

INDEPENDENT  
THINKING  
ON ...

# BEING A SENDCO

*Ginny Bootman*

113 TIPS FOR BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS,  
SAVING TIME AND CHANGING LIVES

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# FOREWORD

A shoulder.

An ear.

A voice.

An advocate.

A champion.

A mouthpiece.

A showcase.

A brainstorm.

A calm in the storm.

A break in the clouds.

A light in the dark.

A family counsellor.

A family mediator.

An interpreter.

A chaperone.

A coach.

A fan.

A referee.

A messenger. (Don't shoot.)

A way through.

A way out.

A way in.

The one who listens.

The one who knows.

The one who cares.

A friend.

A critic.

A challenge.

A hard stare.

A look of love.

The educational professional who campaigns tirelessly on behalf of the children who need more support than most to navigate a system that, at times, seems purposefully set up to make them fail.

A rock.

A lighthouse.

A signpost.

A crossroads.

A bridge.

A map.

A guidebook.

An encyclopaedia.

A facilitator.

A fixer.

A breaker.

A ducker and diver.

A risk taker.

A forgiveness seeker, not a permission requester.

An iterator.

An inventor.

An innovator.

A renovator.

A restorer.

A curator.

A creator.

A pioneer.  
A navigator.  
A confronter.  
A holder to account.  
A holder of standards.  
A holder of hands.  
An 'If at first you don't succeed, try again'.  
A 'won't take no for an answer'.  
A 'things can only get better'.  
A smile maker.  
A promise maker.  
A tea maker. (Coffee also available.)  
The one who knows where the biscuits are kept.  
The one who always has tissues.  
The one who knows where the loos are.  
A transcriber.  
A photocopier.  
A filing cabinet.  
A contacts list.  
A secretary.  
A calendar sorter.  
A meeting organiser.  
A room arranger.  
An ambiance creator.  
A switcher-off of the lights and a locker-up at the end.  
A shot in the arm.  
A shot in the dark.  
A shot at life.  
A starter.

A finisher.  
An everything in-between.  
A reassuring face in a crowded room.  
A smile on a bad day.  
A smile on a good day.  
A hug when you win.  
A bigger hug when you lose.  
A keeper of promises.  
A keeper of secrets.  
A keeper of the flame.  
That first hope.  
Our last hope.  
An expert.  
An ally.  
A connection.  
A relationship.  
A traveller on other people's roads.  
A wearer of other people's shoes.  
A SENDCO.

IAN GILBERT

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# FIRST THOUGHTS

It is hard being a SENDCO. I should know (and I have been a head too!).

It isn't just the job, which is as challenging as it is rewarding, on a good day. It is also about the little things.

Have you ever had a time when you felt overwhelmed and you retreated, snail-like, into your shell, hoping things would sort themselves out? And what about that spiky email you received this morning? How is that going down? And when that parent raised their voice at you? How did you feel?

Then there are those times when you started to question your knowledge and expertise right in the middle of an important meeting and ended up losing your confidence and saying nothing (and then kicking yourself afterwards).

I know you have been there because I have been there too. That is why I wanted to write this book – to share with you many practical ideas to help you be the best SENDCO you can be, the SENDCO your children need you to be, the one you know you can be.

Perhaps the biggest lesson of all – and I am going to put this out there, right from the start – is this one: you don't know everything, and that is okay.

There are too many issues, too many children, too many families, too many situations and too many variables. No one knows it all, so beware those who think they do. It isn't only okay to say you don't know, it is you at your professional best. It isn't a weakness but a strength. I know that now, but it took me a while to learn.

My teaching career began with my training in Liverpool. It was such a great place to get a real feel for what lay ahead. Tough schools with tough teachers. No time for empathy. It was all about survival. I remember beginning teaching practice and being faced with a teacher who was very much on the edge. She would teach with perspiration dripping down her forehead, clearly in a constant and draining state of high alert. A teaching assistant approached me and said, 'Our number one job is to stop her from having a breakdown.' We just about managed it.

Fast forward four happy and challenging years to my first proper teaching job in Gateshead. Another tough school with some amazing children and now my own class. At the end of my first year, a parent sent me the loveliest card thanking me for everything I had done for her son. He was a fabulously challenging Year 6 child. His mother said I had given him the time and understanding that no one else had ever given him. A seed was planted in my brain.

Fast forward five more years. I had moved to Northamptonshire and was working in a school in Kettering. A Year 2 mother came to see me one day to say that her son found it difficult to write on A4 paper due to his fine motor difficulties. I said, 'No problem. Let's make his worksheets A3 size to help him.' You would have thought I had given her the world. Another seed.

