

CHOOSING A SCHOOL

This fact sheet has been written by parent carers for parent carers



Deciding which school will be best for your child is a tough decision for any parent, but especially so when your child has additional needs. This fact sheet explains the different types of schools for children with special educational needs and disabilities and gives tips on how to make the best choice for your child.

Do you get to choose?

Though we talk about 'choosing' a school, in reality this means saying which school you'd prefer your child to go to at primary, junior or secondary stage – and there's no guarantee you will get your first choice. There are local rules that are used to decide who gets places at each school and your local authority will publish details of how this works in your area.

You may be able to argue that your child's additional needs mean that they should get priority for a place at your chosen school. If so, you will need to provide strong reasons why on your admissions form and get a professional to back up your argument, such as your GP or your child's therapist.

If your child has an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHC Plan) or a Statement of SEN, you will be able to name your preferred school or type of school on the proposed plan and the local authority has to agree to this, as long as it's a local state school (mainstream or special). They can only disagree if the school is unsuitable for your child, if it would prevent the efficient education of other children in the school or it would not be a good use of their resources. Though you can choose any local state school, be aware that the local authority may refuse to help with transport if they consider there's an equally suitable school that's nearer to your house. As your child moves from primary to secondary the EHC Plan will be amended and you will get to name a preferred school again.

If your child has an EHC Plan or is being assessed for one, remember to send back the normal admissions form too. Things may not work out as you expect and you need to make sure your child doesn't miss the chance of a place at the mainstream school you would have chosen.

What kind of school might your child go to?

Mainstream: Most children with special educational needs, even those with an EHC Plan or Statement, go to a mainstream school. These are local maintained primary and secondary community schools or church-aided schools (including academies and free schools) and they get funds to enable them to support children with additional needs. All children have a right to be educated in a mainstream school and, if this is your preference for your child, the school and/or local authority have to put together a package of support to make this possible. If your child has more complex needs, be aware that you may have to negotiate hard to get the support package you need in a mainstream school.

Special units and facilities: Some mainstream schools have special units attached that cater for children with particular types of need, such as autism or hearing impairments. These units give children a chance to spend some time in a mainstream setting, but also to get specialist teaching. Children need an EHC Plan or Statement to be considered for a place in one of these units.

Special schools: These are state schools for children with more complex needs that can't be met in a



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mainstream school. Children need an EHC Plan or Statement to be considered for a place. Check your council's Local Offer to find out about special schools in your area. Often children in special schools will also spend some time included in a mainstream school too.

Non-maintained special schools: These are special schools (local or further afield) run privately or by charities, some of which are residential. A small number of children may go to one of these, where it has been shown that no local school can meet their needs.

Schools can't refuse to take your child just because they have special educational needs (this includes academies and free schools), unless they can show it would have a negative effect on other pupils and there is no reasonable way they could avoid this. The Equality Act applies to schools and admissions. Seek advice from your local Information, Advice and Support Service (see below) if you think your child is being discriminated against because of their disability.

How to choose a school

Start early, six months or a year before you need to apply. Think first about your child's needs and what matters most to you about a school.

Ask around. Other parents' views and experiences are valuable. But remember that reputations can soon get out of date and what suits someone else's child may not suit yours.

Collect information. Your council's Local Offer is a good place to start and you should ask for your school's prospectus or visit their website. You can look at each school's OFSTED inspection report (ask the school or use the website www.ofsted.gov.uk). But don't just judge a school by its league table position or building. Smart buildings don't guarantee good teaching and schools lower down the league tables may be skilled at managing behaviour and a range of special educational needs.

Arrange to visit your shortlist of schools. You may need to visit twice; once for a general look and a second time to meet the head teacher or special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) to talk about your child's particular needs and how the school can meet them. You'll need to think about whether to take your child with you. It is useful to take another adult with you too as you won't remember everything.

