

# Understanding the inclusion and SEND requirements in the new Ofsted Early Years Inspection Toolkit



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# Overview of the New EY Inspection Toolkit

The New EY Inspection Toolkit came into effect in November 2025

## Comprehensive Inspection Framework

The toolkit introduces a broad framework focusing on quality provision, leadership, safeguarding, and inclusion.

## Evidence Gathering Methods

Inspectors gather first-hand evidence through observations and professional conversations with leaders.

## Supporting Continuous Improvement

Designed to aid self-evaluation and identify strengths and development areas within early years settings.

## Reducing Documentation Burden

Emphasises using existing business documents to minimise unnecessary workload during inspections.

# Early years inspection toolkit

This toolkit sets out the areas that will be evaluated and graded on inspections of registered early years and childcare provision under sections 49, 60 and 77(2)(b) of the Childcare

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# Who are the leaders in a setting?

Leaders in early years settings are those who guide practice and make key decisions—such as managers, room leaders, and setting SENCOs.

They ensure high-quality, inclusive education and use strengths across the team to improve outcomes for all children.

SENCOs are the leaders of inclusive practice and SEND provision in their settings.



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# Expectations for SENCos

## Core Roles and Responsibilities

SENCos are leaders who empower staff. They provide training and guidance, so practitioners have the knowledge and confidence to support inclusion and SEND. They lead early identification, develop support plans, monitor progress, and coach room staff on adapting strategies to meet individual needs.

## Collaboration and Partnerships

They develop strong partnerships with parents and professionals ensuring effective support and shared decision-making.

## Compliance and Professional Development

SENCos follow EYFS and SEND Code of Practice and engage in ongoing training to refine skills.

## Safeguarding and Inclusive Culture

SENCos play a key role in safeguarding for children with SEND by working closely with the DSL and leadership team. They help promote a confident, inclusive environment for all.

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# How the EY Inspection Toolkit aligns with EYFS



## **EYFS Framework Standards**

EYFS sets essential standards for children's learning, development, health, and safety in early years settings.

## **Toolkit and Inspection Alignment**

The toolkit provides a structured approach for inspections, evaluating compliance and effectiveness against EYFS standards.

## **SEND Support Integration**

Toolkit emphasises embedding SEND support through early identification and targeted interventions within EYFS delivery.

## **Partnership and Quality Focus**

Toolkit encourages collaboration with parents and professionals to improve quality and impact of early years provision.

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# Ofsted: Early years inspection operating guide for inspectors

## Three principles:

1. The extent to which children achieve, belong, thrive
2. Leadership, inclusion and whether there is an open and positive safeguarding culture
3. The 'expected standard' in the evaluation areas in the toolkit is the starting point

**Secure fit** in an evaluation area

**Report card**

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# Ofsted: Early Years Inspection Toolkit

The reforms came into effect in **November 2025**.

Key changes include:

➤ **5-point grading scale:**

- Urgent improvement
- Needs attention
- Expected standard
- Strong standard
- Exceptional

➤ **Wider range of evaluation areas:**

- Safeguarding
- Inclusion
- Curriculum and teaching
- Achievement
- Behaviour, attitudes and establishing routines
- Children’s welfare and wellbeing
- Leadership and governance

