Dingley's Promise

Transforming the Early Years for children with SEND

childcare works

Developing an Inclusive Curriculum

In this handbook you will find

Introduction

Dingley's Promise provide specialist nursery support to children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in the early years (0-5) across England. Our aim is to ensure that every child has the individualised support they need to achieve their full potential. Each of our centres provides holistic support to families and their children, through our learning through play sessions and outreach support. We take a celebratory approach to learning and development and increasing the confidence of our families. In addition, Dingley's Promise has developed a training programme which is accessed by thousands of learners each year, designed to support those working in early years and increase their confidence to support children with SEND. We are committed to creating a fairer and more inclusive early years for children with SEND.

What is a curriculum?

Simply put, a curriculum is what you want children to learn and achieve whilst they are in your provision.

The DfE states that a curriculum must be based on the statutory Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), which gives you a framework that you can build on, through the seven areas of learning. Educators must decide how best to deliver those areas by creating a curriculum for their setting.

As you develop your curriculum, it is important to think about what your own priorities for children's learning are. As you consider how inclusive a curriculum is, you should look at how accessible it is to all children within your settings. Does it clearly demonstrate how individual needs can be met, and does it represent the diverse cultures and values of your community? Keeping these thoughts in mind during the development phase will help guide you towards a curriculum that is inclusive.

Your inclusive curriculum will aim to:

Why should a curriculum be inclusive?

An inclusive curriculum is essential because it ensures that every child, regardless of their background, abilities or needs, feels valued, supported and empowered to succeed. Early years settings are typically the first step on a child's educational journey and play a huge role in the developing knowledge, expectations and behaviours of young children.

Developing a curriculum which enables and promotes inclusion will have many positive impacts on both your setting and children as individuals.

To celebrate diversity and individuality.
Inclusion recognises that every child is unique and will have their own strengths, interests and ways of learning. It will promote a culture where differences are celebrated, helping children to develop respect and empathy for others.

To support mental health and wellbeing.
When children feel accepted and understood, they are more likely to feel safe and secure. This sense of belonging reduces anxiety and builds confidence, which is crucial for learning and development.

To meet the needs of ALL learners.
Inclusive strategies often benefit all children, not just those with SEND. For example, introducing visual prompts or timetables, utilising a range of height surfaces and developing sensory-friendly spaces, can enhance learning for every child.

To build a positive learning environment.
A setting which promotes inclusion, fosters positive relationships between children and educators. It encourages collaboration, kindness, and mutual respect, creating a nurturing space for growth.

To prepare children for the wider world.
Teaching inclusion from an early age helps children to develop a strong sense of self-worth and the ability to navigate a diverse society. It lays the foundation for lifelong learning, resilience and social responsibility.

To be proactive, not reactive, in implementing support.
By embedding inclusive practices into the curriculum, educators can anticipate and meet needs before they become barriers. This reduces the need for separate or additional interventions, as individual children's needs are being met through what you are already providing. It can also support the wellbeing of the team as they will experience fewer challenging behaviours and frustration and be more equipped to adapt their teaching to meet children's individual needs.

Developing your inclusive curriculum

The EYFS provides a flexible framework that allows settings to design a curriculum tailored to the unique needs of their children, whilst still meeting statutory requirements. The EYFS identifies seven areas of learning and development, with a strong emphasis on the three Prime Areas: Communication and Language, Personal, Social and Emotional Development and Physical Development. These areas are crucial for igniting children's curiosity and enthusiasm for learning and for building their capacity to learn, form relationships and thrive. The remaining four Specific Areas: Literacy, Mathematics, Understanding the World, and Expressive Arts and Design, build on the Prime Areas and support a well-rounded educational experience.

Effective curriculum planning involves recognising the holistic nature of child development. Educators should observe and respond to each child's individual interests, strengths and developmental pace. By doing so, they can create inclusive, engaging environments that nurture the whole child. Involving educators in as much of the process as possible can help develop a sense of pride, ownership and achievement across your workforce. Educators are more likely to understand your curriculum if they're involved in the planning, implementation and review processes. Giving everyone a voice to share what works and what could be better. Establishing shared learning intentions across your staff team can help embed a consistent approach and improve educators' confidence to implement your curriculum.

A reflective approach ensures that learning is meaningful and tailored. When children's passions are acknowledged and integrated into learning experiences, they are more likely to engage deeply and make sustained progress. Learning opportunities and routines should be flexible, not only to individual needs, but to your cohort of children. Using children's interests each year may see your curriculum grow in different ways you may not have even anticipated, based on the needs and interests of each cohort of children. This child-centred practice not only supports current development, but also lays the groundwork for lifelong learning.

When considering what to include in your curriculum you should think about the influences on children's learning. Reflect on what you want children to learn, consider the community in which you live and what real life experiences they are likely to explore. You should also endeavour to understand what is important to your families and children. Gathering this information from your team and parents can help frame what experiences and learning opportunities are important for children in your setting to have.

Ten things you may wish to consider when you are developing your own inclusive curriculum:

1 - Using available resources and guidance to plan the content of your own curriculum; EYFS statutory framework, non-statutory guidance documents such as Development Matters. Consider theorists that influence best practice and the additional materials found in the 'supporting documents' section of this guidance.

