

Enquire within

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THE NEWSLETTER BULLETIN OF ENQUIRE, THE NATIONAL INFORMATION AND ADVICE SERVICE FOR SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

This bulletin provides early feedback from enquiries received by the Enquire information team since its launch on 1 November 1999. Enquire staff have dealt with over 350 callers during this time. More than 70% of callers are parents, whilst approximately 15% were professionals.

Dealing with special educational needs enquiries

Nature of enquiries

Questions related to the opening of a Record of Needs were the most common enquiry, with approximately 40% of enquiries from parents containing questions or concerns about the Record of Needs process. This is not surprising, given that parents are required by law to be involved in the Recording process which can be complex and time consuming.

Almost a third of parents call to obtain more information at the stage of identification of special educational needs. In these situations, parents are generally concerned about their child's educational progress. They may see their child falling behind others, or have received a medical diagnosis that has not yet been taken account of by the education service. Often they ask how they can find out if their child has special educational needs that require specific intervention.

Another common enquiry is the type of educational placement suitable for a child to attend. This is a difficult area, as recommendations about placements require professional judgements - the chosen nursery or school must be able to cater for the child's specific needs. Many parents reported difficulties obtaining information about what placements may be suitable for their child. Staff at Enquire - in



line with national policy - feel it is appropriate to give families information about the schools available which could possibly cater for their child's particular needs.

Difficult issues

In approximately 40% of parental enquiries, there was evidence of poor relationships with professionals, with a similar percentage expressing concerns over the quality of services provided for their child. Over one in ten parents had considered, or were planning, to make an appeal. One in five had, were considering, or were involved in making a formal complaint. Many of these parents reported feeling unsupported, not taken seriously or 'spoken down to' by staff, and were frequently frustrated at their inability to work in partnership with such professionals.

Children
IN SCOTLAND
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SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE

continued overleaf

E-mail: Enquire.SENinfo@childreninscotland.org.uk
Internet: <http://www.childreninscotland.org.uk>

Or write to: Enquire, Children in Scotland, Princes House, 5 Shandwick Place, Edinburgh EH2 4RG.

Forthcoming events

The Childcare Strategy: meeting the childcare challenge for children with special needs

3 May 2000, Stirling

This one day conference aims to

- explore ways in which Childcare Partnerships can meet the childcare challenge for children with special needs and/or disabilities;
- examine the contribution of recent Government initiatives to promoting inclusive provision;
- consider examples of good practice in relation to providing inclusive education and pre-school education.

Speakers include Roma Menlowe and Jane Morgan, Scottish Executive; Alan Miller, Scottish Centre for Human Rights and Zoë Dunhill, Edinburgh Sick Kids NHS Trust.

Therapeutic play with children with disabilities

1 June 2000, Glasgow

This experiential workshop will explore the difficulties children with disabilities have in playing, and ways of developing effective approaches to facilitate play.

For information on both events contact Steve Jackson, Children in Scotland on 0131 222 2405.

Planning is also underway for Enquire's first **national conference**, to be held in late summer 2000. The conference is likely to focus on issues of good practice. For further details contact Julia Wilson, Enquire's training and development officer on 0131 222 2424.

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Parents commonly reported feeling isolated in their situation. Many of these, even if in touch with local support groups or perfectly articulate and able to represent their views, felt alone and/or exhausted through their attempts to participate effectively in their child's education. In Scotland there are very few active Named Persons and services that can assist children or parents to put forward their views or prepare for meetings. There are, though, some service providers eg. voluntary sector organisations, who employ staff to offer this role.

Approximately one in three enquiries raised by parents contained an element of emotional, motivational or behavioural difficulties on the part of the child – despite these not being the primary disability. For instance, self-esteem could be adversely affected if attainment was poor; or a child may refuse to attend school if involved in bullying as a result of their special needs. Further, a concerning one in ten parental enquiries related to the exclusion of a child, most of whom had recognised special needs or behaviour difficulties.