Not met	Met
<p>The safeguarding standards have been developed from the safeguarding and welfare requirements of the <a href="#">‘EYFS statutory framework for group and school-based providers’</a>, <a href="#">‘EYFS statutory framework for childminders’</a>, <a href="#">‘Keeping children safe in education’</a> and <a href="#">‘Working together to safeguard children’</a>. Safeguarding standards are likely to be ‘not met’ if any of the following apply:</p> <p>Serious and/or widespread failures in safeguarding practice lead to children, or particular groups of children, being unsafe. Breaches of the statutory requirements for safeguarding have a significant impact on children’s safety.</p> <p>Leaders have not taken sufficient action to resolve weaknesses following a failure of safeguarding arrangements that meant children may not have been kept safe.</p> <p>Leaders are not open to challenge and/or do not learn from issues or incidents.</p>	<p>The safeguarding standards have been developed from the safeguarding and welfare requirements of the <a href="#">‘EYFS statutory framework for group and school-based providers’</a>, <a href="#">‘EYFS statutory framework for childminders’</a>, <a href="#">‘Keeping children safe in education’</a> and <a href="#">‘Working together to safeguard children’</a>. Safeguarding standards are ‘met’ when all the following apply:</p> <p>Leaders have established an open culture in which safeguarding is everyone’s responsibility.</p> <p>Leaders and practitioners meet their responsibilities to promote the safety of children, in relation to the statutory requirements for safeguarding. Multi-agency working is effective.</p> <p>Parents and children know who to go to for support.</p> <p>Leaders identify children who may need early help and who are at risk of harm or who have been harmed. Practitioners recognise that babies and young children, including those with SEND, may be more vulnerable to abuse and neglect and that they depend on adults to recognise and</p>

Needs attention	Expected standard	Strong standard
<p><b>Inclusion is likely to be graded ‘needs attention’ when the ‘expected standard’ has not been met but breaches of the EYFS requirements do not have a significant impact on children’s learning and development and/or safety and welfare.</b></p> <p><b>This may include when one or more of the following applies:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Leaders have only recently started to take appropriate action to identify and assess children’s needs or reduce barriers to children’s learning and/or well-being.</li> <li>■ Weaknesses or inconsistencies in practice have a negative impact on children or on a particular group of children.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Inclusion meets the ‘expected standard’ when all the following apply:</b></p> <p>Leaders identify children’s needs quickly and accurately, including any emerging or changing needs. This includes the needs of disadvantaged children, those with SEND, those who are known (or previously known) to children’s social care, and those who may face other barriers to their learning and/or well-being.</p> <p>Leaders have high expectations for these children. Typically, the support they provide reduces barriers to the children’s learning and/or well-being.</p> <p>Leaders ask for and implement advice from specialists and external partners, when needed.</p> <p>Leaders take a graduated approach (as explained earlier), which means that children’s SEND needs are generally met well. Practitioners receive suitable training and support to implement this approach.</p> <p>Leaders have a secure understanding of these children’s needs and progress. They use appropriate evidence to inform their decisions</p>	<p><b>Inclusion meets the ‘strong standard’ when the ‘expected standard’ has been met and all the following apply:</b></p> <p>Leaders and practitioners consistently make a demonstrable difference to the opportunities and experiences of disadvantaged children, those with SEND, those who are known (or previously known) to children’s social care, and those who may face other barriers to their learning and/or well-being.</p> <p>Leaders and practitioners are consistent in making sure that the barriers children face are swiftly identified and effectively addressed. They rigorously monitor the progress of children receiving statutory support and those who may also face other barriers to their learning and/or well-being. Adaptations are systematically and skilfully adjusted as needed, so that they make a sustained difference to children’s opportunities and experiences.</p>

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# The EY Inspection Toolkit: a closer look

Needs attention	Expected standard	Strong standard
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# Inclusion – the golden thread

teaching

## Inclusive curriculum and teaching

**In gathering evidence about the inclusive curriculum and teaching, inspectors consider the extent to which:**

- leaders and practitioners have the knowledge and strategies to reduce any barriers and adapt the curriculum appropriately for disadvantaged children, those with SEND, those who are known (or previously known) to children's social care, and those who may face other barriers to their learning and/or well-being
- leaders and practitioners prioritise in their teaching the aspects that children need most support with, making sure that they receive the right help at the right time
- the setting supports all children who are at risk of falling behind the expected stages of communication and language development
- practitioners promote children's understanding of the world and other people and communities beyond their own, and help them to recognise both the similarities between themselves and others and their own uniqueness

