



# What to look for in a school

## Introduction

It is important to remember that **all children are different** and what works for one child may not be the best for another, even if they have the same type of special educational need.

**You know your child best.** This checklist will give you some ideas about the sort of questions you might ask or the kinds of things to look for when considering which school would best meets your child's needs. Schools have lots of information on their websites and information about how they support children with special educational needs or disabilities can also be found on the Local Offer for the local authority area in which the school is located.

### 1. Thinking about your child's needs

What are your child's particular needs?

What things are most important for your child when considering what school is best for them?

For example, is it

- a local school they can attend with their friends?
- a school that has particular expertise?
- a school with experience of other children with special educational needs?

How will your child get to school – will Brighter Futures for Children (BFfC) be likely to provide transport? If so, what kind (bus, bus pass, taxi) and will an escort be provided?

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## 2. Visiting a school

Nothing is as important as making a personal visit on a **normal working day**.

Think about whether it is appropriate to take your child with you, particularly if you are visiting more than one school. It could lead to your child becoming excited or confused about a specific school and ultimately as their parent you are the one to make the decision about which school you would **prefer** your child to attend. Be aware that for children with an education health and care plan, BfC on behalf of Reading Borough Council will need to agree with your preference in order for the school to be named on the plan.

You can take a friend, relative or other supporter with you. Subject to availability, a member of the Reading IASS team (including our trained volunteers) may be able to attend with you.

When visiting a school the kinds of things to notice are:

- On your first contact with the school and during the visit do you feel welcomed?
- Do the staff seem interested in you and your child and in answering your questions?
- Do the classrooms look like bright and pleasant places where children can learn?
- Does the whole school look orderly and cared for and a safe place for your child?
- Are the corridor and toilet areas clean and tidy and accessible to your child?
- If your child goes with you to visit the school, how does he or she feel about being a pupil there?
- Do the children look busy and happy? Are they helpful and friendly?
- Are the children calm and engaged in learning, and with each other?
- Are the staff listening to children and answering them respectfully?
- Do you see commitment and enthusiasm amongst the staff?
- Do you see the children's work proudly displayed around the school?
- What specialist facilities/equipment/toys/resources does the school use for SEND children?
- Does the layout of the school environment suit your child's needs e.g. open plan/small classrooms/outside areas/accessibility?
- How many children are in each class? How many adults are in each class? What are they there for?

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### 3. School issues

- What does the school prospectus tell you about the school?
- What are the school policies on special educational needs, behaviour and exclusions, bullying, the role of the parent, safety, absence, administering medicines, equal opportunities?
- What does their Local Offer tell you about how they support children with SEND?
- Who is the SENCo and how much time do they have to devote to SEN work?
- How does the school prepare for children's admission to the school and for moving between year groups?
- How is information on children's needs shared with school staff?
- What expertise does the school already have in meeting the special educational needs of children?
- What support mechanisms and training are available for all staff in the school?
- How does the school communicate relevant information to the parent and encourage parents to communicate with them?
- What is the supervision at breaks and lunchtimes?
- How does the school help children who are not yet toilet trained?
- How does the school ensure the safety for all children on planned activities?
- Does the school have links with any other school? In the case of a special school is there the possibility of partial or full inclusion/reintegration with a local mainstream school?

### 4. Helping your child

- How does the school plan, review and monitor individual children's needs and progress?
- What teaching methods and strategies are used to aid children's learning?
- How long are the lessons and are support materials provided?
- Will your child miss certain parts of the curriculum because of their SEND? How flexible will the school be with this? What lessons do pupils miss to receive extra help?
- What arrangements are made for school exams, tests and SATs? If your child is of secondary age, does the school offer GCSEs or another programme of external examinations? Does the school make use of concessions for exams such as extra time or providing a laptop or scribe if needed?

- How does the school work with support services to meet the needs of children with special educational needs? Are there other professionals based at the school? (e.g. Therapists)
- What extra activities does the school provide at lunch time/ after school? What are the play/recreational facilities like? What are the supervision arrangements?
- What is the school's policy on inclusion for school trips? How would they support your child on them?

## **5. Behaviour and support within the school**

- How does the school ensure that all pupils are welcome and that differences are respected?
- How does the school's discipline system adapt to take account of the specific needs and difficulties of children? Is positive behaviour praised?
- Are all staff briefed on potential triggers for outbursts by children? What plans are in place if an incident occurs in a class?
- Are there any quiet areas where children can go if they become stressed or anxious? Are there distraction free work areas?
- Is there any buddy system or peer support where an older child helps a younger child within school?
- Is there a learning mentor system in the school that can be used for your child if they need it? How does this work?

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## School visit checklist

Your advance research into the school may have answered many of the points above, but here are some key points and questions to consider asking:

### Things to consider and discuss before the initial phone call:

- When would you like to visit? (It is better to visit during school hours)
- Will you be taking your child?
- Do you want someone else to accompany you?
- Is the school easy to get to? (think about transport arrangements)
- Would you like to talk to the SENCO?
- Would you like to meet staff who would be involved with your child?

### Possible questions to ask during the visit:

- What is the general structure & timetable for the school day?
- How many children would be in your child's class?
- How many members of staff (i.e. teachers, learning support assistants) would be in your child's class?
- How does the school support children with Special Educational Needs?
- How does the school feel about 1:1 support?
- Does the school know anything about your child's particular disability?
- Has the school had experience of children with the same disability?
- Are all areas of the school accessible to your child? Would any adaptations be required?
- How would your child be supported outside of lesson time?
- How does the school deal with difficult behaviour?
- How is bullying dealt with at the school?
- How does the school help children mix and make friends?
- What extra activities does the school provide at lunchtime and after school?
- How does the school communicate with parents?
- When can parents talk to their child's teacher?
- What arrangements are there for parents to get involved with the school?

### After the Visit:

Discuss your thoughts and feelings with someone else. Consider:

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- Did you feel welcome at the school?
- Did the school answer all of your questions?
- Did the children seem happy, friendly and helpful?
- Did you think your child would be happy at that school?
- Have you got any other questions that you would like to ask the school?
- Could you see your child attending that school?

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