2 - Understanding legal duties in relation to both the EYFS and the SEND code of practice, to ensure that all children are included within provision planning.

3 - Policy changes needed within provision to ensure your policies and procedures aren't a barrier to inclusion.

4 - Staff training, mentoring and one-to-ones. Educators may need additional support during a period of change, such as changing or implementing a new curriculum.

5 - The individual needs of all children that attend your provision. How they are learning and what you would like them to learn whilst they are with you.

6 - Consider the reasonable adjustments your provision is going to make to be fully inclusive and set the expectations with all educators. Identify when specialist help might support children with specific needs, e.g. Occupational Therapists providing children with equipment, so they can progress and engage more positively in the environment.

7 - Identify your expectations for all children that attend your provision and ensure your curriculum is ambitious and doesn't limit children's opportunities.

8 - Ensure your curriculum is holistic and that it considers individual identity and a sense of belonging within children's local community.

9 - Plan and provide provocations, play and real-life experiences, that help children learn what you want them to learn.

10 - Observe and assess the impact of your curriculum on children's wellbeing, learning and development. Plan time to effectively review its implementation and educators' understanding. Adapt and make the necessary improvements until you are fully satisfied with the delivery of your curriculum and are confident that educators can implement it confidently and effectively. This should be a continuous process.

Presenting your curriculum

How you present your curriculum is entirely up to you. You may choose to have a lengthy document with a range of additional guidance attached to clearly scribe your curriculum for your team and families to follow. You may have simple hints and tips sheets or posters to keep your curriculum fresh and live, or you may simply choose to keep your curriculum in your own head.

There is no set requirement to record your curriculum. The method you choose to present your curriculum and how much additional support you provide around this, is likely to be determined by the size of your organisation. If implementing the curriculum across multiple sites, you may choose to create written guidance and training to ensure that your expectations are delivered consistently. For smaller organisations, you may find that because you created your curriculum together you just need reminders and a simple overview to help you focus and reflect on its implementation. If you are a lone worker or very small group of educators working together you may decide that your knowledge, awareness and conversation about your curriculum intentions are sufficient for it to be maintained and embedded.

The key is confidence in your curriculum's impact and the ease of its everyday application to guide learning within your provision.

For more information of Ofsted's expectation watch this **video.**

Implementing your inclusive curriculum

When considering how to implement an inclusive curriculum, there are many factors you may wish to consider or reflect upon. Is your environment set up to support inclusion? Do you consistently implement your local Ordinarily Available Provision guidance? How are educators understanding individual child engagement and types of learning? How do you work with families and other professionals to recognise and meet children's needs?

Inclusive environments
Many of the strategies we know that work for children with SEND are also strategies that we know will have a positive impact on all children, e.g. implementing a total communication approach with visual timetable, sand timers and now and next boards will significantly improve communication and outcomes for all children in early years provision. Therefore, educators don't need to make changes for 'one child', they can create an inclusive environment that better supports all children in their provision.

All provisions can support many children effectively by using inclusive practice.

Ordinarily available provision
It is advisable for educators to look at their ordinarily available provision and what adjustments can be made to consider accessibility, e.g. providing activities at different heights considering both mobile and non-mobile children or children using physical aids. Adding communication methods to the environment such as objects of reference and photographs, clearly labelling resources or considering auditory stimulation and creating a quieter space/area within the environment. Looking at resources to ensure there are multiple sets available which cater for a variety of sensory needs, whilst providing different opportunities, or adapted resources such as tabletop/easy squeeze scissors.

Recognising engagement, learning styles and patterns of play
Educators should consider the needs of individual children within their cohort and identify how children are engaging with the environment and what they are learning.

Educators may choose to consider the characteristics of effective teaching and learning (COEL's) as outlined in the EYFS, and the Leuven scales of involvement and wellbeing.

Being able to recognise patterns of play will allow educators to identify when learning is taking place, and by implementing an inclusive curriculum and individual support strategies you can effectively provide enhancements and encourage children's learning and development.

Working in partnership
Creating a holistic approach to support and celebrating the individual child is key to creating effective inclusive environments and curriculums. It is important for educators to work alongside families and professionals to identify needs at the earliest possible opportunity. The benefits of early identification are widely recognised. "Identifying need at the earliest point and then making effective provision, improves long-term outcomes for the child or young person.'' (SEND code of practice, 2015).

Potential barriers to developing and implementing your inclusive curriculum and how to overcome them

When creating and implementing a new curriculum, there are understandably challenges that occur and this is a natural part of positive change, provision and staff development.

Where do I start?

There are a few key questions that will help guide the development of your new curriculum:

- What vision and values do you have for your setting?
- What learning do you want to take place?
- What experiences are important for children to learn from and engage with in your setting?
- What influences your practice?
- Are there particular theorists or child development approaches which resonate with you?

How do I get my team on board?

Ensure that the staff are part of the process and contribute to it. This will make it easier to embed as they will see their own thoughts and ideas reflected within your curriculum.