	Expected standard	St
it	<p><b>Curriculum and teaching meet the 'expected standard' when all the following apply:</b></p> <p>Leaders have an accurate understanding of the quality of the curriculum and teaching in their setting. They have a clear action plan to bring</p>	<p>Cu sti ha  Le an ex</p>

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# Urgent improvement & Exceptional

## Urgent improvement

**Inclusion is likely to be graded 'urgent improvement' when breaches of the EYFS requirements have a significant impact on children's safety, well-being and/or learning and development, and any of the following apply:**

- Leaders do not identify, assess or meet children's needs well enough.
- Support for disadvantaged children, those with SEND, those who are known (or previously known) to children's social care, or those who may face other barriers to their learning and/or well-being is ineffective.
- Leaders do not meet the requirements for children receiving additional support and any statutory support, including disadvantaged children, those with SEND, those who are known (or previously known) to children's social care, and those who may face other barriers to their learning and/or well-being.

## Exceptional

**Inspectors may consider inclusion to be 'exceptional' when the 'strong standard' has been met and all the following apply:**

- Leaders and those responsible for overseeing the setting have a transformational impact on children's individual experiences because of their meticulous approach to promoting inclusion.
- Children receive commendable levels of individualised support and guidance, irrespective of the barriers that they may face. Parents are unanimously positive about the unwavering support that they and their child receive from the setting.
- There are no significant areas for improvement that leaders have not already prioritised.

If this grade is awarded, leaders should use their exceptional success in this evaluation area to:

- support improvement across all aspects of their own setting and/or group
- share their learning and best practice externally to support system-wide improvement, for example with other settings, professionals, their community and stakeholders, including local and/or national networks

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# The EY Inspection Toolkit: SEND and inclusion focus



## Central Role of SEND Inclusion

SEND inclusion is a core focus of the Ofsted Early Years Inspection Toolkit, ensuring children feel they belong and thrive.

## Assessment Criteria for Inclusion

Inspectors assess leadership effectiveness, safeguarding culture, and inclusive daily practices supporting SEND children.

## Collaboration and Support

Inspectors will want to know how settings collaborate with parents and professionals to respond proactively to SEND needs and support each child's development.

## Promoting Well-being and Adaptation

SENCOs and staff will need to understand and share the curriculum adaptations and teaching strategies they use to promote emotional well-being and social inclusion for all children.

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# Key aspects of the new framework regarding inclusion

**Inclusion is a separate evaluation area:** Inclusion is now a standalone evaluation area with its own grade on the new five-point scale ('Urgent improvement', 'Needs attention', 'Expected standard', 'Strong standard', 'Exceptional').

**Inclusion is embedded across all areas:** Inspectors will also consider the impact of leaders' work on inclusion across all other evaluation areas (e.g., quality of education, leadership and management).

**Focus on all children:** Inclusion elements focus on how well the needs of all children, especially disadvantaged children, those with SEND, and those known to social care, are met.

**'Expected standard' as a baseline:** The 'expected standard' is the baseline expectation, which includes meeting all legal requirements and professional standards. If a provider does not meet this standard in any area, it will likely be graded as 'needs attention' or 'urgent improvement'.

# Our New SEND & Inclusion: Reflection and Audit Tool

## Early Years Inclusion & SEND Self-Evaluation Toolkit: Guidance and Examples

This resource gives you clear examples of good practice to help you complete the Early Years Inclusion & SEND Self-Evaluation Toolkit. It includes practical ideas linked to key questions, helping you reflect on your current provision and spot areas to improve. These examples are here to guide you in building inclusive practice and improving outcomes for children with SEND. It works alongside the main toolkit to support confident and meaningful reflection.