Professional enquiries

Approximately one in six of the enquiries received were from professionals. These ranged from press enquiries about the service, to politicians or professionals acting on behalf of a family and/or asking specific enquiries about legislation or procedures surrounding SEN provision. Generally, these enquiries were far quicker to deal with than those from parents. This reflects, in part, the degree of active listening required, and level of information to be imparted, when working with parents.

Summary

The enquiries we have received so far have been interesting and challenging. Many have been of a complex nature – often there are no easy answers. A number of parents are already using the service regularly to obtain information as and when they need it. They report finding the service invaluable. We will shortly be sending a questionnaire to users of the helpline to find out more about their views of the service.

PUBLICATIONS

Coming soon!

Children in Scotland and the Scottish Executive Education Department have prepared The parents' guide to special educational needs to provide parents of children with special educational needs with practical information about the education system. Information covered in the guide includes: support for your child at different educational stages; your rights and responsibilities as a parent; how to choose a school; the roles of professionals; how your child's educational needs will be assessed and an explanation of the terms used by teachers and other professionals.

The guide will be sent to all schools, local authorities and health boards in Scotland, and will be available to all parents of a child with special educational needs. If you are a parent and would like a copy of the guide contact Enquire's Administrative Assistant on 0131 222 2425.

Record of needs

Advice and information on the Record of needs process, including when and how one is opened, assessments undertaken and appeals procedures. Free. (Factsheet no. 1, 1999)

Individualised educational programmes (IEPs)

Outlines what an IEP is, when and how they are opened, and ways they can help children with special educational needs progress and develop. Free. (Factsheet no. 2, 2000)

Your future needs assessment

Booklet for young people on how to become more involved in the Future Needs Assessment. £2.95 + 50p p&p (Children in Scotland, 1997)

To obtain these, or to add your name to the mailing list contact: Administrative Assistant, Enquire, Children in Scotland, Princes House, 5 Shandwick Place, Edinburgh. Tel: 0131 222 2425. Please make cheques made payable to 'Children in Scotland'. Sorry we are unable to invoices for orders under £10.

Good practice in minimising conflict in SEN

By Morag Steven, Local Mediation Project Officer, Enquire

Mediation can be defined broadly as a means of assisting people to negotiate to resolve conflicts. An independent mediator brings those in dispute together and helps them to work out their own negotiated solution. The skill of the mediator is to facilitate communication between the people in dispute. Most importantly, it is not the mediator who decides the outcome of any dispute; the mediator is a neutral third party whose role is to guide the people involved in the dispute towards their own solution.

Currently there is considerable potential for mediation to be used in the area of special educational needs throughout Scotland. Mediation can promote a non-confrontational way of resolving disagreements, and foster better communication between parents and education authorities. This, for instance could work well with regard to provision for children with special educational needs.

From the parents' point of view mediation is voluntary, independent, cost-free and confidential. Mediation should also be an attractive option for local authorities, as it has proved elsewhere to be a cost effective and efficient way of resolving disagreements and conflict.

One strand of Enquire's work will be the development of pilot mediation projects in a minimum of four Scottish local authorities. The schemes will offer a new alternative recourse to redress for those involved in determining special educational needs provision. They will operate alongside existing mechanisms such as appeals and complaints procedures and advocacy and support services.

At present, in Scotland, mediation is used as an alternative method of conflict resolution in numerous areas, including neighbourhood disputes, legal and commercial disputes, separation and divorce etc. However, Enquire's projects will be the first of their kind to address disputes in the area of special educational needs.

Many states in America have developed their own special education mediation services since the 1980s, including Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Oregon. Initially, services were operated in a small number of states, on a pilot basis. However, SEN mediation proved so effective that it has now been incorporated within the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA). IDEA rules that states are legally required to provide mediation, and families intending to go to a 'due process hearing' (similar to our Appeals Procedure) must consider using mediation first.



Some examples of special education issues resolved by mediation in the USA include:

- disputes regarding the provision of specialist services such as speech and language therapy;
- conflicts regarding the renewal of services;
- disagreements over the content of Individual Educational Programmes.

