

Independent Special Schools – How to choose and what to look for

Your child has a diagnosis and a proposed or existing Statement of Special Educational Needs setting out clearly all their needs – educational, behavioural, emotional, social, sensory and physical. The Statement may already indicate that these needs can only be met in a special school, or as parents you may be fighting for a school of your choice.

An independent (day or residential) special school can offer specialist knowledge of autism spectrum disorder, high staff to pupil ratios, small classes, a waking day curriculum. However, your Local Authority (LA) may well suggest a school that you feel cannot meet your child's needs or they may leave it up to you to find a school. Your LA should have a list of local mainstream special schools and some independent special schools you can approach, a parent can look at schools 'out of county' if nothing is available locally.

A residential school could be an option which would benefit the whole family – your child would be with specialists who know about their condition/s; they would be able to learn strategies to self regulate their behaviours; they would have a peer group with similar behaviours/interests/anxieties to their own who would understand them. Other children in your home would be able to concentrate on their own life/school/ college work without worrying about their sibling's behaviours and as a parent you would get time to concentrate on things other than your child's negative behaviours. When your child returns home for a weekend or school holidays, you will probably notice that they are better able to manage their behaviours and family relationships. Sending a child to a residential school can be a hard decision to make but the benefits can be huge for everyone concerned.

Remember though that your LA only has to provide 'adequate' education not 'the best' and it has to have regard to 'best use of resources' and this will form the basis of their decision. As a parent it will be up to you to prove why a school being offered cannot meet your child's needs.

Cambian has an information sheet 'Finding a Special Needs School' that lists websites and organisations for you to try in your search for the school that will offer the most suitable care and education for your child. Your LA will expect you to have visited several schools to be able to make a fair comparison and argue your case.

Obtain copies of the latest 'Ofsted' reports for an accurate description of how they are performing: www.ofsted.gov.uk
View the lists of special needs that a school or college can meet with a certain amount of scepticism: make sure the school addresses the difficulties of the conditions, and doesn't just contain them – or think they can cope as "we had a student with this diagnosis a year or so back".

When you have identified several schools, go and visit them:

Most schools will welcome informal visits from parents; many will set aside a day a term for just such 'inspection' visits, so telephone them to check when the next day is planned. These visits are best done by the parents alone, not accompanied by the child, who may get very confused visiting several schools in different parts of the country.

What to look for:

Try to visit schools during a normal school day. Don't just look at the 'hotel' aspects, the beautifully elegant Edwardian townhouse, the large country manor, the indoor swimming pool, the wonderful view, the individual bedrooms all decorated in pastel shades. The standard of such facilities is obviously important, but there are other things you should check. Aim to visit for 1.5 to 2 hours especially if residential and ask to see part of a lesson and unstructured times.

The following is a list of things to either ask yourself as you walk around, and make notes on, or ask someone at the school:

- Was the person delegated to show you around knowledgeable about every aspect of school life? Did they answer your questions helpfully?
- Were they friendly, and giving you the impression that they had all the time in the world for you, the prospective parents of a student?
- Were there locked areas you could not visit? If so, why?
- Is the site secure if your child has no sense of danger or is prone to running away?
- Were you encouraged to talk to staff and students?
- Were you offered opportunities to do so?

- Are OFSTED Education (and Care if residential) Reports available for you to see?
- Many schools may list your child's disorder under their 'special needs' provision – but will they be addressing the issues, and striving to lessen the problems your child has experienced in other schools? If not, they may just be 'containing', not 're-educating' and modifying behaviours.
- Does the school have specialist services and consultants it can call upon? Are there regular visits by doctors, speech therapists, psychologists, etc?
- Does the school encourage visits from parents, referring agencies and other professionals?
- How are parents involved and kept informed about their child?
- How does it monitor its own standards?
- Is there a Complaints Procedure for students and parents to use?
- Is there a Risk Assessment policy for all activities which students might be asked to do?
- Ask to see a copy of the Behaviour Policy
- Are restraints used – if so how and when?

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What official training have staff undertaken?

