

No Budget? Supporting Children's SEMH Needs On A Shoestring

Practical Strategies • Low Cost • No Extra Adults

Introduction

This resource has been put together in recognition that there are increasing SEMH needs in primary classrooms, but not always more than one adult to support. Below are some ideas and strategies to try, that don't rely on an extra adult to deliver them.

Try to remember

- Behaviour = communication
- Regulation before learning
- Predictability reduces anxiety
- Small changes = big impact



What you might see → what it might mean

Behaviour	Possible Need
Refusing work	Overwhelmed / fear of failure
Calling out	Needs attention / reassurance
Wandering	Dysregulated / unsettled
Shutting down	Anxiety / feeling unsafe

Whole Class Strategies

Having **predictable routines**, for the day and also for the starts of lessons. This creates a sense of safety and helps children settle quickly. It also reduces the need to think or worry about what is happening next.



Give children a **WAGOLL** so that they can see what they are aiming for, and in case they forget what they have been asked to do.



Give children a **checklist or task ladder** helps it feel less daunting, and children know where to start and what to do next. It helps children focus on one thing at a time, and helps them to re-engage easily if they get distracted. It is a good memory prompt too for children who struggle to remember what they need to do.



Give **short instructions** that are easy to remember to reduce cognitive overload and help children understand and get on quickly. e.g. Instead of: "I'd like everyone to go and sit on the carpet quietly, cross your legs, and listen carefully..." try : "Carpet. Sit. Listening. Thank you." This reduces confusion and overwhelm, and increases engagement and success.



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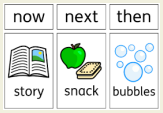
Put **visual reminders** on the board for children to refer to so they can remember what to do. These help reduce verbal overload, and avoids the adult repeating what to do. It also supports children who struggle to process spoken language.



Have **now/next** or now/next/later on the board for everyone to see. This helps learning feel manageable and less overwhelming. It makes expectations clear and visual, so children don't have to rely on remembering verbal instructions.



Using **visual timers** e.g. sand timers, countdown clocks, apps reduces anxiety and uncertainty. They make time concrete and predictable. It helps children see how long they need to wait or work. It helps give a countdown to transitions and end points and develop independence.



Use a **class visual timetable** to show what is happening during the day. This helps children feel safe as they know what is coming up. You could put a question mark near the timetable and explain that if something different happens an adult will help them cope with that and feel safe.



Use the **PACE** approach in interactions with children. This builds relationships and trust. **PACE** = Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, Empathy.

Use **Playfulness** to diffuse conflict, reduce tension, and promote connection. A light, warm, friendly tone of voice is used, similar to when you read a story aloud. Playfulness reduces the shame a child might feel when something goes wrong. Engage with children in a light hearted, relaxed way to reduce withdrawal.

Acceptance is accepting the child's feelings, needs and emotions and understand that these are driving the behaviours seen. You may not agree with their interpretation, but you accept their feelings about it. It is their experience. Show them it's ok to feel the way they do.

Curiosity is when you wonder what is behind the behaviour, what has happened. You are trying to show you simply wish to understand why. Be curious, not furious.

Empathy is when you connect with how the child is feeling and show compassion. Stand in their shoes, feel the feelings and emotions they are feeling. How would you feel if you were going through what they are going through? What would help you? Could that help the child? Empathy helps the child feel seen, heard, and understood.

Whole class movement breaks can be done regularly, will help everyone, and don't need an extra adult e.g.



Punctuate learning with movement – ask for hands up – 2 hands up; stand up to answer; vote with your feet (move to an area of the classroom) When bringing them back to learning do 5 4 3 2 1 and get the children to join in, or copy the clap – do fast then slow.



Put hands either side of chair, push down, lift bottom up off chair, keep arms straight.

Put arms out over knees. March sitting down and knock hands.

Rub up arms and squeeze shoulders.

Shake hands out in front of them.

Try standing still in a tree pose or doing gentle chair yoga to stimulate the vestibular system and promote focus.

Meet and greet builds belonging and safety. Children feel noticed and welcomed, valued and important. It creates a positive start to the day and support needed can be offered early. Add in a physical greeting e.g. high 5, funny handshake, hug, to build relationship and trust.

