

# How can I help?

Supporting accessibility for children and young people with Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs



This guide aims to give you a few helpful pointers to ensure that your setting, service or activity is as inclusive and accessible as possible for those children with SEMH needs.

Meeting a child's SEMH needs is **EVERYBODY'S** business! As set out in the [SEND Code of Practice](#) and [Equality Act 2010](#), it is our responsibility to make reasonable adjustments so that children and young people with SEMH needs have fair access to the services, settings or activities on offer. It is up to us to adjust how we do things, not them!

It is important to remember that every child is an individual, so please do ASK to find out what matters to them. We have also developed the '**All About Me**' profile that children and young people with SEMH can complete to help you support them – please ask them for it in advance to help you to be as prepared as possible, if they don't have one – share it with them to complete.

## What is SEMH?

SEMH stands for Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs, where a child communicates through behaviour and their interaction with the world around them.

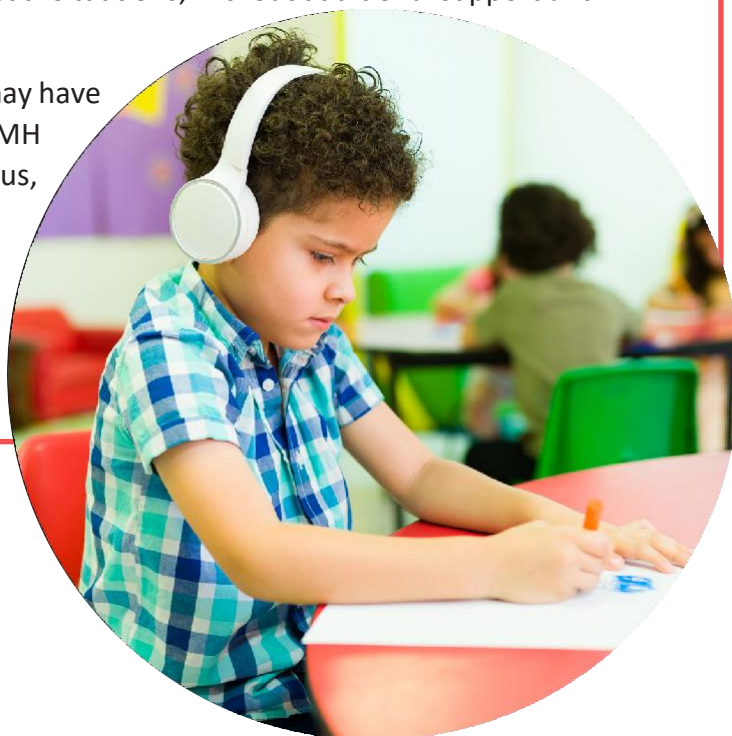
Children and young people may be identified as having SEMH needs if they have difficulties expressing and managing their emotions or behaviours and can also have difficulties developing positive relationships.

All children have unique responses to their emotions and on many different levels (these can be seen in a child's the All About Me). SEMH needs, and how these are communicated, might be seen as uncooperative, unresponsive or inappropriate, but it is important to recognise this is how a child is expressing themselves – professionals may see this as dysregulated behaviour and seemingly disproportionate i.e. overly quiet or challenging. It is important to be professionally curious and find out what the behaviour is trying to tell us.

Children with SEMH needs may also struggle to engage and cope for example learning in a mainstream classroom or setting, or with other usual situations, without additional support and intervention.

Some children identified as having SEMH needs may have other unidentified learning difficulties. Having SEMH needs can also mean that children may feel anxious, scared or misunderstood.

This is why it's so important we support our children to the best of our ability and ensure we listen to and work with parents and carers to support their child's needs.



