



CHOOSING A SCHOOL

When you visit schools, you will want to compare their strengths and weaknesses. You will get an impression of their sense of order, their attitude to the pupils and the general atmosphere by walking around. To get a clear picture of their knowledge, skills and experience you will need to ask specific questions such as those suggested below. You will want to ask some questions of your own and it is a good idea to create a list and write down the responses, as this will build up a picture of each school you visit and you will be better able to make comparisons.

You don't need to visit every school you hear about (and it would not be possible anyway) but it's a good idea to visit as many different types of school as possible. This will give you a much broader picture of what is available and what features you think are important. You may also find that something you would not normally have considered may actually be right for your child.

This information will help you to make an informed decision, considering **ALL** options in preparation for the Local Authority (LA) giving you their opinion.

It is impossible to ask too many questions at this stage. You have made no commitment to the school so don't worry about being labelled as an over anxious parent. If the school thinks that, it is their problem. If you were buying a house you wouldn't be embarrassed about asking questions and the same should apply to choosing a school.

Don't feel pressured to take your child to the first visit. For some parents it may be that taking their child with them will add immeasurably to the stress involved and make evaluating the visit very difficult. Most schools, however, will want to meet your child before offering him/her a place, so a visit at a later stage is best.

If both parents can go, that's desirable, but often this can be difficult. If you aren't able to go with your partner it might be helpful to ask a friend or relative who knows your child to come too.

Obtain a copy of the school's prospectus in which the school's special needs provision will be described, before you make your initial visit. At a mainstream school ask whether you will be able to speak to the school's SENCO during the visit.

Following your visit, make notes relating to these points and the responses to your questions. Reflect on how you felt while looking around the school and talking to the staff. Be aware of your gut feelings. Does the school want your child? Was it welcoming, encouraging and knowledgeable? Could you picture your child within that school?

The following questions may provide some useful guidance, but are not definitive. There may be other concerns specific to your child that you may wish to raise.



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School Environment

- How many pupils are at the school and how many in each classroom?
- What is the staff/pupil ratio and level of support in class?
- What is the layout of the school (e.g. is it on one level, are there several buildings, are classrooms open plan/suitable?) Consider noise levels/distractions etc., and possible escape routes and exits out of the school for 'runners'
- Are there accessible changing facilities and toilets if necessary, or how does the school manage toileting issues?
- Is there space in the classroom for any equipment your child needs? (e.g. extra space to organise work, computer, support, wheelchair or standing frame).

Teaching and Learning Experience

- Has the school signed up to the Essex Inclusion Statement, which reflects partnership working between school leaders and the Local Authority in developing a school-led approach to SEND across the system?
- Has the school experienced pupils with a similar difficulty?
- What training do staff and learning support assistants receive?
- What facilities or resources do/will they provide to support your child's needs?
- Is the school open to suggestions?
- Where will you get support to plan to meet your child's needs? Is there access to specialist services/teacher/therapists?
- How does the school keep parents informed about the progress the children are making at school? Is there a home/school diary or similar for communication?
- Is there a quiet area/escape area for time out? A retreat is a safe place for the pupil to go, which is an area recognised by the whole school.

Social and Recreational

- Is there good supervision during unstructured time? The lack of structure and social nature may make it a prime time for social conflicts and behavioural problems.
- A buddy system is often helpful, does the school offer this?
- Are there lunchtime clubs to foster inclusion and social skills?
- Are you able to watch the children in the playground as well as during lessons on your visit? This could be helpful. This way you can find out how involved staff members are in the children's play, what activities are available, whether there are any areas where your child may be vulnerable and the age range in the playground.
- Does the school have a settling in procedure to ease that transition?

The questions and ideas given via this SNAP information sheet have been shared as a starting point for your own research. We believe the information to be genuine and correct at the time of publishing, however no responsibility for loss occasioned by any person acting or refraining from acting as a result of the material contained herein can be accepted by SNAP.