

A Parent's Guide to Choosing a Special School

By Dr Linda Mallory

About this guide

Choosing a school for your child is a hugely important process. You know your child better than anyone else: their individual strengths, their unique needs.

The process can be even more complex when choosing a Special School and the journey may seem overwhelming at the start. School Guide works alongside teachers and schools to create a foundation of information that will be a helpful springboard for parents' own research. We have put together this e-guide to highlight important questions that will assist you explore and choose the right setting for your child. We start with general questions that can be applied to any school, including mainstream settings, and move deeper into questions about specialist support and facilities.

We have also created a **Resource** section at the end of the document with links to specialist expert organisations relevant to children with special educational needs.

About the author

Dr Linda Mallory is an educational psychologist, author, parent coach and mother of two boys. Founder of The Why Parent and Positive Psychology for Education, Linda helps parents, carers and teachers nurture a calm, connected and conscious approach to understanding children. She works as a Special Educational Needs Coordinator in Bath and North East Somerset and is SEND advisor to School Guide. Linda is passionate about helping parents find good information to help fulfill their child's potential.

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Visiting a school for the first time

Schools will have Open Days to give parents the opportunity to look around the school, look at the facilities, and talk to pupils and staff. If you cannot make the Open Day or want to arrange an individual or small-group visit, phone the school and ask for an appointment.

Here are some reflective questions to consider when experiencing a school for the first time. Not every area is covered although it is a useful starting point when looking around the school.

General questions ('Starters for ten')

- How happy do the children seem to be and will my child be happy here?
- Do the staff connect well with children and are positive about your child?
- Does the school have a positive, welcoming and inclusive atmosphere?
- Do the staff seem to value each other, children and parents?
- Do your values of your family match the values of the school?
- How would you describe the school in three words?
- How would your child describe the school?

Ideally the Head should be available to answer questions. Head teachers are busy but you can be explicit when you arrange the appointment that you want the chance to meet them during the visit.

First impressions

- What is the first experience of the school? Are the secretaries and office staff helpful? Do you feel welcome or like you are disrupting with the daily routine?
- What is the first impression of the school when you go to visit? Does it look well cared for, warm and welcoming?
- Does someone meet and greet you?
- Are there pictures on the wall, pupils' work, records of achievement or some special events celebrated?
- When you go into the classroom, are you introduced to the teacher and the class? Do you see staff/pupil mutual respect?

Policy and extra-curricular ('The framework for learning')

- What is the behaviour policy? What strategies does the school use to manage challenging behaviour?
- What is the equal opportunities and anti-bullying policy?
- After-school activities. Are there limits for attendance? How inclusive are they? What support can they offer your child?
- Are school meals cooked on site or are they delivered? What about special dietary requirements, gluten free/ diabetic diet? Does your child need feeding through a gastric tube and need support?
- What are the structures in place for parental involvement? Are parents welcomed into school? Is there a Parent Teachers Association? Is there a forum for gathering parental views?
- What is the philosophy of teaching and learning?
- How does the school cater for developing the whole child in terms of their physical, social, emotional, creative and academic needs?

Special School specifics ('Drill into the detail')

- Are there links with other schools particularly mainstream schools? Is the link well established? If no link exists, are there plans to set one up?
- Do any pupils have dual placements, spending part of their time at the special school and part of the time in a mainstream school?
- Are the students engaged in meaningful activities?
- Does the school have Home-School books to pass on information between teachers and parents. Ask the school if you can have a look at a home-school book example. Do the teachers write respectful and meaningful comments?
- What happens at the start of the day. Does the Head / key member of staff greet the children as they arrive? Does the transport arrive on time and deliver the children safely?
- Are the teaching staff trained to administer medicine in an emergency?

Parental engagement (‘Communication, communication, communication’)

- How will the school involve parents in supporting learning?
- How can parents contact individual teachers and learning support staff?
- How does the school involve children in planning their learning and support?
- How does the school involve parents and children in reviewing progress?

School staff

- What training in special educational needs have teachers had?
- Have teachers had experience of your child's special educational needs?
- What training do teaching assistants have?
- Do teachers or teaching assistants withdraw children for some lessons?
- Does the school have experience of teaching other children with similar special educational needs to your child?
- What training have the teachers who would teach your child had in SEN and in your child's difficulties in particular?
- Are they willing to undertake training and understand your child's needs?

Classroom

- How many children would there be in your child's class?
- What curriculum will your child be offered?
- What specific support will your child experience?
- How would your child's progress be monitored?
- If appropriate how is home learning organised?

Specialist support

- How will the Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) be involved in your child's progress?
- Are there any specialist teachers that visit the school?
- Do any speech and language therapists visit the school?
- Is there a school nurse at school?
- Are you able to store and give medication at school?
- What outside agencies visit the school and how often?
- Does the school have regular access to a Speech Therapist?
- Do the physiotherapists and occupational therapists visit regularly?
- How often does the Educational Psychologist visit the school?
- What is the system for referral to outside agencies?

Building and equipment

- Will your child be able to manage moving between classrooms?
- Is the school well equipped? For example, books, computers, gym and sports equipment, play equipment, science laboratories.
- Are all parts of the school and outside space accessible for your child?
- Do you have any specialist equipment e.g. hoists?
- Access to specific experiences such as sensory rooms, hydrotherapy pool, horse riding.
- What soft and hardware, and ICT equipment is available in school?