## Behaviour as a form of communication

There are lots of different ways that a child or young person expresses their distress, and also ways which help them cope i.e. stimming or self-soothing. The following are an example of some of these:

Anger or frustration	Repetitive behaviour
Emotional outbursts	Humming
Verbal or physical aggression	Wearing headphones
Lashing out at self or others	Shaking hands
Withdrawing or avoiding strategies	Walking around
Possible law-breaking such as stealing or vandalism	Self-sabotaging behaviour/ low self-esteem
Risk taking behaviour – substance misuse	Escape or run!
Demand avoidance	Dissatisfaction with environment

There are two main ways children/young people with sensory processing difficulties respond to sensory input:

- They may under respond to sensory input (hyposensitivity) or need more input to function, meaning they might seek more input (Sensory seeking).
- They may overrespond, to sensory input (hypersensitivity) and might become overwhelmed, and in result avoid input (sensory avoiding)

It is important we understand what is behind the behaviour, rather than make assumptions – this can depend on age too.

Children will have strategies that help them to cope – this will be in their All About Me. It is important not to remove or stop these strategies as they will be helping that child and may cause escalation.

## Triggers!

There are many things which may 'trigger' a child or young person's SEMH – these are often sensory or could be relational, or due to certain situations.

This is different for each child (see their All About Me) so it important to ASK what these may be BEFORE hand so you can make whatever adjustments are necessary. Things to think about are:

- How are you presenting – is your request non-threatening, does it seem like a demand that might put them off, does it give options/choices?
- Take a step back – behaviour is a form of communication of an unmet need - What is the behaviour telling you? What are the emotions telling you?
- How can you prepare?
- Have you read their All About Me beforehand?
- How is your environment? Have a look at this [video](#) to think about things you can do (although linked to classrooms can be applied to anywhere!).
- Are there things which might be difficult for some children - certain smells, lighting, sounds, a lack of space to move around etc?

Remember sensory needs are not just sight, sound, smells, taste or touch. They can also be Proprioceptive needs (awareness of your body – so liking tight hugs, pressure or vibrations) or Vestibular needs (liking motion – spinning, swinging, movement) or Oral needs (wanting to chew or bite on non-food objects – sleeves, fingers or a pencil). Have a look at these [flashcards](#) to see how they can help you be more prepared.

## Things to consider

Children and young people with SEMH needs require 'reasonable adjustments' to help them access our services or settings – it is up to us to adjust how we do things, not them! Think about this in advance and use what you know to make sure you are meeting their needs – don't make assumptions.

Don't make any changes without plenty of warning and explain any changes that might be happening and why – give a choice if they are not happy with those changes or a chance to feedback so things can be adjusted.

Have you changed the environment since the last visit – different waiting room, person, routine, booking in system etc?

Be sensitive and aware - Children and young people with SEMH are very vulnerable to shame. If you need to have a sensitive conversation with the parent/carer, find a way to do that apart from the child.

Perhaps you can have a meeting in school, or a telephone call to the parent/carer during school hours, or make sure there is someone else on hand that can occupy the child elsewhere when needed."

Can you have things in place that will help children cope - have a little SEMH toolkit ready to hand: maybe have some fidget toys, sensory circuits or stickers, things to place on the floor, bands for the chairs. Also plan in movement breaks, ensure you have the space to move if they need to get up.

Building relationships are key – it is important that you know that child and help – promote the document – things take time – expressing and emphasizing that the professional wants to help and hear their views – anything else need please ask.

## Where to find more info

There is a wealth of information on the SEND Local Offers for [Westmorland and Furness](#). The Local Offer is not just for those with a SEND diagnosis as it also has lots of info on who is there to support a child and their family wherever they are in their journey.

You can also find out more information on training opportunities, ideas for supporting children and what your responsibilities are through documents such as the [Cumbria SEND Handbook](#).

[Westmorland and Furness SEND IAS Service](#) offers impartial information, advice and support to children and young people with special educational needs and or disabilities and their parents and carers.

There are also the new Family Hubs websites for children, young people and families themselves, which have loads of information on all areas of health, wellbeing, development, help, support and much more! Click for the [Westmorland and Furness](#) website.