

## Checklist for Visiting New Schools

Whether your child is just about to start school or needs to change school for any reason such as when you move home or from primary provision to secondary or even if you are looking for residential school provision it is helpful to be clear exactly what you are looking for and to remember just what you have seen where.

You may be looking at several schools so keeping clear notes of your visits will help you decide what you like best - which one will meet your child's needs. Then when you write to your LEA & Social Services you will have the facts and information ready for them.

The following information & checklists have been put into 3 groups:

1. For an integrated place within a mainstream school.
2. For a special day school (primary or secondary)
3. For residential school provision.

Use the information you need and discard or cross out that which you don't need. Then - sit down and think is there anything else you will be looking for? Have a look at your child's statement of special educational needs! Is something mentioned that you will be particularly looking out for? Is there some aspect that you would particularly like to be in place to better help your child make progress?

DO add your own questions to the lists.

## Inclusive education

This means your child will be in a mainstream school and class fully integrated with all the other children. To ensure that your child gets off to the best possible start plan well ahead with a view to anticipating areas which may cause concern.

The following practical do's and don'ts apply equally to the parents of children transferring from established nursery groups as to those entering a reception class straight from the family or play group.

## **Do:**

Contact the Head early in the term before your child is due to start school. Arrange a visit to speak with the reception teacher, SEN coordinator, welfare and mid-day staff. Have a copy of your child's statement to hand in order to clarify his needs and the support recommended. It may also be helpful ask if they have any experience of or information on Autism/Asperger's and to have an information pack handy to leave with them. Arrange preliminary visits for your child and if possible get permission to take photos of them in various parts of the school/class and teacher / welfare staff to act as a preparation for them prior to starting in the autumn term. Ensure any promised specialist, welfare or auxiliary help has been confirmed by the LEA as well as any recommended travel arrangements.

Establish and use a home school contact book, remember it is possible that your child will not be able to tell you much about their school life. Remember all children need time to settle and get used to a new environment, before making progress and they learn in steps rather than in a progressive curve. Don't fret if progress seems to have come to a halt for a while. Be understanding in your relations with the professional staff. In most schools they all work long hours under considerable pressure.

Ensure that annual reviews are planned for; reports received in advance and be sure to contribute your own written comments well ahead of the date. Ascertain who is the Special Educational Needs Governor.

## **Don't:**

Worry if a spell of intense mothering by the other pupils is followed by a period of isolation for your child. This is a common pattern and tends to even itself out. Assume that specialist help which has been available at an LEA nursery or special school will follow your child to mainstream i.e. Speech Therapy, Physiotherapy, Language Development work.

Check out and follow up very strongly if it is hinted that provision of this sort is only available in special schools, units or LEA Nurseries.

Don't allow your child to be placed in a 'Unit attached to a mainstream school" without checking very carefully on the school's attitude to integration. Often integration is restricted to whole school situations such as assembly or non-core national curriculum subjects like music, PE and Drama.

Don't let anyone 'label' your child. Children without any known disabilities are all different, so why should it be assumed that all children with, for example, Down's Syndrome are all the same?

Don't worry if your child is tired out at the end of the day. All children find full-time schooling an exhausting commitment in their early days and need a drink and snack to relax with on arrival home.

Finally, don't give up if your child hits a difficult patch. Be prepared to talk and to listen. Be prepared to be flexible and open to new approaches. Obtain access to support and help by contacting us at **Autism London** and attend one of our support meetings.

## Special Day School

Accepting the need for special education for your child is not accepting 'the worst'.

All children are different and sometimes it is from being in a completely specialist environment that a child can make their way towards accessing and joining in the wider community.

It is usually best to start with maximum input when the child is young in order to give them a firm basis to build on as they grow rather than when the child is in junior or coming up to secondary school, finding that the gaps in their learning are holding them back and then look for a more specialist school.

### **Do:**

Make sure all the information from specialists (Speech Therapists - Occupational Therapists - Educational Psychologists and Nursery Teaching staff ) has been taken into account - with written evidence from you - in putting together your child's Statement of Special Needs.

This will make clear what needs to be included in their education and may also set out class size level of specialist input as well as tactics and approaches.

Contact Autism London if you are not sure about the process or are not happy with the draft statement.

Find out about the special schools in your area (in and out borough) and if they specialise in teaching children within the Autistic Spectrum or have on going experience of providing a suitable environment for them.

Arrange informal visits to the schools that do have Autistic Specific Classes or experience. Take any written information about your child on this informal visit. If the placement seems appropriate arrange for another visit with your child.