In 2005, I not only became a teaching head in a small village school in Northamptonshire but also the school's SENDCO. Those were the days! To be honest, the SENDCO role was very different back then. I had so much else to do with teaching and leadership that the SENDCO role was a small part of my job. Four years later, after having my son, I returned to being a class teacher and now, without the headship duties, I could really take a look at those SEND seeds that had been planted previously.

## FIRST THOUGHTS

Even as a class teacher, I began to understand the power we have to make a difference for the children who need us most, often through little things. And those little things start with listening carefully and then responding with creativity, determination and, of course, empathy. And with those three magic words: I don't know.

Over my career, I had come to learn that by making myself a bit more vulnerable, by having the confidence to admit I didn't have all the answers, I was able to build bridges with everyone with whom I worked. The families you come across meet enough experts; they need a human being. They need you at your professional, honest and compassionate best.

This book is designed to help you be that best, combining your professionalism with empathy, the ability to listen properly and a desire to understand what the lives of others are like and how you can help. It is a book full of tips to save you time and energy, little hacks to help you overcome obstacles and bumps in the road, and proven strategies that will help you build more effective relationships.

These relationships will benefit everyone who comes into contact with the amazing children in our care. It also extends to parents (a word I am using to refer to all individuals who have guardianship and a duty of care of a child or children) and to the professional teams outside the school environment who play a part in helping children.

Together, we can help children, often against the odds and even when the system seems to be working against us.

And we can love our role too; I should know.

**113 TIPS**



# 1. THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING A NETWORK AROUND YOU

You aren't alone. I know it feels like it at times, but you aren't. What are you doing to make sure you are building a great support network around you?

In recent years, I have been lucky enough to work alongside fabulous SENDCOs in a multi-academy trust (MAT). We became a great team. We all brought our own lived experiences to each meeting, which meant that between us we had a wonderful breadth of knowledge. We all acted as each other's sounding board too, something all SENDCOs need. A critical friend to bounce ideas off in a non-judgemental but honest way.

Despite our breadth of knowledge, we also knew we had gaps. Everyone does. Once we had identified them, we were then able to organise the appropriate training to fill those gaps. This coordinated group effort gave us a great sense of security.

You may be the only SENDCO in your school, but you still need a network, even if you have to cast your net a little further afield to find it. Post-COVID-19, I am now being asked to speak at SEND events and conferences across the country. Make sure you come along! The SEND community is such a welcoming group, and I know you will be able to ask for all the guidance and support you need, both on the day and then through the new connections you have made.

## 2. THE POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA

A face-to-face network is great, but it is also important to tap into online networks. They are such an invaluable source of ideas and support.

I joined Twitter in 2019, and I have never looked back. It has provided me with so many amazing contacts and is the best continuing professional development (CPD) you could wish for with regard to SEND. There are many useful SEND networks on Facebook and Instagram. I would strongly suggest that you give the world of social media a go, even if it is something that terrifies (or bores) you.

I was sceptical about joining these online groups at first; however, I have been proven wrong. Through these platforms, I have made amazing contacts, I have learned a great deal, I have people on hand who can answer my questions, day or night, and I have found out about so many SEND events – online, in person and often free.

If you are concerned about any of your questions and conversations being in the public domain, you can get (and give) advice through direct messaging. You can also join closed groups where you can ask specific questions about SEND.

To start with, make sure you follow me on Twitter – @SendcoGirl. Say hi, and I will help you find your feet. You will love it, I guarantee.

### 3. READ A BOOK OR JOIN A WEBINAR

'Every day is a school day' is such a well-known saying in education, but it is one in which I firmly believe. While on social media, I look out to see if there are any webinars that I think would benefit me professionally or personally. I watch out for anyone who interests me, and I view their webinars (either live or at a later date, when you can pause or re-watch parts of particular interest). It is fascinating to me that the authors I enjoy reading are often amazing speakers too. I like it when I read a book and can hear the author's voice speaking to me in my head. Often, webinars are up to an hour long, but they also include question-and-answer sessions, so you are getting a truly personalised professional development session from an inspirational person.

I am one of those people who likes to write notes in the book I am reading about the parts that really appeal to me or that I might want to refer to in the future, while others prefer to read eBooks. Either way, I would highly advocate listening out for recommended books on SEND. I use social media such as Twitter for recommendations. I find that if I own my CPD, I am more likely to enjoy it and learn from it. Own your own CPD too! There are also lots of free podcasts out there featuring lots of interesting ideas on special needs by people who are doing the same job as us. In this area, there seems to be a true feeling of sharing rather than a hierarchy.

