

Choosing a school

Enquire factsheet 3

If you have a child with additional support needs, you may want extra information and help in choosing a suitable school. You may be involved at transition times in making decisions about the school which would best meet your child's needs. Transition times are when your child moves from nursery to primary school, from primary to secondary, and finally, leaves school. Your child might also need to move schools if you move home, particularly to another local authority area. This factsheet provides practical information to help you choose the most appropriate school for your child.

It is good practice for the education authority to ask you to be part of the planning process, and to take your views into account during transition times. It would also be good practice for the authority to ask your child for their views and to take these into account when thinking about a change in school education. If your child lacks capacity to express a view, you can speak on behalf of your child. The phrase "lacks capacity" means that they are unable to understand decisions or what different choices might mean to them.

Children with additional support needs are taught in many different settings. These include:

- mainstream schools (ordinary schools which cater for children in a local area)

- mainstream schools with special units or learning bases/centres
- special schools
- split placement – attendance at both a mainstream school and a special school, each for part of the week
- independent residential special schools
- grant-aided schools
- home or hospital based education.

More information can be found in the 'Choosing where your child will be educated' section of **The parents' guide to additional support for learning**.

Placing requests

If you wish your child to attend a school other than your local mainstream school and you are not able to agree the choice of school with your education authority, then you can make a placing request. More information can be found in **Enquire factsheet 4: Placing requests**.

Points to consider

Choosing a school for your child can seem like a difficult decision. It is important to take time to think about all the available options. You may wish to talk about the options with staff currently involved in supporting your child.

Enquire is the Scottish advice service for additional support for learning. We provide independent and impartial advice to parents and carers, to practitioners in education, social work and health services, and to children and young people themselves.

Factsheets on other topics are available.

It is important you feel confident that your child will be going to a school that is able to meet their needs, and where you can discuss their progress with school staff. It is very important that your child will be happy at the chosen school.

Your child may have their own preferred choice of school. It is important that your child feels included in the decision process and goes with you on school visits where possible.

You might find it helpful to talk to other parents of children with additional support needs. However, every child is different, and the best choice of school for one child might not be the best for another.

Attendance at a special unit or learning base attached to a mainstream school or split placement may appear to offer the best of both worlds, with benefits attached to both special and mainstream schools. However, it is worth taking time to make sure that these options would be in your child's best interests. For example, it is a good idea to find out exactly how much time your child will spend in the special unit away from a mainstream class. This can vary a lot depending on the individual school and education authority policy. Also, a split placement may be difficult for some children who find it hard adjusting to change and meeting different people.

A range of specialist resources may be provided by different agencies if your child has particular needs, such as visual or hearing impairments. These services can supplement the provision your child receives at school.

It is also important to remember that educational provision does not remain the same all the time. Regular reviews of your child's progress will take place and, if necessary, changes and adjustments can be made to better meet your child's needs.

The changing role of special schools

Wherever possible children with additional support needs are educated in their local mainstream school. The Standards in Scotland's Schools etc Act 2000 put a duty on local authorities to provide education for all children and young people in mainstream schools. This is known as the 'presumption of mainstream.'

However, if particular circumstances apply, education could be provided in a special school. These circumstances are:

- where a mainstream school would not be suited to the ability or aptitude of the child
- where provision of education to the child in a mainstream school would be incompatible with the provision of efficient education to those with whom the child would be educated
- where the placing of the child in a mainstream school would result in unreasonable expenditure being incurred that would not ordinarily be incurred.

If the circumstances do apply an authority can still provide education for a child in the mainstream school but only after they have taken into account the views of the parent and child.

Special schools offer a range of services that are usually not available in mainstream schools. They provide enhanced provision for children who have complex additional support needs such as behaviour problems, learning difficulties, physical or sensory disabilities. They quite often are staffed by specialist teachers and can offer a range of education and therapeutic provision.

Some mainstream schools have special units. These offer some of the services that would be provided in a special school but on a smaller scale.

It is becoming more common for special schools and mainstream schools to work closely together, to provide a variety of support for children and young people.

Visiting schools

The first place to look is often your local school. Make sure you find out if it can offer what you need, before moving on to consider other schools.

Before you make your choice, it is a good idea to visit the different schools involved. It could help to arrange this through a professional, or to take someone with you who knows your child and/or the education system well.

Some of the things you may wish to consider when visiting a school are:

- distance from home and transport arrangements
- which school your other children attend (if applicable)
- general accessibility of the school building and state of repair
- accessibility of toilets
- number of stairs
- class size
- playground security and supervision
- the school's additional support needs policy and discipline policy
- if the school has any specialist resources required by your child
- if the school has previous experience of children with additional support needs.

Every school should have a handbook available for parents in which its policies, aims, rules etc are clearly stated. The handbook can give you some information on the school's ethos and approach to additional support for learning.

Examples of questions to ask during a visit:

- How many children are in a typical class?
- How big is a typical classroom? (thinking about space for specialised equipment)
- How much help do the teachers have, (such as classroom assistants, learning assistants or additional needs auxiliaries) and how is this help organised in the school?
- Are there any other children with additional support needs in the school?
- How can the school encourage social inclusion for my child?
- How will the school organise support for learning or other extra provision (such as speech and language therapy) to support my child?
- What kind of personal and social development will the school provide in such things as daily living skills?
- What are the school's arrangements for children who need medicine or medical support?
- Will there be any problems transferring to the local secondary school?
- What is the best way to share information about my child? (such as home/school diaries)
- What are the school's aims and targets regarding children with additional support needs?
- How will the school ensure the progress and support of my child over the long term? (such as do they use staged intervention approaches and Individualised Educational Programmes)

Further useful resources:

Enquire factsheet 2: Planning children's and young people's learning (2008)

Enquire factsheet 4: Placing requests (2008)

The parents' guide to additional support for learning, Enquire (2007).

www.sclid.org.uk Scottish Consortium on Learning Disability produce a booklet entitled 'Top Marks for Good Practice Getting the most for your child's schooling A Checklist for Parents'. This can be ordered from the website.

Information about inclusive education is available from Learning Teaching Scotland: **www.ltscotland.org.uk**

Information about supporting your child's learning is available on the Parentzone website:

www.parentzonescotland.gov.uk

www.scottishschoolsonline.gov.uk Scottish Schools Online is a searchable directory of all schools in Scotland, including local authority and independent schools. It provides contact details, links to school websites where available, and statistical and other information for every school.

Choosing a school. A guide for parents, Scottish Government (2007), available from **www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2007/11/02115753/6**

Also available from Blackwell's Bookshop, tel: 0131 622 8283

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