

All children with ASD are different and all schools are different so it is not possible to say which type of school setting will best meet the needs of your child. However, there are some pointers which may help you decide whether the school you are considering will be suitable.

First of all, ask yourself what you want from your child's education. Is it high academic standards you are looking for or simply a place where your child will feel secure and happy? Are you more concerned with what happens in the classroom or is it the social side of school, i.e. what happens in the playground, that is more important to you? What kind of support does your child need? What are your child's strengths? Is it a specialist or inclusive setting you are looking for? Examining your own views on what constitutes a good education for ASD and thinking carefully about what your child needs to make progress and fulfil his/her potential will help you decide what kind of school is necessary to help him/her thrive educationally.

Visiting the school

Go with your first impressions. If your instinct tells you this is not the right place, trust that instinct. You know your child best and if your observations and the answers you get to your questions make you uneasy, maybe this school is not the one that will accommodate your child's needs.

Physical layout

Size and layout matter. If your child has a lot of sensory issues and poor spatial awareness, look for a school building that is not too big and is easy to find your way around. Narrow corridors and staircases where s/he could get jostled and noisy, open plan classrooms are not the best environment for a child with ASD. Acoustics, lighting and good ventilation (to overcome the smell of toilets, dining hall, science lab) may all be important considerations.

Ethos and Attitudes

From observing pupils and staff around the school and talking to them, what sense do you get of the atmosphere in the school. Is it friendly, warm and welcoming? Are they interested in your child? Does the school ethos seem to suggest a rigid approach to children and their education, or is there some flexibility and a sense of doing what they can to value every pupil and draw the best out of them? It is people, not bricks and mortar, that make a school and caring, tolerant and understanding attitudes are what count in a school that meets the needs of children with needs as diverse as those of children with ASD. What attitudes do you see as you move around the school? How do the staff speak to the pupils? How do the children behave towards staff and amongst themselves? Would your child fit in here? Are you confident s/he would feel safe and not be bullied for being 'different'?

Curriculum

A broad and varied curriculum is the right of every child and you will want to see evidence that what is on offer will maximise your child's potential and motivation. You want to know that s/he is learning and making progress and flexibility is the key.

Ask about what support is available to overcome difficulties, how the curriculum is broken down differently (differentiated) for individual pupils and how the school ensures that it plays to each child's strengths, to bolster self esteem, rather than always concentrating on what children cannot do well. Will your child have to do all National Curriculum subjects, or can s/he be disapplied from some and spend more time on others that may be of more individual benefit?

Classroom activity

All subjects, teachers and pupils vary, so there is no easy way of determining in a brief walk around the school whether pupils are interested in what they are learning and achieving lesson goals appropriate to their ability. However, it is possible to observe whether classroom activity seems purposeful, whether there is positive rapport between teacher and pupils and how classroom staff are supporting activities. Look around you. Do you see a visual timetable on display? How do pupils know what they are doing, why, how long for and what is happening next? Are they expected to follow mainly verbal instructions, or is there evidence of visual support? Ask how supply teachers are briefed about the needs of individual children and what happens when there is a change of timetable. These points may be crucial for the well-being of a child with ASD.

Getting help

Ask to see the school's SEN policy to find out how arrangements are made to assess the needs of individual children, to provide appropriate support and monitor progress. The policy should cover annual reviews, Individual Education Plans, the role of the SENCO and the school's policy on working in partnership with parents.

Sometimes children with ASD need a bit more help in coping with the school environment than other children do. Who can the child go to if s/he has a problem to share? Is there a 'bolthole' to retreat to if it all becomes too much in the playground? Does the school use a buddy system, where capable, caring pupils 'look after' less socially adept peers? Can an anxious, overwhelmed child with ASD request 'time out' from the classroom, to calm down and re-focus? Are seating arrangements fixed, or could your child have an independent work station where s/he could work further away from classroom distractions for some of the time? Can special arrangements be made at exam time, so s/he does not feel over-anxious?

Making the decision

If a school seems reluctant to accept your child when you have explained his/her needs, ask yourself if you really want to insist on this placement. Visit several schools, if possible, and compare their facilities and approach. Take your time in making your decision and talk to other parents. What is right for their children may not be right for your son/daughter, but it will give you something to think about and in the end you will know which school 'feels' right to meet your child's needs.