

Home Educating your child

Here we cover why some parents choose to educate their child with autism at home and explain what the law (UK) says about home education, your rights and responsibilities.

The information in this document IS based on the UK schooling system, but the basics should be able to be considered/applied to anywhere in the world!

Why some parents choose home education

As a parent you may be wondering whether your child will benefit from being educated at home. Educating your child yourself is a huge responsibility (see below), but you do have the right to choose to home educate your child. Parents choose to educate a child with autism at home for a number of reasons. For example:

- your child may have sensory sensitivities, which makes a school environment noisy, distracting or even painful to them. They may therefore find it hard to concentrate or behave well, which may then stop them from reaching their full potential.
- you may feel your child's needs are not being recognised or properly supported at school. Although many children with autism do succeed in school and benefit from the support of dedicated staff, such as learning support assistants, your child may find the school environment difficult, with its emphasis on social interaction and group learning.
- you may feel you can provide a more appropriate education for your child than a school that follows the National Curriculum. This may depend on the educational options for children and young people with autism in your area.

Choosing to home educate your child may mean that you have to fulfil the role of teacher and you may therefore get no break from childcare as you will be spending most of your time with your child. You can ask social services to assess your child so you can take a break.

You may also feel overwhelmed by all the decisions you will need to make about your child's home education, especially if you have no previous knowledge about teaching or the education system. A number of organisations can help you.

What does the law (UK) say about home education?

Legally, you do not need to have any teaching qualifications to home educate your child. And you have the right to educate your child at home, as stated under section 7 of the Education Act 1996 (England and Wales):

The parent of every child of compulsory school age shall cause him to receive efficient full-time education suitable - (a) to his age, ability and aptitude, and (b) to any special educational needs he may have, either by regular attendance at school or otherwise.

Similarly, in Scotland, section 30 of The Education (Scotland) Act 1980 states that:

It shall be the duty of the parent of every child of school age to provide efficient education for him suitable to his age, ability and aptitude either by causing him to attend a public school regularly or by other means.

Both acts say 'otherwise' (Education Act 1996) or 'by other means' (The Education (Scotland) Act 1980), and wording makes it clear that going to school is not the only option to educate a child or young person. However, the law does not define how you should home educate your child.

You may need to tell your local education authority (LEA) (now known as the Local Authority or LA) or the Education and Library Board if you live in Northern Ireland about your decision to home educate, and some particular requirements are in place for children who have a statement of special educational needs.

How should you home educate?

The law does not define how you should home educate. Maintained or state schools have to follow the National Curriculum. The National Curriculum sets out the stages and core subjects your child will be taught during their time at school. Some children with autism can find this way of teaching too rigid. However, when you design your child's education, you will be able to concentrate more on the particular needs and interests of your child. If your child shows a particular talent for maths or music, for example, you could spend more time on these subjects. Your child could also go to classes that specialise in teaching these subjects.

You may decide that you should spend more time on subjects that your child does not do well in. We use the term 'subjects' loosely here. It does not necessarily refer to the areas covered by the National Curriculum.

Although the term 'home education' is commonly used, a child may be taught at home for just part of the time, while also going to colleges or other establishments as well as taking part in community-based learning activities. You are not confined by the classroom and you don't have to teach a large number of children of different abilities. You are able to combine 'academic' lessons with less conventional ways to educate such as visits to leisure centres, classes at colleges or other establishments as well as trips to, for example, historical places, botanical gardens, art galleries or zoos, which can all help a child to learn a particular subject.

In addition, you don't need to follow the hours of the standard school day. If, for example, your child is tired in the morning, but is energetic and has better concentration in the afternoon, you can plan things around this. It can also mean that if your child needs to go to hospital or keep

appointments for therapy, they don't have to miss out on their education as these can be taken into account in advance.

Whatever 'timetable' you finally choose, you will need to make some specific decisions. For example, you will need to decide whether to home educate your child throughout their school career or just for a short time. You may feel that your child will benefit from a period of home education, but go back to formal education at a later date or at another level, for example when they reach secondary school or are of college age.

Getting ready for exams

Legally, no-one has to take any exams. This means that you and your child can decide whether to take exams. If you decide to enter your child for exams, you will need to discuss whether your child goes back to school to prepare for their exams, or whether they are going to study for them at home. You will need to arrange for your child to sit the exams yourself. Exams are based on the National Curriculum so you will also need to keep a close watch on changes to the curriculum to make sure that your child is prepared well for their exams.

Helping your child to socialise

Home education can suit children and young people with autism, and children with autism may find being home educated an advantage. However, you may be worried about the lack of opportunity to socialise, as home educated children are often taught alone or in a small group.

Depending on your child's existing social skills and needs, social interaction may be less stressful if you plan and watch carefully. For example, you can help your child's social learning if you and your family act out or role play situations with them, explaining how and why people acted in a particular way. Your child may also be able to socialise with other children who are educated at home, or visit a local youth group or other clubs where they can practise their social skills in a relatively controlled environment. Or, they might like to go to more classes that teach social skills. A combination of any number of these suggestions may help your child to socialise better.

Telling others about your decision to home educate

If you decide to educate your child at home, you will need to follow some procedures. These may vary depending on the age of your child, the type of school they go to (if they already go to school) and whether they have a statement of special educational needs.