

Strategic Leadership for SENDCO's

Strengthening Strategic SEN Leadership across Kent
Having effective and difficult conversations

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If you have any questions about today or ideas for additional webinars to support you, please put them on the Q&A as we go



Welcome & Who we are

Strategic Leadership Focus

The webinar emphasizes shifting from operational to strategic SENCO responsibilities under statutory and local authority guidance.

Collaborative Learning Approach

The session promotes active engagement, practical guidance, and reflective practice for building SENCO confidence.



Emma Read

- SENDCo at The Marsh Academy, New Romney
Mainstream Academy with SRP(Autism)
- 21 years secondary teaching experience(MFL French & German)
- Key stage 3-5 trained and delivery to Key Stage 2 via outreach.



Angie Cox

- Assistant Head and Inclusion Lead at Herne CE Infant and Nursery School
- I have been in education for 26 years and have taught in primary and infant schools as well as having worked in Children's Centres
- My passion is Early Years

Why this is important

- SENCOs are often the bridge between different stakeholders
- Difficult conversations are opportunities to improve outcomes for our pupils with SEND
- Building and maintaining trusting relationships is key to effective collaboration



Conversations with teachers

As a SENDCO, difficult conversations with teachers are often about accountability, inclusion, practice, or the needs of individual pupils.

The goal is to be both **supportive and challenging**.
At the heart of any conversation is the success of the child/young person!



Key Principles

- **Start with a Shared Purpose** - Begin from the common goal of improving outcomes for pupils.
- **Use Evidence, Not Opinion** - Difficult conversations are much easier when they are based on observable facts.
- **Be Curious Before Being Directive** - Ask questions before offering solutions.
- **Address the Difficult Issue Directly** - Avoid softening the message so much that it becomes unclear.
- **Separate the Person from the Practice** - Challenge the practice, not the teacher.
- **Use the "Support and Challenge" Approach** - Balance expectations with practical support.

Useful Phrases

- "We both want X to be successful in your classroom, so I'd like us to think together about what's helping and what might need adjusting."
- Instead of..."I don't think differentiation is happening consistently."

Try..."In the last three learning walks, I noticed that the same worksheet was being used for all pupils, including those with identified literacy needs."

- "How do you feel the lesson worked for that pupil?"
- "What barriers do you think they're experiencing?"
- "What's been successful so far?"
- "What support would help you implement this?"

A useful conversation structure

- **State the purpose**

"I'd like to discuss how we can improve outcomes for X."

- **Share evidence**

"I've noticed..."

- **Explore perspectives**

"How do you see it?"

- **Identify barriers**

"What's making this difficult?"

- **Agree actions**

"Let's agree the next steps."

- **Follow up**

"We'll review progress in two weeks."

When the conversation doesn't go as planned...

Stay calm and return to:

- The child.
- The evidence.
- The shared goal

The most effective SENDCO conversations combine **empathy, clarity, evidence, and accountability**. Teachers should leave feeling **supported, respected, and clear about what needs to change**.

Conversations with parents

As a SENDCO, some of the most challenging conversations with parents are often those involving concerns about a child's needs, behaviour, attendance, progress, funding, assessments, exclusions, or disagreements about support.

The goal is not to "win" the conversation but to build trust, maintain a positive relationship, and keep the child's needs at the centre of decision-making.



Key Principles 1

- **Prepare Thoroughly** - Before the meeting gather facts, evidence and examples, review previous communications, anticipate likely questions or concerns, be clear about what can and cannot be changed, know the desired outcome of the conversation, avoid entering difficult conversations without clear evidence, as emotions can quickly outweigh facts.
- **Start with Strengths** - Parents need to know that you see their child as more than a concern or challenge. This helps establish a collaborative rather than adversarial tone.
- **Listen More Than You Speak** - Parents may need to feel heard before they are ready to hear the school's perspective.
- **Acknowledge Emotions** - Don't dismiss feelings, even when you disagree with the viewpoint. Validation does not mean agreement; it means recognising the parent's experience.

