

LOOKING GLASS CARE / FREE PRACTICAL GUIDE

EHCP evidence: understanding behaviour and distress

Parents, carers, SENCOs and staff supporting a child who is struggling.

A practical guide to recording context, listening to the child and connecting underlying needs with support. Behaviour alone does not establish a diagnosis or entitlement to an EHCP.



Why this matters to me

As a parent and care professional, I want adults to be curious about what a child is finding difficult. A label in a record should never replace a careful account of what happened, what the child needed and what helped.

How to use this guide

Read the five short lessons, work through the checklist and use the record sheet to choose your next action. Allow around 25-35 minutes plus time for your own review. Keep personal records securely; use anonymised notes for team learning.

This is general educational information for England, checked against the sources listed at the end. It is not an accredited qualification, clinical assessment or individual legal advice.

Learn and apply

1. Describe what happened without judgement

Use observable descriptions: what the child did or said, when, where, for how long and what was happening around them. Avoid labels such as naughty, manipulative or attention-seeking. Record strengths and successful moments as well as difficulties. Persistent disruptive or withdrawn behaviour does not automatically mean a child has SEN; assessment should explore possible causes and unmet needs. Distress can have several explanations, and a record is not a diagnosis.

2. Look for context and the child's perspective

An antecedent-behaviour-consequence record can help organise observations. Note the demand, transition, noise, social interaction, communication difficulty or physical discomfort before the event; record the response and what followed. Ask the child what it felt like in a communication method they can use. Consider pain, tiredness, anxiety, bullying, sensory overload and learning demands without assuming any one explanation. Compare home and education observations with consent and protect sensitive information.

Learn and apply

3. Try supportive changes and evaluate them

Agree a small number of adjustments that respond to the identified difficulty: a visual timetable, reduced verbal load, movement break, predictable transition or quieter work area may help some children. Explain the purpose, who will do it and how you will know whether it helps. These are examples to individualise, not a treatment prescription. Do not use punishment or restriction as a substitute for understanding need. Immediate risk requires the setting's appropriate safeguarding and safety response.

4. Translate evidence into needs and provision

For an EHCP discussion, connect the observation to a possible educational need and the support required. Hypothetical example: a child regularly leaves a noisy group task and can engage in a quieter supported group. Record the context, impact and response; ask for assessment of the relevant communication, sensory or learning needs rather than declaring a diagnosis. Explain the frequency and expertise of support being proposed. A count of incidents without this context may obscure what adults need to change.

Learn and apply

5. Review progress with dignity

Agree an assess-plan-do-review cycle with the SENCO or relevant professional. Include measures such as participation, sense of safety, communication and recovery time, not only fewer visible incidents. A child who becomes silent may still be struggling. Review what helped, what did not and what further assessment is needed. An EHC needs assessment request can proceed where the statutory test may be met; behaviour support should not become an indefinite waiting stage.

Check your understanding

A child has fewer recorded incidents but has stopped joining lessons. Has the support definitely worked?

Suggested answer: No. Review participation, wellbeing and the child's perspective as well as incident counts. A quieter presentation can still hide unmet needs.

Practical review checklist

Mark each item: checked / action needed / not applicable. Note the evidence and reason, rather than treating a tick as proof.

- ☐ Records use factual, respectful language.
- ☐ Successful moments and strengths are included.
- ☐ The child's account is sought accessibly.
- ☐ Context, adult responses and outcomes are recorded.
- ☐ Possible pain, bullying or safeguarding concerns are followed up.
- ☐ Adjustments have an owner, purpose and review date.
- ☐ Evidence links impact to needs and support.
- ☐ Records are shared only with appropriate people.

My next three actions

1. Action: _____

Owner / help needed: _____ Review date: _____

2. Action: _____

Owner / help needed: _____ Review date: _____

3. Action: _____

Owner / help needed: _____ Review date: _____

Your working record

Use a copy for each review, support plan or referral. Keep identifying and sensitive information in your own secure system.

Date, setting and activity

What happened immediately before

Observable action or words

Adult response and what followed

Child's perspective and what helped

Adjustment to review, owner and date

Sources and next steps

Information checked on 18 September 2026. Guidance and local pathways can change; use these primary sources for current detail.

[Department for Education and Department of Health \(2015\). SEND code of practice: 0 to 25 years](#)

[GOV.UK. Special educational needs support](#)

[UK Parliament \(2014\). Children and Families Act, section 36](#)

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