

Supporting Reading for Children and Young People with SEND

A Resource for Practitioners

Developed as part of the National Year of Reading 2026 – a UK-wide campaign designed to help more people rediscover the joy of reading. This resource brings together practical ideas to help practitioners support children and young people with SEND, as well as their families, to develop positive reading experiences and communication skills.

Reading for Children with SEND

Stories can be experienced through listening, talking, movement, sensory exploration, pictures, music and shared experiences, as well as the printed word.

For many children and young people with SEND, offering a choice of book formats and access to a range of reading experiences can support engagement. Practitioners can help families recognise that enjoying stories, interpreting pictures, building communication and developing confidence are all valuable parts of a child's literacy journey.

When working with families:

- **Build on strengths, interests and existing communication methods.**
- **Celebrate all forms of reading and storytelling.**
- **Value shared reading experiences as well as building competence.**
- **Promote reading for pleasure and connection.**
- **Help families understand that communication can happen through speech, signs, symbols, sounds, movement, gestures and technology.**



Supporting Families to Read Together

To help support positive shared reading, you might encourage parents and carers to:

- **Start with the child's interests:** Many children engage more readily with stories that connect to things they already enjoy. Books, magazines, photographs, subtitles, instructions and online content can all provide meaningful reading opportunities.
- **Use audiobooks and storytelling:** Listening to stories supports vocabulary development, comprehension and enjoyment, even when children are not reading independently. Encourage families to listen to audiobooks or podcasts together, pause and discuss favourite parts, retell stories using toys, pictures or role play. Library services offer free access to digital audiobooks
- **Enjoy picture-based books:** Illustrated books, graphic novels and wordless books provide rich opportunities for discussion. Families can describe what they see, predict what might happen next, make up dialogue for characters, invent new endings, and more.
- **Read as a family:** Shared reading experiences help create positive associations with books. This may include looking at books together, sharing bedtime stories, listening to stories as a family, talking about stories from parents' or carers' childhoods, sharing songs, rhymes and family memories.
- **Discover their library:** Libraries offer a huge range of free resources and services, and some offer dedicated support for SEND families: [Find your local library service here.](#)



Fun Ways to Explore Stories

Stories do not only live in books. You might suggest:

- **Drawing, Painting or Making:** Parents and carers can encourage children to create drawings, paintings, collages or models inspired by characters, places or events from a story.
- **Family Storytelling:** Using photographs of family members, favourite places or memorable events can be a powerful way to develop communication and narrative skills. Children can describe what is happening in the picture, share memories, or imagine new adventures for people in the photograph.
- **Reading in Different Places:** Changing the environment can make reading feel exciting. Families might try garden story time, reading in a den, sharing a story at the park, or creating a cosy reading corner.

Sensory Approaches to Storytelling

Many children with SEND benefit from multi-sensory experiences. You could take opportunities to demonstrate to parents and carers how to incorporate a sensory approach through:

- **Touch:** Exploring textured books, using objects that relate to a story, creating mystery bags or boxes for children to identify items by touch, discussing how objects feel using descriptive language.
- **Smell:** Offering familiar scents linked to stories or experiences, asking children what memories, places or feelings particular smells remind them of.
- **Sound:** Using household objects, instruments or recorded sounds, matching sounds to story events, encouraging children to make their own sound effects.

Sensory experiences can support engagement, communication, vocabulary and imagination.



Communication Through Sound and Movement

Communication is much broader than spoken language. Families can enjoy activities that encourage interaction through movement, rhythm and play. You might share suggestions including:

- **Movement-Based Storytelling:** Acting out stories, physical games, dance, stretching or yoga-inspired storytelling activities.
- **Rhythm and Music:** Clapping syllables, tapping rhythms, singing songs, joining in with rhymes, creating sound patterns.
- **Humour and Play:** Sharing jokes, funny stories and laughter support language development and social connection. Children may enjoy telling jokes, creating silly characters, inventing their own stories, playing with sounds and words.

Creating an Inclusive Reading Environment

You can support families by helping them to overcome challenges to accessing reading, such as by:

- **Reducing Pressure:** Reading should feel enjoyable, not like a test. Encourage families to follow the child's lead, stop when a child loses interest, celebrate small successes, revisit favourite books repeatedly if the child wishes to.
- **Supporting Different Reading Needs:** Helpful adaptations may include larger print, audio or sensory supported texts, visual supports and symbols, shorter reading sessions, accessible seating and lighting.
- **Helping them access specialist books:** Audio, braille or large print books may help children with a visual impairment. BSL and Makaton storytelling or videos may help children who are d/Deaf or use sign-based communication for other reasons.
- **Valuing All Communication:** Children may respond to stories through speaking, signing, pointing, eye gaze, AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) systems, gestures, movement, sounds. All responses should be recognised as meaningful participation.



Growing as a reader of print

Many children and young people with SEND can and do become readers of print, often with patient, structured and encouraging support shaped around how they learn best. Supporting print does not have to feel like pressure, and it can sit comfortably alongside the shared, sensory and story-rich experiences above. Here are some suggestions to help promote engagement with the printed word:

- **Notice print in everyday life:** Print is all around us, in signs, labels, packaging, logos and messages. Pointing out and talking about familiar words, a child's name, a favourite shop, or the label on a favourite snack, helps children see themselves as readers with no sense of a test.
- **Share the words, not only the story:** When reading a favourite book together, you might run a finger under the words, pause on a repeated line for the child to join in, or notice a word that keeps appearing. Following the print gently, at the child's pace, builds familiarity with how reading works.
- **Build on interests:** A child who loves dinosaurs, trains, or a particular character often wants to read the words that name the things they love. Their interests can be a powerful, pressure-free route into print.
- **Celebrate every step:** Recognising a letter, reading a single word, joining in with a line, or reading a caption under a picture are all real reading. Small successes, noticed and celebrated, build the confidence to keep going.



Key Messages for Practitioners

When supporting families of children and young people with SEND:

- Reading can happen in many different ways.
- Stories can be heard, seen, acted, sung, signed and experienced.
- Communication is more important than perfection.
- Shared enjoyment builds confidence.
- Children's interests are powerful motivators.
- Adults do not need to feel like expert readers or storytellers to share stories and support reading at home.
- Positive experiences with stories and language help lay foundations for lifelong reading.
- Resources from a range of organisations can be found at www.goallin.org.uk/resources - these can also be filtered by the tag 'Accessible & Inclusive'.



Further Information

- **Find out more:** [National Year of Reading 2026 | Go All In](#)
- **Pledge your support:** [Pledge your support | National Year of Reading 2026](#)
- **Share your events:** [What's on | Events Calendar | National Year of Reading 2026](#)
- **Resources for schools and settings:** [What's On For Schools | National Year Of Reading 2026 | National Literacy Trust](#)



© 2026 National Literacy Trust. All rights reserved. This work and all its contents are protected under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 and other applicable UK intellectual property laws. No part of this material may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means—including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods—without the prior written permission of the copyright owner, except where permitted under statutory exceptions such as fair dealing for the purposes of non-commercial research, private study, criticism, review, or quotation, as provided under UK copyright law.

The National Literacy Trust is a registered charity no. 1116260 (England and Wales) and SC042944 (Scotland).

Powered by

**National
Literacy
Trust**

Change your story

**GO
ALL
IN.**

**National
Year of
Reading
2026**