Useful Phrases 1

- "Before we discuss today's concerns, I want to say how much we value X's creativity and kindness. X has some real strengths that we see every day."
- "Can you tell me more about that?"
- "Help me understand your concerns."
- "What has your experience been?"
- "I can hear how frustrating that has been."
- "I can see this is really important to you and I understand why you're concerned."

The CARE approach model for SENCO conversations

C – Connect

- Build rapport.
- Acknowledge feelings.

A – Ask

- Explore concerns.
- Seek understanding.

R – Respond

- Share evidence.
- Clarify misunderstandings.

E – Establish Next Steps

- Agree actions.
- Clarify responsibilities and timescales



SENCO Reflection...entering the mindset of a parent



- A helpful question to keep in mind is:

"If this were my child, what would I need to hear, understand, and feel before leaving this meeting?"

- Parents may forget some of the information you provide, but they will usually remember whether they felt listened to, respected, and included in decisions about their child.

Conversations with SLT

- **Why this can be challenging:**
- Power dynamics and hierarchy
- Fear of being seen as 'difficult' or 'negative'
- Concern about impact on your own position
- Worry about undermining relationships
- SLT may have competing priorities



Key Principles 2

- **Come with solutions, not just problems** - Frame concerns alongside potential solutions
- **Use evidence** - Bring data, examples, and documentation to support your points
- **Focus on pupil outcomes** - Always bring it back to the impact on SEND pupils
- **Choose your timing carefully** - Request a specific meeting rather than catching them in passing
- **Be professional, not emotional** - Stay calm and factual, even if you feel frustrated



Useful phrases 2

- "I wanted to discuss something that's impacting our SEND pupils' progress..."
- "I've noticed a pattern that I think we need to address..."
- "I understand there are budget constraints, but I'm concerned about our statutory duties regarding..."
- "Can we explore some options together to resolve this?"
- "I'd value your perspective on how we can move forward with..."

What to Do If the Conversation Doesn't Go Well

- If the headteacher:
- **Dismisses your concerns:** Remain calm and reiterate the statutory duties and potential consequences. Ask if you can escalate to the chair of governors.
- **Becomes defensive:** Use phrases like "I know this is a difficult situation for everyone, but we need to find a solution together"
- **Refuses to take action:** Document this in writing and consider speaking to your SEND governor or chair of governors
- **Suggests unlawful alternatives** (e.g., "just don't tell parents"): Be clear that you cannot support this as it breaches your professional responsibilities
- **Remember:** You have a professional duty to advocate for SEND pupils. If you genuinely believe the school is in breach of statutory duties and SLT won't address it, you may need to escalate to governors or, in extreme cases, seek advice from your union or the local authority.

Supporting Teachers whilst addressing concerns

- Teachers are already under significant pressure and workload
- You need to maintain a positive working relationship
- Teachers may feel defensive about their practice
- You're often asking them to do 'more' on top of existing demands
- Some teachers may lack confidence or training in SEND

Key Principles

- **Start with empathy** - Acknowledge the challenges they're facing
- **Focus on pupil outcomes** - Frame the conversation around what's best for the child
- **Offer support, not just criticism** - Come with solutions and resources
- **Be specific** - Use concrete examples rather than general statements
- **Build on strengths** - Recognise what they're doing well before addressing concerns

Useful phrases 4

- "I can see you're working really hard with [pupil name]. Can we talk about some strategies that might help?"
- "I've noticed [specific observation]. Let's explore what might be happening and how I can support you"
- "What challenges are you experiencing with [pupil]? What would help you feel more confident?"
- "I have some ideas that have worked in other classes. Would you like to try them together?"
- "Let's work as a team to find the best approach for [pupil]"

