of children is therefore important as it is not uncommon for a child's impairment to be thought of as part of their 'personality' by their immediate family or as 'something that they have always done' as the example below shows.

*"I wasn't picking up that he wasn't fully hearing. I just thought that his speech was quite sweet and because I was at home I knew what he needed as I was very much tuned into his speech. I was amazed when I realised that he really couldn't hear properly."*

*Gail, mother of Hugh, who had conductive hearing loss*

### Understanding the limits

While it is important to observe children and consider the needs of particular children, it is essential that practitioners understand that their role is not to 'diagnose'. This is the role of other professionals such as educational



psychologists, paediatricians and language therapists. Inaccurate diagnosis or speculation can mean that children become 'labelled' and potentially cause considerable anxiety for parents. The early years practitioner's role is to notice, observe and then, if necessary, act to inform parents and to refer.

### Building a picture of the child

Most practitioners are quick to notice children who do not appear to show the same behaviour, progress or development as other children. When this happens, it is important to begin to look more closely, not only at the child, but also at the provision in your setting. Remember that the Code of Practice assumes that before any IEPs are drawn up, settings will have already tried a range of strategies including differentiating the curriculum.

### Focusing on the provision in your setting

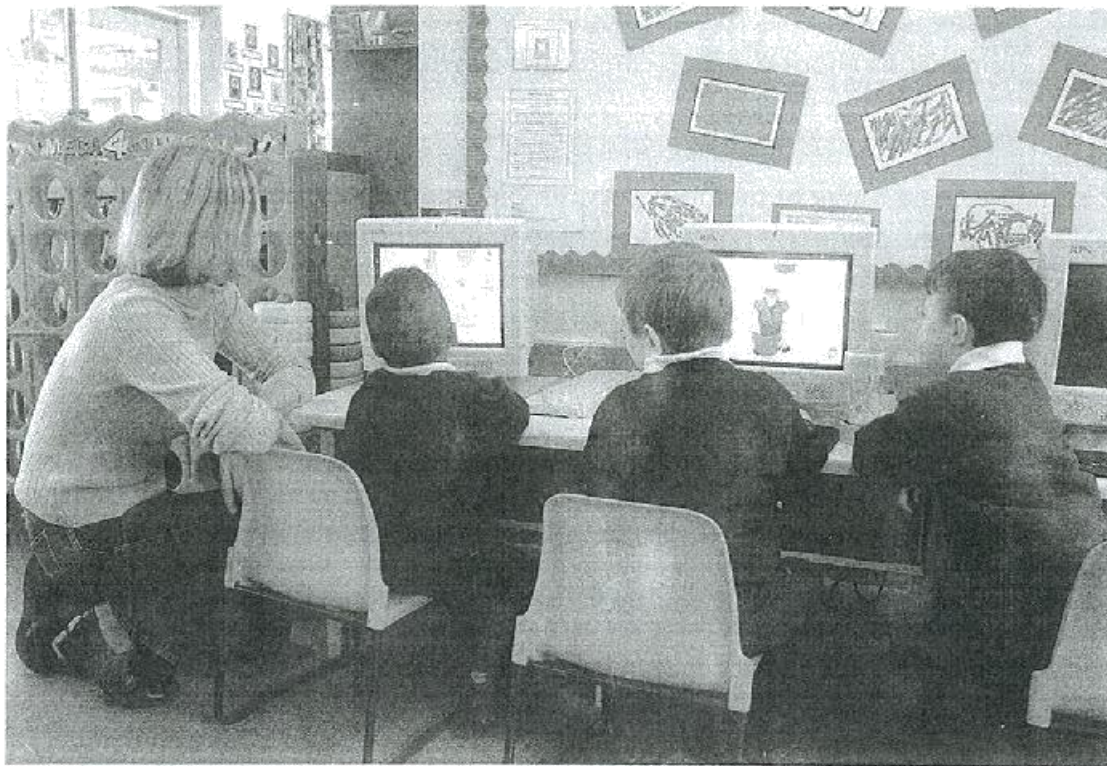
The key to good identification of children's needs is to be as objective as possible. Your starting point should be to consider whether or not the environment, activities or system of deploying adults in the setting is 'disabling' a child. This is particularly important where a child is perceived as having behavioural difficulties or is reticent to communicate. At the same time, you should also have a clear idea of the 'normal' ranges of children's development. In some cases, by standing back and considering what is being provided, and also by referring to normative development charts, you may find that a child does not have any particular needs, but that the setting needs to consider its approach.

#### REFLECT ON YOUR OWN PRACTICE

The following questions can be used to help you think about the effectiveness of your setting:

- ◆ Are there any periods of time when children are 'waiting', e.g. registration, snack time, lining up?
- ◆ Are group sizes during adult-led activities small enough to encourage children to talk and participate?
- ◆ Do children have a key worker who spends some time with them each day?
- ◆ Does the key worker greet the child at the start of the day?
- ◆ What opportunities are there for children to get individual attention in each session?
- ◆ Is a range of sensory activities available during each session, e.g. sand, water, dough?
- ◆ How attractive are the equipment and activities?
- ◆ Are there sufficient activities and equipment available to prevent squabbles?
- ◆ Are children encouraged to choose their own resources and play activities?





