

Finding, visiting and choosing a school

Finding the right school for your child can sometimes feel daunting, especially if they have special educational needs. Our top tips can help you to narrow your search, get the most out of school visits and ask the right questions. Use it alongside our factsheet 'Choosing a school' and our questions to ask and checklist.

1. Understand and be clear about your child's needs

Before you can begin choosing a school, you'll need to know:

- what your child's needs are
- what support they'll need and
- what kind of environment they will be able to manage

Your child should have a written school plan which sets out their needs clearly, along with the support they currently should have. If your child has an EHC plan, their needs and support will be set out in that too.

Make a list for yourself of their main needs, alongside the support given for each. This will help you focus and means you shouldn't miss anything important when you start looking at and visiting schools.

2. Narrow your search

Use the [Government database](#) or the [Devon schools database](#) to select and find the schools you would consider.

Rule out any that you definitely wouldn't consider, for example, those that are too far away.

Talk to any professionals that already support your child about what kind of learning

environment and approach would help them to thrive.

If you're looking for a special school or resource base, make sure you know what your child's main type of SEN is. Special schools usually have a 'designation', which means they aim to support mainly children and young people with specific types of SEN. For example, some schools have pupils who mainly have communication and interaction difficulties, such as autism. Others support children and young people with social, emotional and mental health difficulties or moderate to severe learning difficulties.

You can also consider a school that's over the border from Devon and into another local authority, such as Plymouth and Torbay. You'll need to consider travel time for your child if it's some distance away. There's no guarantee of getting a place at a school in a different local authority though. That authority will place children from their area as a priority and look at children from outside after that.

3. Find out more about the schools on your list

Do the following for each of the schools on your list. It might take a bit of time, but the research is usually worth it.

Check out the most recent [Ofsted](#) inspection by reading the report. You can find this by going to the Ofsted website (details below), clicking on 'find an inspection report', and entering the school name, place or postcode into the search boxes.

Then look at the school's website and find and read their SEND report.

This will give you a general idea of:

- the character of the school
- what's important to them
- where their focus is

All schools must publish a report every year about their policy for children with SEND. This must include information about:

- the kinds of SEND that are provided for and their approach to teaching
- how SEND is identified, and how support is assessed and reviewed, including preparing for adulthood
- how they work with children and young people, parents and families
- how changes are made to the curriculum, activities and the learning environment to enable children with SEND to take part
- the expertise and training of staff to support children and young people with SEND, including how specialist expertise is brought in
- their support for improving emotional and social development

Look at other policies that might be relevant, such as:

- Anti-bullying policy
- Behaviour policy
- Medical conditions policy
- School prospectus, academic curriculum and after school activities

Talk to parents who have a child at the school. You can try searching for groups connected to the school online or ask the school if they have a parent group you could join. You could also ask your local Ambassador Volunteer if they know of anyone at a particular school who you could talk to.

When you've gathered this kind of information, look at your child's needs and their support and think about which schools, on paper, might best be able to meet those. Now, you should be able to narrow your search down further. Hopefully you will have just a few schools that you would consider. At this point it's a good idea to visit the schools on your list.

4. Visit schools

Visiting a school is a great way to get a feel for it and to have your questions answered. Many parents find that the feeling they get during a school visit helps them decide if it's right for their child. It's often a good idea to visit during the school day, so you can see the school in action when teachers, support staff and children are there. While you're there, you could also ask to see an example of their school plans, such as an individual education plan or a Pupil Passport.

Mainstream schools

Mainstream schools usually have open days in the weeks before the standard school applications for reception, primary and secondary schools open. This usually involves a tour of the school along with other interested parents and children. It's usually run by a senior member of the school staff, and you'll have a chance to ask questions and get more information.

If you want to visit when there isn't an open day or want to meet directly with a member of staff, you'll need to organise this yourself. Most parents arrange to meet with the special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCo). If your child is moving up to secondary school, it can be helpful to meet the head of year or head of Key Stage 3 too.

When you arrange a meeting, you might decide to take someone with you to give you support and another pair of eyes and ears. This could be a partner, family member or friend. Take any relevant information about your child with you too. The kind of documents that are useful are a previous school support plan, any educational psychology advice, copies of individual education plans (IEPs) or a copy of your child's Education, Health and Care (EHC) plan if they have one.

