



How to choose the right school

Parents of children with autism are in a difficult position when it comes to exercising school choice.

Word of mouth, rumours, assumptions, advertising and attractive brochures can all exert influence. But there are core factors that matter! Lovely buildings and pretty grounds are nice, but it's the people inside who really matter. No school should claim 'Autism specialism' status unless most of its staff are highly trained in working with children on the spectrum. The best schools insist that teaching staff have a postgraduate Autism qualification in addition to Qualified Teacher Status.

Support staff, such as teaching assistants, should all have or be working towards a Level 2 or 3 qualification in Autism if they are to claim 'specialism'. This is beyond the 'Autism awareness' level, which every school employee, including the lunch ladies, should have. The difficulty in finding and retaining highly trained staff means that schools often need to develop their own. This makes it important to ask not only what qualifications staff have, but how new staff are supported to gain qualifications and how existing staff access continuing professional development.

Pleading poverty is no excuse: affordable training is readily available through the Autism Education Trust's Training Hubs project and many other sources. For the teaching staff themselves, an investment in postgraduate education will pay off quickly in student achievement. Training in managing challenging behaviour is also crucial. The best schools will ensure that all or most staff are trained through programmes which focus on avoiding force wherever possible.

There are individual exceptions to the 'Autism specialists are best' rule. Occasionally, you will encounter an experienced mainstream or special educator who, despite a lack of formal Autism training, has a general sensitivity to children's differences and works wonderfully well.

The next important element after the quality of the staff is the school environment. If a school understands Autism, it understands the importance of an orderly, predictable learning environment. Expect to see daily timetables, task timetables, and rooms set up where there is a place for everything, and everything is in its place. There should be quiet spaces where children can voluntarily go when feeling overwhelmed or simply in need of an undisturbed area for study.

Sensory needs

You should see evidence that attention is paid to the sensory needs of children on the spectrum, rather than be satisfied with the issue simply being talked about, including seeing strategies for reducing odours and noise, avoiding fluorescent lighting where possible, and teaching coping skills such as using 'fiddle toys'.

Good teachers want a deep understanding of each child they work with, going beyond assumptions based on a diagnostic label. Look for evidence of how teachers talk about their students, and in students' special interests and abilities being catered for and celebrated. There are also things you should never find: locked seclusion rooms, frequent physical restraint, obvious health and safety hazards, evidence of children being bullied or shamed, and negative attitudes about Autism or disability.

Also ask how children with Autism are supported during free time, such as outdoor play periods and meals. Schools that 'get it' add structure and support during these parts of the day.

With regard to teaching approaches, there is no one-size fits-all methodology that works for children with Autism, so claiming adherence to just one way of teaching should raise a red flag. Staff should have knowledge of and training in a variety of methods for the ongoing assessment of children. They should know how to choose and employ the teaching methods that are likely to work best, based on what they learn about each child. Teachers and support staff should be interested in hearing what has worked for your child previously, and why you came to that conclusion. In fact, one of the best criteria for judging a school is the ratio of questions they ask about your child and his or her learning compared with the number of statements they make about the school.

Staff ratios matter. Smaller class sizes tend to be better for children with Autism: 10 or fewer children per class is fantastic. However, 1:1 aides are not always the hallmark of quality. Some schools use relatively unskilled aides as a cheap means of behaviour control, while expecting them to differentiate teaching for the child they work with without any training. Always having an aide next to you can also limit your ability to interact socially with other children. So rather than looking for an absolute ratio, look for evidence of good classroom order, expertly differentiated teaching, and appropriate support available whenever children need it.

Mainstream schools

In mainstream schools, of course, class sizes will almost always be larger. This is fine for some children on the spectrum - as long as support is in place. That support may include breaking up large classes into smaller work groups, having quiet break-out areas for study, being able to leave the room if overwhelmed, and having recourse to a smaller group (an Autism unit or similar) when needed.

Able children on the spectrum are probably the hardest to place, because it is important for them to have access to high quality mainstream teaching that stretches them in their areas of greatest ability and interest, and access to a range of choices, which often isn't available in special schools.

School-to-parent communication is another area to ask about. Home-school notebooks and annual conferences are great, but superior schools go beyond these basics. If the school works well with families, it's a good sign that it also has the right mindset for working well with children. The school's attitude underlies everything else, from valuing good staff to encouraging flexibility: pay close attention to any clues you pick up from how staff talk about children, education AND Autism.

SCHOOL VISIT CHECKLIST

Write down whatever answers you're given, even if you're not sure you understand. Do further research about anything you're unsure of, and don't be afraid to call the school back for clarification. If you don't want to be distracted by writing, ask if you can make a sound recording on your phone to listen back to later.

Questions to ask:

Teacher training

- What level of autism specialist training do the classroom teachers who will work with my child have?
- What level of autism specialist training do support staff have?
- If teaching or support staff do not have specialist training, what access do they have to autism specialist staff such as an autism unit or an LEA communication team?
- What autism training support and options are available to staff?
- Which manual handling programme have they used for training staff?
- Do all relevant staff have a certificate from this programme?

Teaching and assessment methods

If you can visit during a teaching session, make your own observations as well.

- How large are the classes my child is likely to be in?

- What is the classroom staff-to-student ratio? Do teachers or teaching assistants differentiate tasks for students with SEN?
- Which assessment methods do you use to judge student progress?
- Are there any special assessment methods or adjustments used for children with autism/SEN?
- Which teaching methods do you use?
 - Why do you feel these are helpful?
- Do you use any specialist teaching methods developed for children with Autism?
 - Why do you feel these are helpful?
- What happens if a child is making no or slow progress in a particular area?

For secondary provision

- What methods do you use to prepare students for further education and/or work (such as work experience)?
- For secondary provision: what options will be open to my child in terms of standard or alternative qualifications?
- For secondary provision: what are the destinations of children who complete their education at your school (further education, work, something else?)
 - How do you know?

Also ask about

- What extra-curricular activities will be available to my child?
- What support will be available to help him or her access these?
- How does the school handle bullying?
- What steps does the school take to support the social and emotional development of children with autism?
- Which methods of communication are used to inform and involve parents?
- Does the school offer any special non-classroom programmes for parents or siblings of SEN children?

School environment

When you visit a possible school for the first time, try to put yourself in your child's shoes. Knowing how he or she experiences environments, have a critical look at what the physical space and emotional climate might feel like.

- Is the classroom orderly and tidy?
- What are the levels of noise, smell and activity like?
- Do you notice anything else that your child is likely to find distracting?
- Can you see schedules for individual children and the class (task, daily, weekly)?
- Do you see evidence of children's achievements and successes?
- Is it easy for you to spot areas for specific activities and where materials needed for activities can be found?
- Is there evidence of thought about classroom design, such as quiet spaces, study areas, group work areas?
- What other spaces will your child access (lunchroom, gym, toilets, play areas, autism unit) and what are they like?