If the school is the one allocated to by the LEA arrange to take your child for a visit and elicit the schools help / advice in arranging a starting date and introduction to the classroom.

### **Don't:**

Accept the first school your LEA suggests without checking it out as above. (It may be the best!)

## Residential Education

### First Steps

Talk through the idea of residential school with all the family; make a list of the needs of all the members and the benefits that could result from the Autistic member moving into a residential setting. Discuss the type of residential provision that would best meet the autistic child's needs and make a note of that and why.

### Possible benefits to the Autistic Student

- Continuity of approach over 24 hours in a consistent environment reduces anxiety, increases familiarity of routine and expectations.
- Reduction of difficult and demanding behaviours re consistency of routine & response.
- Improvement in communication re familiarity and anticipation.
- Improvement in self-care and independence with consistent approach by staff fresh to give attention when and where needed.
- Familiarity with a peer group out of school hours enabling the development of friendships.
- Supported access to appropriate social activities out of school hours.
- Visits from Parents and home visits would be constructive and enjoyable experiences with parents refreshed enough to cope with student's demands for set periods.

### Possible benefits for Siblings

- Increased attention from parents.
- Possibility of bringing friends home.
- Parents able to attend School meetings on their behalf.
- Freedom to get on with homework et without interruption.
- Parents free to support the development of their sporting / social life (clubs etc.)
- Social contact with student in residential provision at set times and for set periods, which can become enjoyable and stress free.

### Possible benefits for Parents

- Both would be able to sleep all through the night and relax with the family in the evening.
- Health would be likely to improve with release from the stress of constantly being alert to and responding to the needs of the autistic child.
- Energy levels would rise enabling them to cope effectively with their Autistic child positively and constructively for short breaks and holiday periods.
- The constant worry of finding appropriate respite to cover weekends and during the long holiday would be alleviated.
- Enjoying contact with their Autistic child on visits to the residential placement and during home visits.
- Having time and energy to provide more support for each other and their other children.

## Type of provision

Weekly - Monday to Friday (3 nights at home - all holidays at home).

Termly - coming home at intermittent periods of 4 to 8 weeks sometimes even 11 weeks for regulation holidays (1 to 6/7 weeks) when the school is shut.

52 weeks - This means that the school is open for 52 weeks in the year – not that the child has to be away all that time. Visits to the child and home breaks are arranged to suit the family and the child. No worries about respite or what to do in the holidays that is all provided for at the continuous 52-week provision.

24-hour consistency - Proper 24-hour continuity of staff and consistency of approach means familiar staff fresh to work at all times of the day or night all following the same tactics with behaviour and communication systems. (Not day staff and evening staff in isolation.) This provides stability for the child and reduces anxiety.

Note - Weekly & Termly both imply that respite provision is either not needed or would be provided separately, which may be best for a very young child but which, for an autistic person can create too many environments and people to be consistent and can therefore be counterproductive and distressing for all.

## What next?

Having got everything clear in their own minds parents need to inform in writing their current school, LEA and Social Services who have to approve the provision and often have to share the costs.

In informing of their need for a change in their child's provision parents will need to ask that the statement is amended accordingly to reflect the change of need and change to recommended provision. It is a good idea to elicit the support of the current school in this process.

**NOTE:** - Parents can also start to look at Schools and provisions at any time informally to gather information for themselves.

Asking Autism London, talking to other parents and looking things up on the Internet or at a library can provide lots of information on schools but it is always best to get the prospectuses of several provisions and go and make an informal visit to look at them.

It is helpful to have a copy of your child's Statement of Special Educational needs with you to show staff at any provisions you like but it is only the LEA & Social Services that can apply for a place and arrange for a formal visit and exchange of papers.

It can take quite a long time to find the right place that also has a vacancy - apart from getting the funding agreed and finally making preparations for the child to move - it can be done in about 4 months but a year or so is more usual but even four years is not unknown!

## The move!

As soon as the placement is agreed then planning for the change is essential. Planning staff visits and integration for the child so that everyone learns how best to settle your child into their new residences and school gives time for all of the family to adjust and prepare for changes.

Making clear with the new provision just how you will be leaving your child with them, who will be there for him, how often and when will you be able to visit.

How can you keep contact with him during the week, who will it be best to talk to about him? Having friends or a friendly teacher to talk to at this time does help parents to prepare for the parting. But, when you have chosen well and are well prepared then all will progress positively.