Consider the terminology used. Is it accessible and is there regular training to ensure it can be easily applied by all the team?

Provide extra information to enable all staff to interpret it in different ways and to give them confidence to carry out activities.

Curriculum training should be done as part of the induction process, to ensure that all staff joining your team have a full understanding of your curriculum, the values behind it and how it can be delivered through practice.

How do I adapt and maintain a high-quality curriculum to meet the changing needs of children?

Managers and the team should actively participate in experiences so that they can see them from the child's point of view and adapt as needed. Regularly observing in practice to review the curriculum and its impact as a team, will support you to make adaptions or changes as required, ensuring that you are continually providing developmentally meaningful learning.

Take the time to reflect on the impact the curriculum is having on the cohort of children:

- Have children made expected or significant progress in their learning?
- Have children been engaged and motivated by the experiences on offer?
- Did children find new passions and interests?
- Did the curriculum activities stretch the children's thinking?
- Do educators feel confident applying the curriculum to meet a variety of children's needs?
- Do educators confidently extend children's learning using the curriculum?

How do I use the curriculum to support families with their home learning environment?

Share the details of activities and how this supports children's learning; you could further this by encouraging them to revisit the learning at home. Suggesting books or resources which could support engagement in the home learning environment would be beneficial and you may be able to set up a 'lending library' to enable all families to access different learning opportunities at home.

You could further support the home learning environment through your curriculum by including families in the experiences you are providing, e.g. encourage them to go on a spring walk and collect natural items that can be used in a provocation within your setting.

It may also be possible for you to invite families to participate in curriculum experiences to see how you engage their children when they are at nursery. Don't forget to encourage them to share their ideas about how to engage their child through their interests and preferences.

How can educators support all children to access continuous provision? (the balance of SEND and EYFS)

This challenge could be overcome by utilising a combination of available resources such as the Dingley's Promise Reflection Framework or your local authority Ordinarily Available Provision document, to look at provision as a whole and help educators to create an enabling environment that naturally supports both your curriculum and the EYFS framework.

Supporting educators within team meetings and one-to-one meetings, reflecting on children's needs and interests and discussing strategies that will best support those children.

Sharing good practice within community networks and arranging 'staff swaps' through which good practice examples can be identified and shared across provisions is really useful.

Leaders and managers must have high expectations for all children, including children with SEND, and offer an ambitious curriculum. They should clearly communicate the legal requirements and their own expectations, so educators are aware of their visions and aims.

Actively role modelling positive mindsets, inclusive practice and making reasonable adjustments, will help support educators understanding and own personal development.

Remember to include the eight senses alongside the seven areas of learning when considering your environments, to ensure that children have access to every opportunity and the provision meets the individual needs of all children.

Support educators to focus on how children are learning, utilise information on patterns of play and use this knowledge to inform the layout of the environment and provocations provided.

Case study

Dingley's Promise nursery group reflected on their current curriculum and determined that they wanted to make changes to create a more ambitious and inclusive curriculum for their children. All team members were offered the opportunity to comment on their curriculum and share their ideas for what currently worked well and what they feel would be positive changes.

This feedback was shared and discussed during a managers meeting so that all input could be heard and similar ideas could be grouped and categorised. A review of other non-statutory curriculum guidance and the various assessment documentation that was commonly used was undertaken and key themes and learning were taken from these. The varying needs of children within the nurseries was considered alongside the home environment, community opportunities and the demographics of the area.

Once the new curriculum had been determined, this was implemented through a series of training sessions for leaders and managers and then disseminated to the wider team. As the curriculum was launched regular staff one-to-ones were held to discuss staff confidence and understanding of the curriculum.

Leaders observed children and team members engaging and held their key person discussions, to understand how the curriculum was being implemented and adapted to meet the needs of individual children.
As feedback was gathered through these conversations, adjustments were recorded so that at the end of the term any consistent challenges and barriers could be changed or addressed through further training.

Through the changes in curriculum and comprehensive process of involving and training the team to fully understand the curriculum, the nurseries have seen increased engagement between children and staff, positive progress in children's development and greater awareness of how to continue to support children's learning at home with families.

Key principles of an inclusive curriculum

- Inclusive vision and values which are embedded in policy and practice.
- Ambitious expectations for all children.
- Understanding of 'Ordinarily Available Provision' and 'Reasonable Adjustments'.
- Representation and autonomy for children with SEND.
- Inclusive teaching practices and nurturing relationships.

Having a curriculum which you consider to be inclusive is an excellent resource for your setting; however, it must work in partnership with your pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning and your assessment tools and methods. Inclusion is not a tick box exercise but a continuous journey; it should be a deeply embedded value within everything that you do. Consider your vision for an inclusive setting and develop a curriculum which is a valuable part of this.

Supporting and useful documents

- DfE (2015) SEND code of practice: 0-25 years
- Pen Green (2018) A Celebratory Approach to SEND
- Leuven scales of involvement and wellbeing
- DfE (2025) EYFS Statutory Framework
- Dingley's Promise Inclusion Training
- DfE (2024) SEND Assessment Guidance (Developed by Dingley's Promise)

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