

Every child with autism is different, and every school is also different. This information sheet is designed to help you think about whether a school is suitable for your child.

What do you want from your child's education?

- High academic standards or a place where your child will feel secure and happy?
- Are you more concerned with what happens in the classroom or is it the social side of school, like what happens in the playground that is more important to you?
- What kind of support does your child need?
- What are your child's strengths?
- Are you looking for a specialist or inclusive setting?

Think about what you think a good education for your child with autism means and what they need to make progress and fulfil their potential.

Visiting the school

Go with your first impressions. If your instinct tells you that it is not the right place, trust that instinct. You know your child best and if your observations and the answers you get to your questions make you uneasy, maybe this school is not the one that will accommodate your child's needs.

Physical layout

Size and layout matter. If your child has a lot of sensory issues and poor spatial awareness, look for a school building that is not too big and is easy to get around. Be aware of narrow corridors and staircases where they could get jostled. Noisy, open plan classrooms may also not be the best environment for a child with autism. Acoustics, lighting and good ventilation are all important considerations.

Ethos and attitudes

From observing pupils and staff around the school and talking to them, consider what sense you get of the atmosphere in the school.

- Is it friendly, warm and welcoming?
- Are they interested in your child?
- Does the school ethos seem to suggest a rigid approach to children and their education, or is there some flexibility and a sense of doing what they can to value every pupil and draw the best out of them?

It is people that make a school caring, tolerant and understanding. Attitudes are what count in a school that meets the diverse needs of children with autism.

- What attitudes do you see as you move around the school?
- How do the staff speak to the pupils?
- How do the children behave towards staff and amongst themselves?
- Would your child fit in here?
- Are you confident they would feel safe and not be bullied for being 'different'?

Curriculum

Every child has the right to experience a broad and varied curriculum, and you will want to see evidence that what is on offer will maximise your child's potential and motivation. You want to know that they are learning and making progress. Flexibility is the key.

- Ask about what support is available to overcome difficulties.
- Ask how the curriculum is broken down differently for individual pupils, and how the school ensures that it plays to each child's strengths to bolster self-esteem.

Classroom activity

All subjects, teachers and pupils vary, so there is no easy way of determining in a brief walk around the school whether pupils are interested in what they are learning and achieving lesson goals appropriate to their ability. However, it is possible to observe whether classroom activity seems purposeful, whether there is positive relationship between teacher and pupils, and how classroom staff are supporting activities.

Classroom activity

- Do you see a visual timetable on display?
- How do pupils know what they are doing, why they are doing it, how long for and what is happening next?
- Are they expected to follow mainly verbal instructions, or is there evidence of visual support?
- Ask how supply teachers are briefed about the needs of individual children, and what happens when there is a change of timetable.

Getting help

Ask to see the school's SEN policy to find out how arrangements are made to assess the needs of individual children, to provide appropriate support and monitor progress. The policy should cover annual reviews, Individual Education Plans, the role of the SENCO and the school's policy on working in partnership with parents.

Sometimes children with autism need a bit more help in coping with the school environment than other children do. You might want to ask:

- Who can the child go to if they have a problem to share?
- Is there somewhere they can go to retreat to if it all becomes too much in the playground?
- Does the school use a buddy system, where caring pupils 'look after' less socially adept peers?
- Can an anxious, overwhelmed child with autism request 'time out' from the classroom, to calm down and re-focus?
- Are seating arrangements fixed, or is there some flexibility for children to move if they need some time to work independently?
- Can special arrangements be made at exam time, so they do not feel over-anxious?

Making the decision

If a school seems reluctant to accept your child when you have explained their needs, ask yourself if you really want to insist on this placement. Visit several schools, if possible, and compare their facilities and approach. Take your time in making your decision and talk to other parents. What is right for their children may not be right for your child, but it will give you something to think about. In the end you will know which school 'feels' right and meets your child's needs.

Useful resources

A parents and carers guide to finding a school for you child with autism:

https://www.aettraininghubs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/what_to_guide_upload.pdf

Choosing a school with an EHC plan or choosing a school without an EHC plan:

<https://www.ipsea.org.uk/selecting-a-school-or-college>

Your education choices, mainstream or special school.
Education advice on choosing a school

<https://www.autism.org.uk>