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The right fit

Eileen Sheerin looks at how to find the school that will best meet your child's needs

The biggest decision you will ever make is to have a child; after that, perhaps the most important thing you will be faced with is making the right choice of school for that child.

As a parent, you probably know your child better than anyone else; you have lived with them from the minute they first came into the world. So you should be the one to understand what they need. In choosing a school for your child you need to think about the following questions which look at your child's needs: what are their interests? What is the most important outcome for you and, crucially, for the child? How do they mix with other children? Do you agree with the proposed school's policies? What results do they get?

There are questions, questions and more questions. The process can be daunting but you need to stand your ground and look for the best fit for your child. Of course this can be very difficult but by focussing on what is important to your child and your family, it will become easier.

If your child has been assessed and given an education, health and care (EHC) plan, this can cause a mixture of relief (that at last there are some answers) and worry (about how will they cope with school, independence and later life). Selecting a school for any child is tough enough, but to choose one for a child with SEN is harder still, so here are some things to look for.

Specialist provision or mainstream?

Some mainstream schools can and do cope very well with particular special needs, and some have a unit within the school that works specifically with children with SEN. Visit the school and speak to parents if possible. Don't just choose a school because it is close to home or because you don't want to segregate your child from their local peer group.

Ask lots of questions about the school and how they work with the needs of individual children. You may wish to question the school on issues such as: will my child have a designated support worker? Will they have access to the full curriculum? Do the children with SEN integrate with students from the main school at any time of the day? What happens at unstructured times such as lunchtime or break? What allowances does the school make for assessment or exams? Will they have extra time, a scribe or a reader for their exams?

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions; it is down to you to determine what answers you expect and how to interpret the ones you get.

If you decide you want a specialist school, do the research. For a child with autism, for example, look for schools in your area or beyond that have a strong track record of working effectively with children on the autistic spectrum. If your child has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or behaviour issues, look for the schools that are used to supporting children with these conditions.

Types of schools

There are a number of different types of schools and school placements, including:

Maintained (state) schools

These are run by local authorities.

Non-maintained (independent) schools

Independent schools require local authorities or parents to pay fees for the child's education. Many non-maintained special schools are run by charities.

Out-of-county placements

An out-of-county placement is when a child attends a school not run by their local authority – either a non-maintained school or a school run by another authority. In either case, the child's own local authority must pay the fees.

Residential schools

These provide accommodation for children during the school week and, in some cases, at weekends. Local authorities are most likely to agree to fund residential provision if children have severe or multiple SEN that cannot be met by day provision and support from other agencies. For some pupils (for example, for children looked after by the local authority) placements may be funded jointly by the local authority and health or social services.

Special schools

Normally, these schools are only for children with statements of SEN or the new EHC plans, although sometimes children may be admitted before the EHC plan is complete. Most are for children with particular types of SEN or disabilities. Increasingly, special schools also act as resource centres supporting mainstream schools.

Specialist units

These units are for children with, for example, multi-sensory impairments; they are attached to mainstream or, more commonly, special schools. Children may spend all of their time in classes within the unit, or spend part of their time in other classes within the school, usually with support.

What will suit your child?

Look around and try to decide which type of school will bring out the best in your child. If a particular setting seems to meet your criteria:

- read the school's latest Ofsted report to see what Government inspectors have to say about it
- visit the school and look at it with an open mind
- look closely to see if the students are happy and learning. The carpet maybe thread-bear but if the school gives you a feeling of being supportive and caring, that might be much more important for your child
- examine the school's policies on bullying, behaviour, teaching and learning, and safeguarding
- talk to some of the staff and students, if possible, to see if they are happy and well motivated.
- decide whether you feel your child will fit in.

You know what is best for your child and they are entitled to the best education they can access. Visit a number of schools that you are interested in, make a short-list of two or (no more than) three, then take the person who is going to spend so much of their time there and listen to them.

Some authorities may want your child to go to their mainstream provision but if this is not suited to your child, speak out because you have rights.

Choosing the right school for your child is one of the most difficult decisions you will make as a parent, especially if your child has SEN. Some parents believe that attending a state school will give a child with SEN the support they need; others feel that a private education will suit them better.

If you choose to go down the private route, look at your child's strengths and weaknesses and see how the school will address them. Visit the school, talk to parents in a similar situation, and try to discover how the school deals with kids who perform either above or below average.

Further information

Eileen Sheerin is Headteacher at Together Trust's Ashcroft School, a special school in Cheshire:

www.togethertrust.org.uk

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