Questions	Examples
1. How do we notice and respond to children's SEND needs?	<p><b>We notice needs by:</b>            Watching how children play, communicate and interact            Using observations to spot differences in development            Listening to parents' concerns and experiences            Checking progress against EYFS milestones            Noticing changes in behaviour, mood or engagement            Tracking progress against EYFS or developmental milestones            Completing more detailed assessments (e.g. Solihull EY SEND Assessment Toolkit)</p> <p><b>We respond by:</b>            Talking with parents and sharing what we've noticed            Following the <u>graduated</u> approach            Putting simple strategies in place and seeing what helps            Creating support plans with clear targets            Asking for advice from professionals like SALT or Area SENCo            Making changes to the environment or routines to support the child            Tracking smaller steps of progress</p> <p><b>We know it's working when:</b>            Children are more settled and engaged            Parents feel listened to and involved            Staff use strategies consistently            Support plans are reviewed and updated            We see progress in learning, communication or behaviour</p>
2. How do we keep track of attendance for children with SEND, and what do we do when it's low or irregular to help them build good routines?	<p><b>We monitor attendance by:</b>            Keeping daily registers            Noticing patterns (e.g. frequent late arrivals)            Talking to parents about reasons            Recording reasons for absence</p> <p><b>We support better attendance by:</b>            Offering flexible start times            Using visuals to support routines</p>

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# Benefits of the audit tool for SENCOs

## **Helps SENCOs Lead SEND and Inclusion**

Supports strong leadership in early years settings.

## **Clear Reflection Framework**

Gives a simple structure to review practice, spot strengths, and find areas to improve.

## **Boosts Team Collaboration**

Promotes shared discussions so everyone works consistently on inclusion.

## **Meets Legal Requirements**

Matches EYFS and SEND Code of Practice, helping settings stay compliant.

## **Supports Key Conversations**

Useful when talking with Ofsted, managers, and leadership teams.

## **Plans Next Steps**

Helps SENCOs set clear actions for better SEND provision.



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# How to use the audit tool

## Solihull EY Team: SEND & Inclusion Reflection and Audit Tool

This reflection and audit tool helps you, as a leader in an [early years](#) setting—like a SENCO or manager—think about how well your setting supports children with SEND and includes everyone. It uses a simple Red, Amber, Green (RAG) rating to help you look at how things are going in key areas of inclusion.

- Red - this area needs work
- Amber - some things are happening, but not consistently
- Green - reflects strong, embedded practice

This toolkit is for your own use and self-reflection. It helps you recognise what's working well, spot areas to improve, and plan next steps to strengthen inclusive practice. It supports ongoing development in line with best practice and guidance. It's not an assessment or judgement by other professionals — it's for you as a leader in your setting, so please be honest to get the most out of it.

Questions	Evidence – what does it look like in your setting?	Rag rating	Next Steps – what do we need to do to make it better?
1. How do we notice and respond to children's SEND needs?			
2. How do we keep track of attendance for children with SEND, and what do we do when it's low or irregular to help them build good routines?			
3. How do we spot early signs that a child may be struggling with routines, and what do we do to help?			
4. How do we decide what each child with SEND needs to learn next?			
5. How do we ensure children with SEND have a voice in their learning and experiences?			
6. How do staff help children with SEND join in and learn during activities?			
7. What do we do to help children learn about others and celebrate differences? How do we help children with SEND feel part of the group?			

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# Next steps and further support

## Access resources:

- Download a copy of Ofsted's EY Inspection Toolkit
- Download a copy of the SEND & Inclusion Audit Tool.
- Review example guidance available on Solgrid.

## Start small:

- Choose one evaluation area to audit first.
- Complete the audit:
- Work through the tool systematically.
- Identify strengths and priority areas for development.

## Plan for improvement:

- Add identified priorities to your Action Plan.
- Begin working on your identified priorities

## Seek support:

- Contact your Area SENCo if you need help.
- Additional support may be available through new Area SENCo training.



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# Resources & links



- [Ofsted training webinars](#)
- [Ofsted webinar - Ofsted education inspection framework: nurseries, pre-schools, other registered early years settings](#)
- [Ofsted EY Inspection toolkit](#)
- [Audit tool](#)
- [Area SENCo shorts](#)
- [EY Team – Using the EY Inspection Toolkit for self evaluation PVI's](#)
- [Report card examples](#)

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