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The Complexity of 'Complex Needs'

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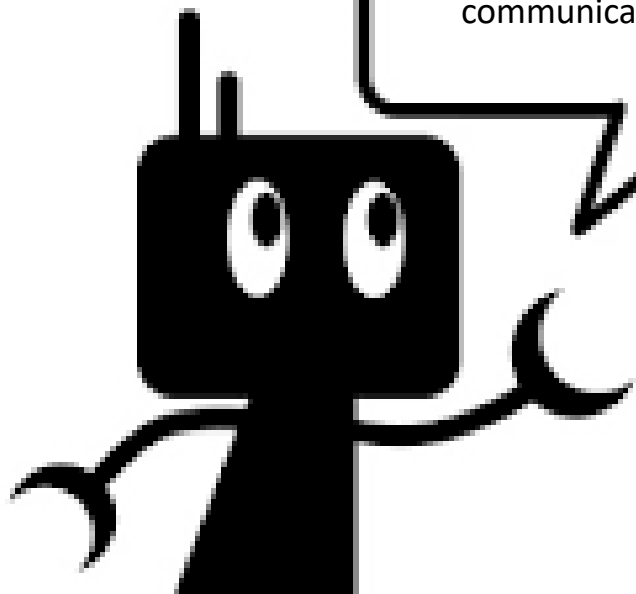


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1. Defining 'complex needs'

“Complex needs refers to children and young people who have multiple, significant disabilities—often combining sensory impairments with additional cognitive, physical, or communication challenges. These needs require coordinated, multi-agency support and often involve specialised skills or technologies to address unique barriers to access and communication.”



2. The interplay of needs

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Sensory impairment as a starting point – impacts how children and young adults access the world and can exacerbate over developmental differences.

Interwoven disabilities – When combined with cognitive or physical disabilities, sensory impairments can create unique challenges.

Impact on learning and development – The combined effect of multiple impairments means that traditional learning and assessment methods may not apply. Children with complex needs require specialised, adapted strategies to engage their cognitive, social, and motor skills.





3. The role of advisory sensory impairment teachers

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Specialised knowledge – Sensory impairment teachers bring expertise in adapting communication, environment, and curriculum to meet sensory needs while addressing additional impairments.

Interdisciplinary collaboration – Effective support relies on collaboration with speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, and family members. The teacher’s role is central but interdependent on a network of other professionals.

Empowering Special Schools - Teachers support special schools by offering guidance on best practices and accommodations that allow for meaningful, accessible learning experiences for these students.



4. Challenges and barriers

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Resource and training needs – Complex needs often require resources—such as assistive technologies or tailored educational materials—that may be costly or require extensive training for staff.

Communication with Families – Families of children with complex needs often navigate a challenging path. The need for sensitive, clear communication about goals, progress, and support options is essential for aligning home and school environments.





5. Innovative approaches and opportunities

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Emerging Technology: Advances in assistive technology, such as AAC devices, accessible software, and adaptive equipment, provide exciting opportunities to better serve children with complex needs.

Professional Development: Continuous training and sharing of best practices among sensory impairment professionals will strengthen the support network for children with complex needs.

Holistic Perspective: Embracing an approach that views the child as a whole person, rather than just addressing one aspect of their needs, allows for a more comprehensive support strategy.



6. Reconsidering the term 'complex needs'

The Problem with “Complex” - The term “complex” can unintentionally reduce children to a set of difficulties or needs that require “solving.” While intended to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of their experiences, “complex” often focuses on what’s challenging rather than celebrating the child’s individuality, strengths, and potential. It risks framing them primarily by their limitations, which can subtly influence how others perceive, interact with, and support them.

The Importance of Person-First Language - Language shapes our approach to support. When we label a child as “complex,” it risks overshadowing their personality, unique talents, and preferences. This can have a subtle but profound effect on how educators, peers, and even family members view and engage with the child, often placing emphasis on managing challenges rather than fostering strengths and interests.

Alternative Terminology: “Diverse Learners with Additional Needs” - Instead of “complex,” terms like “diverse learners with additional needs” or “children with layered support needs” may offer a more inclusive, empowering perspective. This language frames the child’s needs as part of their diverse learning journey, inviting a focus on adaptability, strengths, and unique pathways to learning, rather than solely on their challenges.

Focussing on strengths, not just needs - By shifting our language, we’re also shifting our mindset towards a strengths-based approach. Describing children as “diverse learners” places the emphasis on their unique abilities and potential, encouraging us to see their additional needs as part of a holistic view of their development. This perspective fosters resilience, creativity, and optimism—qualities that are critical both for the child and for those supporting them.





Final thoughts