It's a good idea to take the same list of questions with you if you're visiting more than one school. That way you can compare different schools equally.

It can also help to take a short summary of your child's strengths and difficulties, such as a one-page profile. This will help give the school a sense of your child as a person. Many parents visit schools with their child at some point though, before making a decision. This can

Special schools

If you've been given clear advice that a special school is appropriate for your child, then it's a good idea to visit. Special schools don't usually have general open days though. Visits are sometimes arranged through the SEN 0-25 team, but sometimes schools are happy to arrange an informal visit. If the school is full, they may not offer a visit. Check directly with the school you are interested in.

When you visit a special school, take your child with you if you can. Ask if you can speak to staff and other pupils and take note of the school environment and accessibility issues that might be relevant for your child. These could be things like adaptations that will meet your child's needs if they have a physical disability, or classrooms that are designed to reduce the impact from sensory difficulties.

Find out what kind support is available. Special schools will often have specialists such as speech and language and occupational therapists, specialist teachers and psychologists available on site. Check whether what's available can meet your child's needs, or how getting specialist support from outside school will work.

Try and get a sense of the level of need and the types of behaviour that other children and young people at the school have. Think carefully about whether your child is likely to 'fit in' with their peers. You know them best, you know their personality as well as their needs, and you'll know whether they're likely to thrive in a particular environment and peer group, or not.

Take your child's EHC plan and list of questions with you and go through them with the SENCO or whoever you're meeting with. Make notes, so you have something to reflect on when you get home.

help them to get a feel for whether they would like it too.

5. Compare the places you visit

As you're gathering a lot of information before and during visits, it's a good idea to have some way of keeping a record so you can compare the schools. It can

help to keep track of what's available at each school and how they're able to meet your child's needs. You could do this in whatever way you find best, such as:

- using a red, amber, green rating next to each school
- making a list or chart of each of your child's needs and how well each school will meet them
- writing a pros and cons list for each school or a short summary about each, including how you and your child felt about it
- filling out a chart or spreadsheet – DiAS has one you can download and use

6. Decide

Hopefully, by going through the steps above, you'll come out with a favourite or preference. When you've done that, you'll need to apply for a place.

If your child doesn't have an EHC plan

If your child doesn't have an EHC plan, you'll be applying for a mainstream school place. To do that, apply using the standard school admissions process.

Once you've chosen a school and your child has been accepted, work with them to make a clear plan to get your child successfully settled into the school. The plan should focus on the needs of your child or young person and what's going to work best for them. Take things at a pace your child can manage and make sure their support is well planned and ready before they start at the school. Once they are there, have regular meetings with school to check how things are going and change the support if needed.

If your child is having an EHC needs assessment and you expect a plan to be issued, you should mention that in your application. This is so the School Admissions Team can liaise with the SEN 0-25 Team, so there is no mix up about where your child will be going to school.

If your child has an EHC plan

Moving to a new key stage

When your child moves to a new key stage it's important to have enough time to plan the move well. The legal guidance says a review of an EHC plan, and

any changes to it, must happen to allow enough time for proper planning.

If your child is moving to a new school, the review of their EHC plan, and any changes, should be finished at the latest **by 15 February in the year they move**. That means the February before they move in September.

The main key stage moves are:

- from nursery or pre-school to school
- from key stage 1 (infant school) to key stage 2 (junior school)
- from key stage 2 (primary school) to key stage 3 (secondary school)

Applying for a place

You will need to apply for the school place, whatever kind of school you are asking for, using the standard school admissions process. You can apply for schools in Devon or in another Local Authority area. You can apply for a mainstream, a specialist or an independent school or setting.

What happens after that will depend on the school you've chosen but is likely to include conversations with schools and with you. You should get a letter from the SEN 0-25 team when your child is due to move schools, which tells you what you need to do and what will happen after you've made your choice.

If your child is moving school within the school year, this should be done in agreement with the SEN 0-25 team. They will make direct arrangements with the relevant school, so you won't need to go through the standard school admissions process.

Making these kinds of decisions can sometimes be complicated, so please contact us if you would like to talk about the different options that are open to you.

Need more information?

Ofsted

www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted

Devon school admissions

www.devon.gov.uk/educationandfamilies/school-information/apply-for-a-school-place/

Contact

contact.org.uk

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