

How to support your autistic child at school



When any child starts school for the first time, it can be worrying for parents. This worry is normal and is usually quickly overcome as your child settles in and begins to make friends and enjoy going to school. Indeed, it is often the parents that take longer to adjust to the child starting school than the child themselves!

But when your child is autistic, your worries may be compounded. You know that they are different from other children, and while you may rightly celebrate and be proud of those differences, you may wonder whether the school will take proper account of them and understand your child as you do. Again, this is completely natural.

This resource is designed to provide help, advice and support in the process of choosing a school for your autistic child, working with the school you choose and finding other support if needed.



The difference between mainstream and special schools – what school is best for your child?

Before choosing a school for your autistic child, you will first need to consider what sort of school you are looking for.

Mainstream schools

Many mainstream schools now have much more extensive provision for autistic children than may have been the case in the past, but you will need to determine exactly what specialised support would be available for your child in the mainstream schools you are considering.

In a mainstream school, an autistic child will meet and spend time with a wide variety of other children, many of whom will of course be neurotypical. This exposure can be useful preparation for later life when they will need to be able to live in a world still mostly designed for neurotypical people. It can also benefit the neurotypical children to be exposed to alternative ways of thinking and behaving at an early age. But it can also be a strain on an autistic child if they are conscious of being different to other children or find it difficult to socialise, as many autistic people do.

A mainstream school is likely to have less specialist provision for autistic children than a special school and classes may be larger, but what is available can vary widely from school to school and you need to assess whether the schools you are considering provide the right support and environment for your child.

Special schools

In a special school, your child is likely to be in a smaller class with other children who are autistic or who have other particular needs. This means that they will likely receive much more specialised support and education, and there may be more patience and empathy shown towards their differences.

The move from a special school to a mainstream school at a later age or to the wider world on finishing school may be much harder to manage than if an autistic child has always attended a mainstream school and mixed with a wider group of other children.



Other Factors to Consider

There are also a number of other issues you should take into account in choosing a school for your child:

Location and transport:

How far from your home are the schools you are considering, and how would your child get to and from school every day?

Curriculum:

What will your autistic child learn at the school – will they have access to the full curriculum, and what activities, trips and clubs are offered that may be of interest to your child?

How to get a place at a mainstream or special school

First, remember that choosing a school for your child and securing a place for them at your preferred school can be a difficult and stressful process for parents of all children.

To attend a special school, your child must have an Education, Health and Care plan (EHC) which will name the school they will attend.

You can indicate the school you would like your child to attend as part of the process of drawing up the EHC, but your Local Authority can reject this request if they have clear reasons why the school chosen would be unsuitable for your child. A school named in an EHC must admit the child.

Staff expertise and experience:

Are the staff at the school trained and equipped to provide what your child needs?

Physical issues:

Are the school building and atmosphere suitable for your child?

Some children may thrive in a buzzing atmosphere, but a noise sensitive autistic child may struggle if there are no quiet spaces available.

This is a personal choice for every parent of an autistic child and will depend on the specific school choices available in your location and how the needs of your child match what is available at the schools you are considering.

To attend a mainstream school, you need to use the normal admissions procedure administered by your local authority. There is more information on this process [here](#).

Unfortunately, pressure on school places is such that you may not get a place for your child at the school of your choice. If this happens, there are appeals procedures you may wish to use.

Whether you choose to appeal or not, do not despair. All schools are required to provide your child with a high standard of education and to offer support to children with particular needs, including autistic children.