## Check List

- Name/Address of School:
- Telephone Number:
- Head of School:
- Prospectus received:
- Host on visit:
- Date & time of appointment
- Transport route: Travel Time: Distance:

## Questions to Ask & What to look out for:

- Friendliness and efficiency of welcome:
- Location: town - village - countryside - main road - side road - drive - other
- External space / security:
- Fences - gates - vehicle access - gardens (tidy) - playgrounds - equipment - fields – adventure playground - other
- Buildings: En bloc or separate - offices - class rooms - swimming pool - gym - sports & leisure - soft room - home craft / cookery - other
- Internal Security / Safety: Security system for visitors - for students - unbreakable glass windows - fire procedures – medical provision - other
- Internal space: Classrooms - proximity of toilets - communal arrears - sports hall - dining room - wet play areas - parents or visitors area - other
- Decorative order: Cleanliness - no damage to fixtures & fittings observable - quality of furnishing
- Teaching: Teacher Pupil ratio
- Additional classroom staff
- Number of children in class
- Break time staffing levels
- Lunchtime staffing
- Symbol system in use: Signing system in use
- Computers in class or side room
- One to one area in class
- Classroom activities observed
- Class timetable / structure evident:
- Checklist for Visiting New Schools - Factsheet January 20 06
- Class group teaching: Individual program
- Range of topics taught, Look at work on the walls:
- Evidence and examples of children's' work indicates the ability levels of other children.
- Is a break time structure in place?

## Teacher Qualifications

- On going staff training for all
- S.A.T.S. - do they apply or are they differentiated?

## Support Services

- Behaviour Specialist - Educational or clinical psychologist - Speech & Language Therapist – Music Therapist – other Frequency of contact - external or on site -
- Are the therapeutic tactics incorporated into the classroom approach?

## Behaviour Policy - approach

- How are difficult and challenging behaviours dealt with?
- SCIP (Strategies for Crisis Intervention and Prevention) or other?
- Restraint - policy - system - staff training - Parental involvement?

## Parent's contact

- What are the procedures for communication between the school and parents?
- Is there a dedicated Parent liaison teacher? Is there a Parents Room to drop in and meet with other parents?
- Does the school use a home/school book communication link?
- How is the review of the Statement carried out?
- Frequency of meetings with whom?
- How often are Parents Open Evenings /days?

## Age range of pupils

- Primary to age 12 years - Secondary to age 16 years / 19 years.
- College age 15 to 25 yrs - Further education 16+ /19+

## General observations

- Did you see any teaching; was there a clear structure?
- Were the children happy - involved - supported?
- Were the staff friendly towards each other - to the children?
- Would you feel able to go to the head / staff member with a problem?
- Tap in to your gut feelings on entering the school, what is the atmosphere like?
- Would you like your child to go to this school - why?

## Specific aspect to take note of when visiting a residential establishment

- Weekly Termly 52 week 24 hour curriculum

## Accommodation

- In the same building as the classrooms or in a separate building / house or purpose built residential accommodation
- Single rooms - shared rooms - en suite - Proximity of bathrooms /toilets to bedrooms
- Dinning room / cafeteria
- Sitting room - TV lounge - play room - Toys and activities evident
- Checklist for Visiting New Schools - Factsheet January 20 06

## Homeliness

- Comfort and state of repair of furniture/ fixtures and fittings -
- Security - of windows - doors etc.
- Bedrooms - comfortable - storage - personal items - decorative order

## Staffing

- Are the levels of staffing maintained throughout as during the school day?
- Does the staff shift system take account of the children's needs for continuity in all aspects of learning and what formal hand over procedure for staff changing shifts exists?
- Are the same staff available to work school day shifts alternating with after school shifts?
- Do the staff organise and run leisure activities / clubs / outings in the evenings and at weekends?
- Are care staff able to receive the training open to teaching staff (use of symbols - signs – behavioural tactics)
- Is the child individual program in developing self care, personal hygiene and independence skills followed through over 24 hours as well as Behavioural tactics and communication aids.
- Look at the menu - do they offer a variety of nutritionally balanced foods, can they provide for specific dietary needs?

## Community Contact

- Are local amenities used regularly - swimming pool - shops - clubs - church - other
- Are local people involved in the life of the school?
- Is transport available to take the children out and about?

## Medical cover

- School nurse on site or First aiders?
- Local GP / hospital.
- Policy on medication.

## Parental contact

- Is there parent's accommodation available?
- Is there a key person for the parents to be in regular contact with for information on their child?
- What are the usual visiting and home visit arrangements?
- How is integration and initial separation from parents planned?