*Think about the equipment and activities you provide in your setting – are there plenty of opportunities for children to participate in group activities?*

### SEEING THEORY IN PRACTICE



The Busy Bees pre-school had concerns over one child who appeared to lack concentration. After attending a training session, the supervisor decided to focus on the layout of the setting and the activities that were being offered. She noticed that when sand and water were put out, the child in question was able to concentrate for as long as 20 minutes at a time. She also noticed from carrying out the observation that several children were looking bored during snack time, including the child who she was focusing on. She concluded that the child could concentrate, but that the setting needed to be more pro-active in looking at the activities and also the routine of the session.

- 1 What may have been the consequences for this child had the setting not reflected upon its practice?
- 2 Suggest two ways in which this setting might change its practice in order to allow the child to concentrate.

## Focusing on the child

Once the routine, layout, etc. of your setting has been considered, it will then be important to carry out some observations and to gain a fuller picture of the child in question. In some situations it can be better to ask another member of staff who is not closely involved with the child (or the SENCO) to observe the child as



the key is to be objective as possible. It is well known in research that pre-conceptions about children can influence what we perceive and see.

## Types of observation methods

There is a range of methods that can be used in order to collect more information about children. The type of observation method that is used will depend very much on personal preference but also on what area needs to be considered. Confidence is often the key to observation, so be prepared to adapt a method to suit your observing needs.

### KEY ISSUE: OBSERVATION METHODS

Method	Aspect of development	Useful for
Event sample	Behaviour Interaction Social skills	Good for identifying how often a child shows a particular behaviour or is interacting
Checklist	Physical skills Language Cognition	Useful in identifying the skills a child has acquired and can be re-visited to check for progress
Target child	Behaviour Concentration Interaction Social skills	Good for providing a range of information about what a child does over part of a session
Time sample	Concentration Interaction	Good for providing a range of information about what a child does over a session
Free description	Behaviour Interaction Physical skills Concentration	Good for providing a detailed but snapshot record of a child's activity

### Event sample

Event samples are very useful as they can be used to gain a more accurate picture of how frequently any kind of behaviour is being shown. This means that they can be used to look at how often a child interacts with other children, how often they play in groups as well as how often a child shows aggressive behaviour. Event samples can be used to monitor the effectiveness of IEPs; for example a target may be to increase the number of times a child interacts with other children and an event sample could be used to see if this target has been met.

### Method

A sheet is prepared and each time the child shows the behaviour or action that is being monitored, the sheet is filled in. The number of columns is dictated by the type of information that is sought.

- ◆ Prepare a sheet beforehand.
- ◆ Add a column for each piece of information that you want to collect, e.g. the time, what happened, who the child was with.
- ◆ Make sure that everyone in the setting knows what behaviour is being monitored and where the sheet is being kept. This is important as you may be out of the room or not available when the action or behaviour occurs.
- ◆ Repeat the event sample on other sessions to build up a picture of what is happening.

### CASE STUDY

Dora is four years old and the staff feel that she hardly plays with the other children. Dora's key worker, Chris, has decided to use an event sample to log down the number of times she plays with other children during a session. He is also interested to see whether Dora actually talks to the other children as she seems very quiet. Chris drew up an event sample to collect the following information:

- ◆ How many times Dora played with other children during a session.
- ◆ How long Dora played for.
- ◆ Who Dora played with.
- ◆ Where the play took place.
- ◆ Whether there was any interaction.

No.	Time (start and finish)	Who	Where	Interaction	Comments
1	9.45-9.46am	Niamh, George, Ali, Mark	Sand tray	No	Dora made eye contact and smiled at Niamh
2	11.13-11.15am	Sandie, Elliot	Toilets (washing hands)	Yes	Sandie and Elliot were singing. Dora joined in and giggled
3	11.35-11.53	Zainab	Dressing up corner	Yes	Dora took on the part of the baby and both girls played co-operatively

- 1 How many times was Dora seen interacting?
- 2 Which activity appeared to stimulate the most interaction?
- 3 Do you feel that the staff should be concerned at the level of her interactions?



## Checklists

Checklists are quick to complete and many settings use them to assess children's development. A checklist is literally a list of skills and /or behaviours that can be ticked off when the observer has seen them. Checklists are useful because they focus the observer on particular things, for example, whether or not a child uses plurals, or can stand on one foot.



*Checklists are an effective method for assessing children's stage of development*

## Method

Checklists are extremely simple to use, but a decision needs to be made as to whether or not to intervene in a session and actually ask the child to show certain skills so that they can be ticked off. Intervening (known as structuring) can put the child under pressure, but has the advantage that the observer can fill in the checklist more rapidly.