- What to Do If the Conversation Doesn't Go Well

- **Becomes defensive or dismissive:** Stay calm and don't take it personally, reiterate: "I understand this feels challenging, but we have a legal duty to make these adjustments". Focus on the impact on Charlie: "Without these adjustments, Charlie can't access the curriculum. How would you feel if your child was in this situation?"
- **Refuses to implement the adjustments:** Be clear about expectations: "These aren't optional. They're part of our legal responsibilities and your professional duties as a teacher". Explain consequences: "If we don't implement these adjustments, we could face a discrimination claim from Charlie's parents, and it would also be a capability issue". Escalate if necessary: "I need to involve [headteacher] in this conversation if we can't reach an agreement"
- **Says she doesn't have time:** Break it down: "Let's look at each adjustment. The overlay takes 5 seconds. The visual timetable is a one-off 10-minute task. Pre-teaching can happen during morning registration. What specifically feels unmanageable?". Offer to observe: "Can I come and watch a lesson to see where the time pressures are? Maybe I can help you be more efficient"
- **Blames the child:** Redirect: "Charlie has dyslexia - this isn't about effort or behaviour, it's about how his brain processes information. With the right support, he can succeed". Educate: "Would it help if I arranged some training on dyslexia? It might help you understand what Charlie experiences"
- **Agrees in the meeting but doesn't follow through:** Document everything in writing. Follow up after the agreed timeframe: "I wanted to check in on how the adjustments are going. Can I pop in and observe?". If still not implemented, escalate to the headteacher: "I've raised concerns about reasonable adjustments not being implemented for Charlie. This is now a safeguarding and legal compliance issue that needs senior leadership involvement"

Having difficult conversations with External Professionals

- **Why this can be challenging:**
 - Different professional perspectives and priorities
 - Limited time and availability of external professionals
 - Conflicting advice or recommendations
 - Professionals may not fully understand your school context
 - Power dynamics - they're often seen as 'the experts'
 - Long waiting lists and resource constraints in external services

Key Principles 5

- **Respect their expertise** - Acknowledge their professional knowledge while advocating for your pupils
- **Be clear about your school context** - Help them understand your constraints and realities
- **Focus on shared goals** - You all want the best outcomes for the child
- **Come prepared with evidence** - Show what you've already tried and the impact
- **Be assertive, not aggressive** - Stand your ground professionally when needed
- **Build relationships over time** - You'll likely work with these professionals again

Useful Phrases 5

- "I value your expertise, and I'd like to share what we're seeing in school..."
- "Can you help me understand how this recommendation would work in a classroom of 30 pupils?"
- "We've tried [strategy] but haven't seen the impact we hoped for. What else would you suggest?"
- "I'm concerned that the recommendations in the report don't reflect the current situation. Can we discuss this?"
- "What's the evidence base for this approach? I want to make sure we're using our resources effectively"
- "I need to advocate for this child. Can you help me understand the next steps if we can't access this support?"
- **Remember:** You know the child in the school context better than anyone - your expertise matters too

Conversations

- **Before the conversation:**
 - ✓ Understand their constraints and pressures
 - ✓ Know what outcome you want to achieve
- **During the conversation:**
 - ✓ Acknowledge their expertise and ask questions to understand their perspective
 - ✓ Use "I" statements - "I'm concerned that..." rather than "You haven't..."
 - ✓ Focus on the child's needs and outcomes; propose solutions where you can ✓
- **After the conversation:**
 - ✓ Document everything in writing, follow up on agreed actions
 - ✓ Keep parents informed
 - ✓ Maintain the professional relationship
 - ✓ Know when to seek support (from your headteacher, LA, or professional associations)

Remember...

- **You are the expert on the child in your school context** - don't be intimidated by external professionals' qualifications
- **Most professionals want to help** - assume good intentions and work collaboratively where possible
- **You have a duty to advocate for the child** - this sometimes means having uncomfortable conversations
- **Document everything** - keep detailed records of all conversations and agreements
- **You're not alone** - seek support from your headteacher, other SENCos, and professional networks

In conclusion...

Teachers

Parents

Child

SLT

Professionals

Useful resources and next steps

- [Leadership and SENCO toolkit | Whole School SEND](#)
- [SENCO Induction Pack: revised edition | Whole School SEND](#)
- [Inclusion – KELSI](#)
- [Locality Model for School Inclusion – KELSI](#) – CoS, PRG
- [Home page | Nasen](#)
- [Additional guidance on the mandatory requirements for SENCOs and schools - GOV.UK](#)
- [Countywide SENCO forums year 2025/2026 – KELSI](#)
- [Kent County Council – Kelsi](#) - Director weekly Bulletin



Thank you for your participation. The evaluation of this session is key to support further development and monitoring the effectiveness of these webinars.