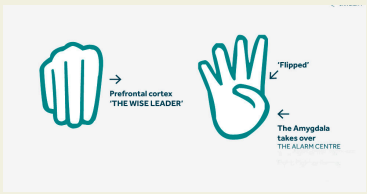


Practice whole class **mindfulness.** This helps to develop a calmer classroom and reduces the likelihood of children feeling overwhelmed. They can be short, regular activities - 1-5 minutes, 2-3 times a day. Some schools use Take 5 - [Home - Each Amazing Breath, CIC]

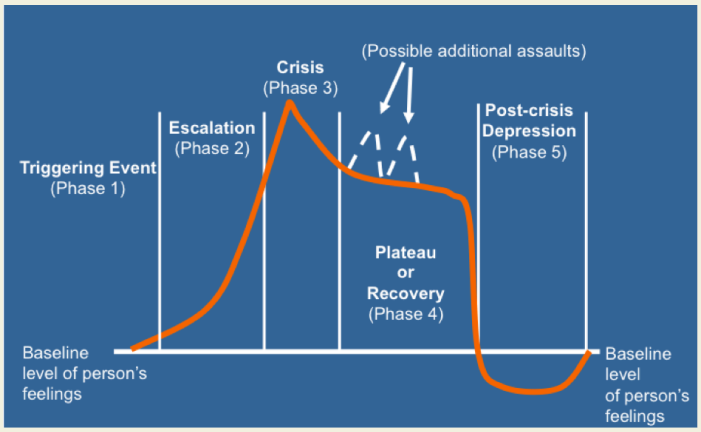


Supporting Emotions

Flipping your lid - this idea explains that when we get overwhelmed, the thinking part of the brain ("upstairs brain") temporarily goes offline and the emotional/reactive part ("downstairs brain") takes over. By learning that everyone flips their lid sometimes, children realise strong emotions are normal, not bad; losing control is something brains do—not a personal failure. This reduces shame and helps children feel safe talking about their feelings. "Flipping your lid" is a simple phrase children can use to communicate, and be understood. This is a good video to show Why Do We Lose Control of Our Emotions? With the "flipping your lid" analogy, children can learn to show you they are feeling dysregulated with a small hand signal.



Breakwell cycle



The Breakwell Cycle is a behaviour model used in schools that explains how a child can move from anxiety and agitation to defensive or crisis behaviour and then back to recovery, helping staff intervene early and support positive outcomes. This is good for adults and children to understand, so that they can put together a regulation or safety plan for each phase. The Breakwell Cycle can be taught t the whole class so everyone benefits from understanding it, and it helps provide a common language and empathy. The Arousal Curve

Emotion labelling Teach emotional understanding explicitly rather than just managing behaviour. The adult puts words to the child's emotional experience, especially when the child cannot do this themselves. It helps the child feel understood e.g.

"I can see you're feeling..."

"It looks like you might be worried."

"You seem really excited right now!"

Using class books to explore emotions
Select stories with clear emotional themes, for example:

- Friendship and conflict
- Anxiety or worry
- Anger and self-control
- Belonging or difference

Don't just read—stop and explore feelings as they arise - "How is this character feeling right now?" "What clues tell us that?" "Have you ever felt like that?" As the adult, deliberately model emotional language - "He looks frustrated because it didn't go the way he wanted." "She might feel nervous about what will happen next."

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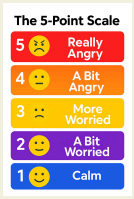
5 point scale The 5-point scale helps show how big a child's feeling or behaviour is. On the scale, 1 is very small/calm, and 5 is very big/really upset. It's like a thermometer for feelings. It makes **feelings** easier to understand, and gives a shared language for discussing behaviour. It helps with self-awareness and regulation.

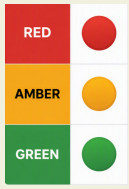


Regulation box - You can set up a whole class regulation box. Put a range of sensory items in there. Show the children what the items are, get them to use them and say if they help them feel calmer - which ones help different children. Let them know that if there are times they are feeling worried/stressed they can go and use the regulation box to help.





Whole class pupil voice can be used for children to RAG rate the environment, lessons, what makes a good day/tricky day etc. This helps to open up conversations to help each other understand that everyone has strengths and areas they find difficult. When children see others choosing red or amber, they realise that finding things difficult is a normal part of learning. This increases emotional safety and reduces anxiety.



A calm corner/regulation station is a dedicated, safe place where children can go to settle their emotions, regulate their behaviour, and feel secure when they are overwhelmed, anxious, or upset. It helps them take a break without feeling punished. It can be a small area with a rug, cushions, soft seating, beanbags, blankets, or stuffed toys. You could also include: breathing prompts or visual calm-down cards; sensory tools - stress balls, fidget toys, weighted items; sand timers; books about emotions.





Support aids Just as some children may need a pencil grip to help with writing, or a number square to help with maths, some children will need things to help them feel calm. Some examples include Thera-bands/yoga bands which can go around the legs of the chair for them to push on; wobble cushion; ear defenders; soft lighting; weighted lap blankets; stress balls/tangle toy; play dough; sensory mat; soft toys; cushion/blanket.