School policies

- Does the school have an inclusion policy?
- Does the school have an equalities policy?
- Does the school have a behaviour policy?
- Does the school have a medications policy?
- How is bullying managed at school?
- Who is the special educational needs governor?
- Who is the parent governor?
- Who is the chair of governors?

Out-of-school activities

- Are there after-school clubs my child could attend?
- Are there holiday play schemes or study schemes?
- What school trips or outings are arranged?

Special Educational Needs in the mainstream school

If your child is going into mainstream and needs one-to-one support, ask what training is given to the Learning Support Assistant (LSA). Will your child get the same LSA every day or a different one each day? What will happen at lunchtime and playtime? The standard 25 hours one-to-one support may not cover these breaks.

Talk to the school Special Educational Needs Coordinator and find out how many children have statements and how many others have special educational needs. How often do they monitor progress? Ask to see an IEP (Individual Education Plan) and that will give you an idea of how the school sets targets, monitors and makes changes to the plan if it does not work.

If your child is likely to take part in other activities such as sports and swimming and needs support, check with the school who will go with the child, the teaching assistant or someone else?

If your child has speech and language difficulties ask what method will the school use for communication such as Makaton or PECS? Do they have access to any computer assisted communication tools?

Special Units within mainstream schools

Units within mainstream schools can offer specialist support and often take children with a statement for a particular learning need.

Children receive specialist support for their learning difficulty in the unit and may experience some classes with mainstream pupils. It all depends on the individual unit so it is useful to compare how your child would be helped in a unit compared to a classroom in a mainstream or within a special school.

Questions to ask about Special Units

- How many pupils would there be in your child's teaching group?
- How are pupils selected for the unit? Do they have a statement, for example?
- Do pupils ever progress from the unit to mainstream classes?
- Is the unit part of the school or very separate? How much time would your child spend in mainstream classes and the playground and how would they be supported there?
- For secondary school pupils are pupils in the unit able to take the full range of public examinations?
- The main question to ask is what would a day look like for your child in the unit and the school?

Summary

Your own instincts can be a very good guide as to whether you feel the school can offer a safe and enjoyable experience for your child. Ultimately are the children happy? Do the school staff connect with the children? Do they seem genuinely caring and interested?

When you visit the school you may find that you know more about your child's specific needs than some of the staff. If the school treats you as the expert on your child and actively listens and responds to your questions, then this is a good indicator that the school will work hard to make your child's school experience enjoyable and successful.

Schools have a responsibility to make reasonable adjustments for children with special educational needs. If it feels that the school is not supporting you and your child to be part of your local community school, you may think about seeking advice from the Local Education Authority and the Parent Partnership Service (see Resources, below).

Following your visit, you will need some time to think about all the information you now have before coming to a decision about whether the school will meet your child's needs. Making a second visit with your child may help to understand if the school feels a good match. Talking it through with friends, family and other parents of children with special educational needs will help you reflect on whether the school will be the best educational experience for your child and family.

Resources

Overview of Special Educational Needs

Overview:

<https://www.gov.uk/children-with-special-educational-needs/overview>

Special Educational Needs regarding Personal Budgets Regulations 2014:
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukdsi/2014/9780111114056>

Special Educational Needs and Disability Regulations 2014:
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2014/1530/contents/made>

Children and Families Act 2014:

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/6/contents/enacted>

Pathfinder information packs: <http://www.sendpathfinder.co.uk/infopacks>

General support

National Parent Partnership Network – guidance on impartial information, advice and support: <http://www.iassnetwork.org.uk>

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS):

<http://www.nhs.uk/chq/Pages/1082.aspx?CategoryID=68>

National Network of Parent Carer Forums: www.nnpccf.org.uk

<http://www.nasen.org.uk>

<http://www.cafamily.org.uk>

<http://www.specialneedsuk.org>

<http://www.sossen.org.uk>

http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/parents/identifying_sen/

Specific needs

Achievement for All: www.afa3as.org.uk

Global Developmental Delay: <https://www.mencap.org.uk/node/16043>

Dyslexia and Dyscalculia: <http://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk>

Dyslexia SpLD Trust: www.thedyslexia-spldtrust.org.uk

Dyslexia support: <http://dyslexia-help.org>

Autism / Social Communication Needs: <http://www.autism.org.uk>

Autism Education Trust: www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk

Pervasive Developmental Disorder:

<http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/pdd/pdd.htm>

Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder: <http://www.addiss.co.uk>

Emotional and Behaviour Needs:

http://www.youngminds.org.uk/training_services/young_minds_in_schools/sen/assessing_besds

Mental Health and Behaviour Guidance:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/mental-health-and-behaviour-in-schools--2>

MindEd: www.minded.org.uk

Speech and Language: <http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk>

<http://www.ican.org.uk>

<http://www.afasic.org.uk>

www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk

Deaf Association: <http://bda.org.uk>

Blind Institute: <http://www.rnib.org.uk>

National Sensory Impairment Partnership: www.natsip.org.uk

Supporting pupils at school with medical conditions:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-pupils-at-school-with-medical-conditions>

Tourettes: <http://www.tourettes-action.org.uk>

Bullying guidance:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preventing-and-tackling-bullying>

Exclusions guidance (DfE):

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-exclusion>

Resolution

First-tier Tribunal (Special Educational Needs and Disability):

<http://www.justice.gov.uk/tribunals/send/appeals>

Tribunal Procedure Rules 2008: <http://www.justice.gov.uk/tribunals/rules>