Enquire aims to set up local mediation projects, to be piloted for one year in the first instance. Visits to interested local authorities are currently being made, and thereafter we hope to be able to announce in which authorities we will begin developing projects. Enquire will be contributing a range of services to the schemes, including training and support for volunteer mediators, access to specialist resources, national co-ordination to allow transfer of knowledge, monitoring and evaluation involving feedback to schemes to promote continuous improvement, and national dissemination of findings.

Our vision is that the pilot mediation projects will complement the existing range of local support networks, and be a welcome new addition to methods of conflict resolution in the field of special educational needs. It is very exciting to be involved with this project from the very beginning, and to see how mediation will work in practice.

Resolving disagreements: a case study of a 'typical' enquiry

This case is fictional but reflects key elements of cases commonly dealt with by Enquire helpline staff.

Child name: Joe • Age: 9 • Placement type: mainstream school • Person calling: mother

Issue: Joe's mother is concerned that Joe is falling significantly behind in class, and does not seem to be getting the input he needs. Eighteen months ago an educational psychologist identified specific learning difficulties, and learning support was put in place. However, he only receives an hour a week in a group setting, and she doesn't feel this is sufficient; whilst initial progress was made, he is falling further behind over time. The class teacher feels that no more can be done due to the school's limited resources. The caller wants to know how to get more help for Joe, and is annoyed with the teacher for dismissing her concerns.

Enquire assessment and follow-up: this case is at the early stages of disagreement. With appropriate information and support to the parent and a constructive response from the school and/or education authority, the situation can be resolved before escalating further. It sounds as if there is no Record of Needs or Individualised Educational Programme (IEP) in place. While the former may not be appropriate, the latter almost certainly would be; the existence of both should be checked by Joe's mother, as they could result in different courses of action. It is also worth exploring the recommendations for supportive provision made by the educational psychologist when difficulties were first identified, and whether all these were implemented. The caller sounds quite isolated and uninformed about the education system - there may be a need to establish support.

Enquire response:

- establish with Joe's mother if he has a Record of Needs or not (she would know this), and whether he has an Individualised Educational Programme (she should know this, but it is possible she may not);
- if Joe has a Record that has not been reviewed in the last year, his mother should be advised to write to the educational psychologist and to the Head Teacher of Joe's school. A letter expressing concern about Joe's progress, and asking for a review of the Record should be sent to both people. A Review would automatically involve her, the psychologist, the Head Teacher and any other key people in discussing Joe's progress and planning what more can be done to help him.
- if Joe does not have a Record, establish if Joe's mother knows whether he has an IEP or not. She could ask that he have an IEP (if he hasn't already) or that it be reviewed (if he has). Joe's mother would be advised to write to the Head Teacher expressing her worries. She could also request a meeting with the Head Teacher and/or class and learning support teacher to discuss what the education authority and school planned to do, and how she herself could help Joe. This would make it clear she expected something to be done.
- Joe's mother would be advised by Enquire that she could take a friend or relative with her to give her confidence and support during any meeting, and that she might find it helpful, before she goes, to write down anything she wants to raise.
- Enquire would also ask if Joe's mother wanted contact with a local support group, resource or advocacy service;
- finally, it would be suggested to the mother to call Enquire back if there was no satisfactory response after the above steps.

Reflection on call: it is difficult to know whether these suggestions will be put into action or, having done so, whether it will make a difference to Joe's education - we will shortly be sending a questionnaire to callers to identify what strategies they found useful in resolving their situation. In our experience, many parents just value having the opportunity to spend time talking about their situation and discussing ideas with a supportive person. Some factors to consider when working with parents:

- parents are emotionally involved, and find it difficult to divorce themselves from their feelings;
- parents may feel extremely tired which may affect their ability to contribute, especially if their child does not sleep well or they have many caring duties;
- parents often do not have good access to information showing what they can reasonably expect to be provided, and within what time-scales;
- some parents may wish to have an advocate assist them eg. in meetings;
- some parents may disagree with what is being suggested - this is their right;
- parents should be given timely access to reports etc. to help them participate effectively - along with help in understanding the information contained within them, especially if there are many educational, medical or psychological terms;
- some families may need practical support to assist them contribute eg. with child care or travel arrangements.