Noticing Imagining Wondering Noticing, Imagining and Wondering language helps children begin to self-regulate. It allows you to share what you notice about them, suggest possible emotions, and offer a helpful regulation strategy. Through co-regulation, children learn to self-regulate. For example: "Chloe, I've NOTICED you've crossed out your work and put your head on the table. I IMAGINE you're feeling frustrated because you made a mistake. I WONDER if you could help me by taking this note to reception—it will give you a chance to move and take a break. When you get back, we can look at this together if you're ready."







Transitions, even small ones (e.g. moving between activities, spaces, or teachers), can feel unsettling for children and may lead to fear, sadness, or frustration. Offer reassurance and use consistent cues like music (e.g. a tidy-up or lining-up song) to signal what's next. Break transitions into smaller steps e.g. rather than stopping work and putting books away/moving, 15 minutes before let them know, 10 minutes before put on transition music, 5 minutes before put up a visual reminder. Brief mindfulness activities can help calm emotions before and after transitions. During movement, keep children engaged with simple tasks like walking in different ways, carrying items, or passing a beanbag.







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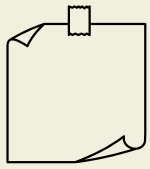
Being Relational

Safety first Helping children feel emotionally safe is key and helps them feel ready to learn. Try to have a highly structured and predictable environment. Meet and greet with a warm welcome helps build trust and safety. Finding time to listen to worries helps children feel heard. Model respect and kindness. Find ways to help children when they feel stressed or overwhelmed to alleviate anxieties.



Build **positive relationships** to support wellbeing, inclusion, and confidence by giving pupils regular opportunities to praise each other. e.g. give post-its out, they write the name of the child next to them on the post-it then something positive about that them. Then they/you read them out; swap books with someone on their table and tell the class something they like about that piece of work; at the end of a session, pick out a name and other children say a positive about them; have a smiley face on the wall that they stick positive post-its on.





2 minutes 10 days - For children that are feeling overwhelmed regularly, spend 2 minutes with them for 10 consecutive days talking about non-school things. It could be something the child is interested in. It isn't about the length of time, it is about consistency and genuine connection.





Keeping children close - When children become overwhelmed, or start to be agitated, bring them closer to you - you can move to be nearer them, or you can suggest they sit nearer to you. Try to sit alongside rather than opposite them. If they are becoming agitated during an input, ask them to come and help you/sit by you and be in charge of the laptop/resources. Use this approach with all pupils too to build trust and safety.



Comic strip conversations were created by Carol Grey. A comic strip conversation is a visual representation of a conversation or incident, drawn by the child or adult. They can be used to show what has actually been said and done, what people involved might have thought and felt, and what people might have intended. They use stick figures and symbols to represent social interactions and abstract aspects of conversation, and colour to represent the emotional content of a statement or message. Comic Strip Conversations





Repair - Things go wrong with relationships so it is important to help children repair them. It isn't about making them say sorry, it's helping them understand that someone has been hurt/upset so what could they do to help that child/adult feel better. There will be days when as teachers we don't always get it right, so find ways to repair things then too.



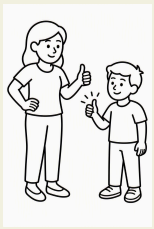
Keeping in mind activities 1 **Class reminder board:** It is key that adults support children by showing them they 'keep them in mind' when they aren't physically with them. Children with attachment difficulties struggle to trust adults to remember or follow through with what they have said. A reminder board helps show them they are "kept in mind" and that promises will be kept. A class reminder board is easy to set up – all you need is a stack of post it notes! You can also set up individual reminder boards at a child's work station/table space if a more individual approach is needed. Example: *'it's Tom's time to water the flowers before break tomorrow.'* Or *'we will have ten minutes at the end of the day when you can complete your Lego design.'*



Boundaries 1 Boundaries create a consistent trusting safe space. Clear rules help this to happen. Usually when behaviour goes wrong, it is about following instructions; how we speak to each other; attitude to learning; how we treat each other; and how we treat the environment. If you create a short rule for each area, it helps children know what is expected. Always make them about what you want the children to do, rather than what they shouldn't do e.g.



Keeping in mind activities 2 **Keeping in mind body movement:** If you know a child seeks your reassurance frequently, you can set up a particular gesture so you can send a non-verbal communication that you know they are there and you are keeping them in mind e.g. if you are on one side of the classroom and they are in their seat, you might touch opposite hands to shoulders and they do the same gesture back at you. Make sure you don't use phrases that suggest this is 'secret'.