Tips for visiting schools

Use your eyes and ears as you walk round. Does the school feel welcoming? Do the children seem cheerful, busy and interested? And do the staff? Think about how noisy, crowded, orderly or lively it seems and what this would mean for your child. Are you encouraged to see the whole school? Check the classrooms and think about how they are organised. Is the school well supplied with resources and equipment? Look at the notice boards. Is work by children of all abilities on display? Make sure you get a look at the playground during a break time. Try to observe how the staff speak to the children. What is the head teacher like? He or she is crucial to how the school runs and how happy and supported both pupils and staff feel. Look out for the things that matter to you and your child whether that's lots of computers, great football coaching or an emphasis on giving pupils real responsibility.

Ask questions. You want to find out practical details, like class sizes and arrangements for extra support. But even more important is the school's attitude to children with special needs. Do they look for problems or solutions? Do they see meeting special educational needs as a chore or as a benefit to the whole school? Some things you might want to ask are:

- What is the staff's experience and understanding of my child's needs?
- Has the school had a child before with my child's needs?



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- Do any of the staff have specialist training?
- What strategies and resources would be used to help my child?
- Where would the school turn to for specialist advice and support?
- How do they deal with difficult behaviour?
- How would they support my child outside lesson time?
- How do they help children mix and make friends?
- How do they deal with bullying?
- How would they meet my child's medical or personal care needs?
- How do they consult and communicate with parents?
- What out of school activities are there and can all children take part?

If it is a special school or unit you might also ask:

- What range of disability does the school cater for?
- What therapies are available?
- What subjects will my child be able to study?
- Would they get some qualifications?
- Will they get help with personal and life skills?
- What inclusion experiences does the school offer?
- Is there an appropriate group of children in the school for my child to learn with and find friends?

After the visit, take time to reflect. Try to imagine your child in that school. Does that feel OK? Trust your instincts on this. Discuss your thoughts and feelings with someone you trust. You may want to think about your ideal choice and a 'fall back' position that you are still happy to accept.

What if you don't get offered the school you want?

If you are really unhappy, you can try an appeal. If you applied through the normal admissions process, you appeal to the local admissions panel. If your child has an EHC Plan or Statement and you disagree with the school named in the final Plan/Statement, you can appeal to the SEN Tribunal. But start by speaking to the local authority officer involved in your child's EHC Plan/Statement to see if you can negotiate a solution.

Ask about

- **Independent Support: Amaze's Independent Supporters** provide extra advice and support to young people and parent carers who are going through the process of getting an EHC Plan in Brighton and Hove and East and West Sussex. For **Brighton and Hove Independent Support**, call 01273 772289. For **Sussex Independent Support**, call 0300 123 7782.
- **West Sussex Information, Advice and Support Service (IASS)** – contact them for impartial information, advice and support. They also have Young People Advisers, who can support young people up to the age of 25 to help them to think through their options. Call: 0330 222 8555, or email: send.ias@westsussex.gov.uk (parent carers) or: cyp.sendias@westsussex.gov.uk (children and young people).



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Further reading and useful links

- **Making Sense of it All** and **Making Sense of Adult Life (14+)** – Reaching Families' handbooks for parent carers of children and young people with SEND in West Sussex provide essential information on education, social lives, money matters, social care, health, employment and much more. Go to: www.reachingfamilies.org.uk.
- **Fact Sheets** – for further information, see our Amaze/Reaching Families fact sheet, Starting Secondary School about the transition from primary to secondary school. It's available to download at: www.reachingfamilies.org.uk/factsheets.htm.
- **Mencap** – for information on choosing a school for children with SEN go to: www.mencap.org.uk/about-learning-disability/education-and-special-educational-needs-sen/choosing-school.
- **School Admissions team** – there are two offices serving West Sussex; Horsham for the north of the county (tel: 0333 014 2903, email: admissions.north@westsussex.gov.uk) and Worthing for the south (tel: 0333 014 2903 or email: admissions.south@westsussex.gov.uk).
- **West Sussex Local Offer** – go to <https://westsussex.local-offer.org>.

