

What to Look For in a School (Including Checklist for Visiting Schools)

Introduction

It is important to remember that **all children are different** and what works for one child may not be the best for another, even if they have the same type of special educational need.

Parents should be aware that professionals working for Local Authorities are not permitted to suggest or recommend specific schools to any prospective pupil or their parents, although they should be able to give guidance about the type of school, if special school or resource is being considered.

You know your child/young person best. This checklist will give you some ideas about the sort of questions you might ask or the kinds of things to look for when considering which school would best meets your child/young person's needs.

Thinking about your child/young person's needs

What are your child/young person's particular needs?

What things are most important for your child/young person when considering what school is best for them?

For example, is it

- a local school they can attend with their friends?
- a school that has particular expertise?
- a school with experience of other children with special educational needs?

How will your child/young person get to school – will the local authority provide transport? If so, what kind (bus, bus pass, taxi) and will an escort be provided?

Visiting a school

Nothing is as important as making a personal visit on a **normal working day**.

Think about whether it is appropriate to take your child/young person with you, particularly if you are visiting more than one school. It could lead to your child/young person becoming excited or confused about a specific school and ultimately as their parent you are the one to make the decision about which school you would **prefer** your child/young person to attend. Be aware that for children with education health and care plan the local authority will need to agree with your preference in order for the school to be named on the plan.

You can take a friend, relative or other supporter with you. If you wish, a member of the SENDIASS Team may be able to attend with you.

When visiting a school the kinds of things to notice are:

- On your first contact with the school and during the visit do you feel welcomed?
- Do the staff seem interested in you and your child/young person and in answering your questions?
- Do the classrooms look like bright and pleasant places where children can learn?
- Does the whole school look orderly and cared for and a safe place for your child/young person?
- Are the corridor and toilet areas clean and tidy and accessible to your child/young person?
- Would you like your child/young person to spend their school days there?
- If your child/young person goes with you to visit the school, how do they feel about being a pupil there?
- Do the children look busy and happy? Are they helpful and friendly?
- Are the children calm and engaged in learning, and with each other?
- Are the staff listening to children and answering them respectfully?
- Do you see commitment and enthusiasm amongst the staff?
- Are the staff friendly towards you and the children?
- Do you see the children's work proudly displayed around the school?
- What specialist facilities/equipment/toys/resources does the school use for SEN?
- Does the layout of the school environment suit your child/young person's needs e.g. open plan/small classrooms/outside areas/accessibility?
- How many children are in each class? How many adults are in each class? What are they there for?

School information

- What does the school prospectus tell you about the school?
- What are the school policies on special educational needs, bullying, the role of the parent, safety, absence, administering medicines, equal opportunities?
- What does their Local Offer tell you about how they support children with SEND?
- Who is the SENCo and how much time do they have to devote to SEN work?
- How does the school prepare for children's admission to the school?

- How is information on children's needs shared with school staff?
- What expertise does the school already have in meeting the special educational needs of children?
- What support mechanisms and training are available for all staff in the school?
- How does the school communicate relevant information to the parent and encourage parents to communicate with them?
- What is the supervision at breaks and lunchtimes?
- How does the school help children who are not yet toilet trained?
- How does the school ensure the safety for all children on planned activities?
- Does the school have links with any other school? In the case of a special school is there the possibility of partial or full inclusion/reintegration with a local mainstream school?

Helping your child/young person

- How does the school plan, review and monitor individual children's needs and progress?
- What teaching methods and strategies are used to aid children's learning?
- How long are the lessons and are support materials provided?
- Will your child/young person miss certain parts of the curriculum because of their SEN? How flexible will the school be with this? What lessons do pupils miss to receive extra help?
- What arrangements are made for school exams, tests and SATs? If your child/young person is of secondary age, does the school offer GCSEs or another programme of external examinations? Does the school make use of concessions for exams such as extra time or providing a laptop or scribe if needed?
- How does the school work with support services to meet the needs of children with special educational needs? Are there other professionals based at the school? (e.g. Therapists)
- What extra activities does the school provide at lunch time/ after school? What are the play/recreational facilities like? What are the supervision arrangements?
- What is the school's policy on inclusion for school trips? How would they support your child/young person on them?

Behaviour and support within the school

- How does the school ensure that all pupils are welcome and that differences are respected?
- How does the school's discipline system adapt to take account of the specific needs and difficulties of children? Is positive behaviour praised?
- Are all staff briefed on potential triggers for outbursts by children? What plans are in place if an incident occurs in a class?
- Are there any quiet areas where children can go if they become stressed or anxious? Are there distraction free work areas?
- Is there any buddy system or peer support where an older child helps a younger child within school?

- Is there a learning mentor system in the school that can be used for your child/young person if they need it? How does this work?

Information from schools

All schools have to produce information, which is available to parents, usually from the school office.

You can ask for the following:

- School prospectus
- School's Special Educational Needs (SEN) policy including basic information about the school's special education provision
- Ask where to view the school's Local Offer
- Governors' annual report on the school's Special Educational Needs policy including budget details
- School's Behaviour Management Policy
- Recent Ofsted report
- School's complaints procedure
- School's Bullying Policy

Checklist for visiting schools

Before arranging a visit, contact the school and ask for a copy of the school prospectus (you may be able to download this from the School website). After reading the prospectus think about and write down a list of questions you would like to ask the school when arranging the visit.

Things to consider and discuss before the initial phone call:

- When would you like to visit? (It is better to visit during school hours)
- Will you be taking your child/young person?
- Do you want someone else to accompany you?
- Is the school easy to get to? (Think about transport arrangements)
- Would you like to talk to the SENCO?
- Do you want a guided tour?
- Would you like to meet staff who would be involved with your child/young person?
- Would you like to talk to other parents who have children at the school?

Possible questions to ask during the visit:

- What is the general structure & timetable for the school day?
- How many children would be in your child/young person's class?
- How many members of staff (i.e. teachers, learning support assistants) would be in your child/young person's class?
- How does the school support children with Special Educational Needs?
- How does the school feel about 1:1 support?
- Does the school know anything about your child/young person's particular disability?
- Has the school had experience of children with the same disability?
- Are all areas of the school accessible to your child/young person? Would any adaptations be required?
- How would your child/young person be supported outside of lesson time?
- How does the school deal with difficult behaviour?
- How is bullying dealt with at the school?
- How does the school help children mix and make friends?
- What extra activities does the school provide at lunchtime and after school?
- What will you have to provide for your child/young person? (Uniform/stationery/money for trips, events, extra activities, etc.)
- How does the school communicate with parents?
- When can parents talk to their child/young person's teacher?
- What arrangements are there for parents to get involved with the school?
- What opportunities are there to meet other parents? (PTA, organised events)

After the Visit:

Discuss your thoughts and feelings with someone else. Consider:

- Did you feel welcome at the school?
- Did the school answer all of your questions?
- Did the children seem happy, friendly and helpful?
- Did you think your child/young person would be happy at that school?
- Have you got any other questions that you would like to ask the school?
- Could you see your child/young person attending that school?

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2026