## 4. SEND AND THE EUREKA MOMENT: PART I

When did you first realise you had a passion for being a SENDCO? And when did you utter your first SEND-related 'eureka'? The moment when you grasped that this was the job you were put on this earth to do?

For me, it occurred thanks to one particular child. I had been a SENDCO for many happy years when, always willing to learn new things, I went on a course to help me understand the specific needs of a child in my care. That day changed forever how I approached my SENDCO role. I suddenly had a moment of utmost clarity and understood, perhaps for the first time, what was important in my role and in my work with children.

Anyone who has heard me speak or followed me on Twitter will understand what I mean when I say that I suddenly knew the road I needed to follow wasn't a yellow brick one but an empathy one. I have been skipping that road ever since.

The approach we explored on that day unlocked in me a greater understanding of how I, as a SENDCO, could help children to feel safe, secure and valued in a genuine and understanding way. It was the key to revealing my true potential as a SENDCO. And what was the course that so changed my approach to my work? It was one that considered the work of Dan Hughes and Kim Golding and their PACE approach, which demonstrates the many benefits of employing *playfulness*, *acceptance*, *curiosity* and, of course, *empathy* in all your interactions.<sup>1</sup>

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1 See K. S. Golding and D. A. Hughes, *Creating Loving Attachments: Parenting with PACE to Nurture Confidence and Security in the Troubled Child* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2012).

- **Playfulness.** When we talk to children, we need to consider our tone and stance, to talk *with* and not *to* or *at*. It is important that we don't come across as Judge Judy, but as someone who is listening to understand. This isn't being soft on children or letting them off (before Twitter explodes), but it is about having the empathy needed to help everyone learn from what has happened.
- **Acceptance.** You know you shouldn't have done it. I know you shouldn't have done it. The person you did it to knows you shouldn't have done it. So, let's accept that you shouldn't have done it. No ifs, no buts, no 'But he started it'. Accepting that what happened shouldn't have happened means we can all move on. This acceptance is important for the child as part of the process of taking ownership of their behaviour. It is a vital step in helping them learn to manage their emotions and actions when they are in a similar situation in the future in order to tread a different path.
- **Curiosity.** What does life look like through the eyes of an anxious 5-year-old, a traumatised 7-year-old or an autistic 10-year-old? We can never really know, but asking ourselves these questions means we will approach our interactions with such children in a far more curious and less judgemental way. I have found that when I unpick situations with children from a place of curiosity, new possibilities present themselves. As a consequence, I have identified changes that could be made to the school's systems that would prevent the event from recurring.

- **Empathy.** And lots of it. My #FollowTheEmpathyRoad approach is right at the heart of all my work on a daily basis. You will have noticed by now that it is running through this book, too, like ‘Bridlington’ in a stick of rock.

Easy really.

## 5. SEND AND THE EUREKA MOMENT: PART II

Learning about a new strategy is one thing. Translating it into school-based practice is another – the real test of whether a day spent on an out-of-school course is worthwhile. Armed with my new acronym and a sense of excitement, I began using PACE in my work; it was hard.

To begin with, it felt laboured. I had to consider every sentence, every word, every non-verbal response, and to consider it all carefully. And then to reconsider it. We are so used to thinking and responding in certain ways that we don't even think about it. It is just the way we are. But, like all habits, our responses can be changed. It just takes a bit of dedication.

One of the fundamentals of the PACE approach is to get to the bottom of things without ever using the word ‘why’. Have a go; it is tricky to master. I spent many a journey to and from school practising model sentences without using ‘why’.

I soon learned that the easiest way to get round the compulsion to ask ‘why’ was to simply echo whatever it was a child had said to me. For example, if a child came to me and

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*Independent Thinking on Being a SENDCO* is designed to help you become a compassionate, honest and determined SENDCO, combining your professionalism with empathy, the ability to listen properly and a desire to understand what the lives of others are like and how you can help. It is a book full of tips to save you time and energy, little hacks to help you overcome obstacles and bumps in the road, and proven strategies that will help you build more effective relationships.

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MARY MYATT, EDUCATION WRITER, SPEAKER, CURATOR, MYATT & CO

Full of invaluable, easy-win ideas to help the busy SEND leader save time and effort in their demanding yet extremely rewarding role.

NATALIE PACKER, SEND CONSULTANT, NPEC LTD, AUTHOR OF *THE PERFECT SENDCO* AND *THE TEACHER'S GUIDE TO SEN*

*Ginny Bootman* is an experienced teacher and SENDCO with responsibility for four primary schools, as well as a regular speaker at national SEN conferences. She is passionate about the impact of relationships within education, particularly for those working with children with additional needs, and is determined to improve understanding of the pivotal role that these relationships play within the school environment.

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