Boundaries 2 Sometimes we just refer to the rules when someone is doing something wrong. It is important to use the rules proactively - if a child is following instructions, praise them using the language of the rule "well done for following the instructions/ trying your best", reward them. It helps other children to want to follow the rules too and get that praise/reward. Teach what each rule looks like through role play, creating comic strips illustrating them, stories, puppets etc



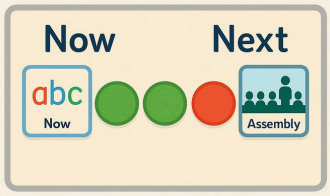
Individual Support

Some children will need something extra. Below are ideas of how to offer extra support without an extra adult to facilitate it.

Having **a bespoke visual timetable** helps a child by making the day predictable, manageable, and tailored to their needs, which leads to better regulation, engagement, and emotional security. The unpredictability of the day can lead to feelings of overwhelm and being out of control. A visual timetable can act as a bridge, helping them communicate what they need or expect next without frustration. You can make it themed to their interests too.

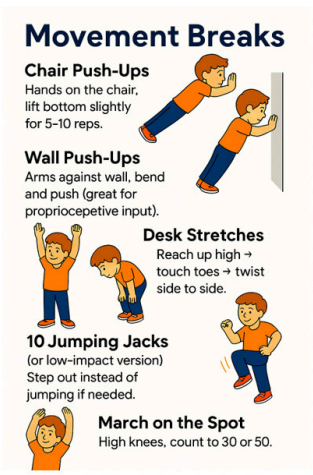


Give children a **Now/Next board with dots** so that some children find timers that count down difficult. An alternative can be the dot system. It works by removing the 3 coloured dots at a pace that suits the needs of the child. If you know a child finds it difficult to finish a task and that forcing them to do so will cause them to become distressed, you can remove the dots slowly. If you know that it is a task/activity that they will struggle to do, you can move through the dots quickly. This allows the adult to remain in control of the situation which ultimately makes the child feel safe. You can incorporate it into a Now and Next visual (see the image) or simply use the coloured dots.



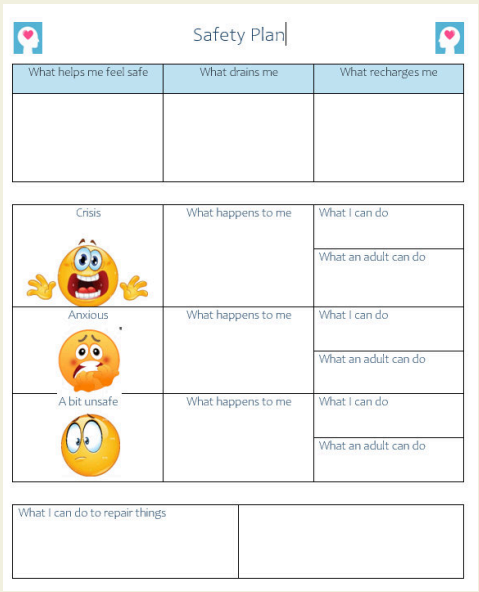
An **individualised movement break** can be used in addition to whole class movement breaks if needed. Create routine cards to enable them to do them independently e.g.





They can do these to one side of the class or cloakroom area where they can be seen by you.

A **safety plan** can be created with the child, when they are calm. You can link it to the Breakwell cycle or 3 point scale. It helps you know how to keep them calm and how to respond when they are feeling distressed.



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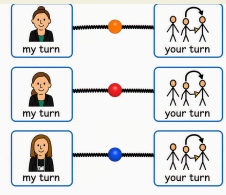
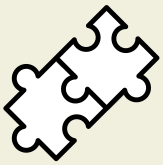
My turn, your turn has been developed by Oaktree Primary School. This can be used in a paired activity, or where a child has to wait their turn for something. The bead is moved to “my turn” when someone is using the equipment/doing an activity, then when they move the bead across to “your turn” the child knows it is their turn then.



Have **continuous provision resources** available. Look at the developmental stage that key children are at. Have some drawers with activities linked to number, English, fine motor skills that they can access independently once they have finished their main task. Use B-squared targets for ideas e.g. ordering numbers; maths jigsaws; letter tracing; magnetic letters; bead threading; peg board patterns

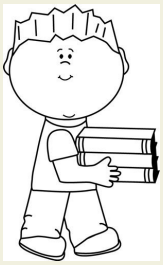




Create **personalised safe spaces** for key children with things that specifically hep them. You could link it to the safety plan. Encourage them to use their safe space when they are calm too so they don’t see it as somewhere they just go when they are upset. this helps it to feel a safe space.



Use **jobs and responsibilities** to raise self esteem of key children and help them to really feel that they belong. It shows them that you trust them and they start to see themselves as the helper/expert.



❤️ **FOR YOU**

🌱 You don’t need to fix everything
🌱 Consistency > perfection
🌱 What you’re doing matters

There is always someone to talk to, you can contact your local Behaviour Partnership, or this website also offers a listening ear www.educationsupport.org.uk/get-help/help-for-you/helpline