

STARTING SECONDARY SCHOOL

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



The move to secondary school brings new opportunities but can often feel daunting for both parents and children. Our companion fact sheet *Choosing a school* deals with the process of choosing the best school for your child. This fact sheet gives practical advice on how to make that transition to their next school as smooth as possible.

Think positive

Be as positive as you can about your child's move to secondary school. If you are anxious it can rub off on them. Some people say, "I can't see him coping in a big school..." but nearly all children cope and most flourish. In fact, things may be better at secondary than primary for some children. Big schools bring new opportunities. More teachers and more subjects mean new chances to find someone or something you like. There will be new people, activities and clubs and your child may enjoy feeling more grown up and independent. All local schools have experience of supporting a range of children with special needs. They may not always get it right but most things are fixable.

Make a list with your child of the things they are looking forward to about the new school. This will help both of you to feel excitement as well as nerves.

Make sure some things in your child's life stay the same like an activity or group they already enjoy and keeping in touch with old friends.

Use their last term at primary to prepare

Find out as much as you can about their new school. Does anyone you know already have a child at the school? If so ask them for more information. Ask for copies of the timetable and ask how it works. Get copies of the lunch menu. What clubs and activities do they normally run? Can you find out the names of their teachers or form teachers?

Meet the special needs team before the end of term. Write down what they should know about your child (strengths, interests, medical information, other professionals involved, what's worked for them in the past). Take a list of questions and check the arrangements for your child's support.

Arrange extra settling visits if necessary. Typically a teacher from the secondary school visits the primary to meet and find out about the children, some paperwork is sent on and the children make a visit or two. If this isn't enough for your child, you could arrange extra visits. This will help them to learn the layout.

Deal with your child's worries

Find subtle ways of checking what (if anything) your child is worried about and try to deal with these worries beforehand. These are some typical worries that they may have:

- **There'll be lots of new people and will I make friends?** Let your child know that everyone will feel like this. Try to meet up over the summer with at least one other child going to their school. Help them choose a club or activity they could join at the new school and make sure they do this. It's a good way to find children they have something in common with.



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- **Will I get lost?** Remind them that they will usually be going with a group and can follow others till they learn the way. If you know they will find it hard, arrange an extra walk around the school with them before the end of the summer term.
- **Will I be able to keep up with the work?** Talk about how they have managed before. Point out that they will have new subjects but that doesn't mean the work will be any harder than in Year 6. Encourage them to ask for help when they need it and make sure they know who to ask.
- **Will there be lots of homework?** Most schools ease children into homework gradually. They will usually be given a homework diary to fill in during class when homework is set and many schools now also have online portals where you and your child can check what homework needs to be done and when. Ask the schools about this beforehand so you can see how it works. You could also plan to find someone else in their group they can ring to ask if they haven't managed to get it all written down in class. Plan where and when they will do their homework. A clear space and the right equipment will help.
- **Will I get bullied?** Most children don't of course, but talk about what to do if it does happen. Our companion fact sheet on bullying has more advice on this and see the 'Ask about' section below for helpful resources or organisations.

Use the summer holidays well

Buy the uniform early. Get your child to try it on. Check for things that need practice like buttons or a tie. If your child has sensory issues they may be more comfortable if you wash it and sort out scratchy labels. Get their school shoes in time to wear them and get them comfortable.

Make sure they have all the equipment they will need - a big enough bag, all the right PE kit, stationery and other equipment. Involve your child in this so they feel things are ready.

Casually mention things like how the day will be different at the new school. Give your child opportunities to talk or ask questions but don't force it. For some children it will help to look at pictures or rehearse how things will work. Maybe look at the school website together. Use the strategies that have helped in the past like visual timetables or social stories.

Practice the journey to school as often as you need to, including getting them to do it alone with you shadowing at a distance if they will be travelling independently.

Make sure you and they know the system for school dinners and when they can use the loo.

Get into the right routine in plenty of time so they won't be overtired during their first week.

The first few days

Pack a transitional object - having something they can carry around at school that is a link with home helps some children. It needs to be something discreet that they can tuck in a pocket or bag. Choose it together beforehand and talk about how they can use it.

Be ready for your child to be tired, grumpy or emotional. They are coping with lots of new things and new people so keep home safe and predictable. Allow some childish or clingy behaviour.

Get a copy of their timetable before they lose it. Stick it up on the fridge or somewhere obvious and use it to work out with them what they need each day. Get things ready the night before.

Help them get into a good homework routine from the start.

Allow time to unwind - sensible bed times and good food all help too and, for some children, a chance to let off steam with physical activity.



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Plan something nice with them to do on the first weekend after they start.

Keep an eye on how they seem to be coping. Be available to talk. Ask interested questions but don't turn it into an interrogation. Listen at a time and place that suits them. If they do express anxieties try to help them problem solve rather than jumping in with answers. They will know they are at big school now and may want a chance to sort things out without your help.

Look after yourself so you can support your child. It will help your peace of mind to be clear about factual information, your child's rights and so on. Get the contact arrangements with the new school clear as it will not be so easy to pop in as at primary school. Email is often a good way to communicate with secondary school staff if you can use this.

Make sure you have someone you can talk to about your concerns. We all have worries and if we don't want them to rub off on our children it helps to talk them over with someone else.

Ask about

- **Action Against Bullying Support Line (WSCC)** – run by West Sussex County Council, tel: 0333 014 2904.
- **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 Sussex Independent Support, call **0300 123 7782** or email: independentsupportWSx@amazebrighton.org.uk.
- **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).
- **Settling in procedures** – different schools offer different activities and events to prepare their new students. Find out what they offer and speak to the SENCO at the new school if you think your child might need more support in order to be well prepared.
- **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).

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 companion fact sheets, *Choosing a School* and *Bullying*, which you can download at: www.reachingfamilies.org.uk/factsheets.htm.
- **Anti-Bullying Alliance** – has a Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Information Hub with a range of resources. Does not get involved in individual cases but can signpost to other support. Go to: www.anti-bullyingalliance.org.uk or email: aba@ncb.org.uk
- **Contact a Family** – has specialist education helpline advisers. Call **0808 808 3555**.
- **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.
- **West Sussex Local Offer** – go to <https://westsussex.local-offer.org>.