- What recording arrangements are there for incidents involving behaviour and/or restraint?
- If your child needs any special domestic arrangements – such as a special diet, bedding, etc – would the school be able to respond happily to these very individual needs?
- Are there always qualified first-aiders on site at all times?
- Does the school keep an accident book for any incident, however small?
- Who runs the school: is there a Board of Governors? If not, who are the Heads/Principals answerable to?

Staff and students:

- Did they seem happy? Do you see them smiling and laughing?
- Did you feel that there was a rapport between staff and pupils?
- Is their a suitable peer group for your child?
- You need a lot of commitment and enthusiasm to work in special education – is this evident amongst the staff?
- Does their care and concern for the well-being of their students come across? Not too far into the future, one of these students may be your child!
- Does the school – and all the staff that your child will meet there – have an in-depth knowledge about his particular learning disability and the problems which challenge him?
- What training does the staff undertake? Are staff encouraged to request further training if they feel this is necessary?
- What is the staff to student ratio?
- Is there an Independent Person that any student can talk to confidentially if he has a problem?

The classrooms:

- How many children per class?
- How many adults (teacher plus assistants) in each class?
- Are the rooms colourful and pleasing to the eye?
- Or are they calming and low arousal if your child is hyper sensitive?
- Are they noisy? Too busy?
- Is there a quiet place?
- Is there an 'escape' area in the classroom, or very close by, for a student needing a brief 'time-out'?
- Are there activity areas?
- Do they offer differentiated learning and

individual learning plans?

- Do the pupils have their own work-bays and visual timetables?
- Is there a communal table for group work?
- Are there computers and other IT equipment that your child can easily access to support their learning?
- Does it look as if learning is fun?
- Are books easily accessible? Are they age appropriate?
- What are the standard procedures if, for example, a child needs the lavatory? Has a minor accident in class (cuts himself using scissors etc)? Gets over-wrought and rushes out of the classroom?

Residential school:

Bedrooms:

- Do they look 'homely' – is there 'normality' – posters, hi-fi systems, family photographs?
- Do they look clean?
- Are they tidy? Most teenagers would not see a tidy bedroom as a Number One priority! But if you see an unmade bed at three o'clock in the afternoon, ask why? There may be a very valid reason (an individual development plan required the bed's owner to air and then make the bed himself; the student may have been poorly and in bed all morning, etc).
- Is there single occupancy bedrooms and en suite facilities?

Other factors:

- Many independent schools are in large country houses: what is access like? Will you be able to visit regularly? Will your child feel isolated?

Are there community facilities nearby that the students can use?

- What do they offer at weekends?
- Do they have a 'waking day' curriculum?
- Is there a separate television lounge?
- What rules are there on time spent in front of the television, video-viewing, internet access?
- Is there free time when they can be themselves e.g. if autistic can they hand flap, follow special interests?
- What level of contact is there with 'the outside world'?
- How is home contact maintained and how often?
- Do students go to local youth clubs, the cinema, local shops and sports centre?

Activities should be kept at a normal family level – if they are too high your child may have excessive (and costly) expectations when he comes home.

- Even though it's a residential school, a daily 'head count' should still be seen as necessary. How is this carried out and monitored?
- Are there staff on duty each night? Where are they located? Are they waking night staff, or do they sleep?
- Check the menus – go into the kitchen if you can.
You child is going to LIVE here – it's going to be his second home – check it out!
- What sort of training is given on independent living skills?
- Are older students taught to budget, shop, cook, wash, iron, mix and socialise with the wider community? What other skills appropriate for your son or daughter's level of abilities are taught? e.g. how to fill in forms, what they can expect to find at post offices, libraries, council offices, and other local community resources, how to use a telephone directory, etc?
- Do they have a work experience initiative at this school? Is this carefully monitored and risk assessed?

Don't ignore intuitive thoughts – if everything looks wonderful, but you just don't feel that a school is right for your child then listen to your thoughts. Remember – people can thrive in the most outlandish of places and unkempt of homes: genuine affection, enthusiasm, patience, concern and knowledgeable understanding from staff rate far higher than fresh coats of paint and new curtains.

I'VE FOUND THE RIGHT SCHOOL – WHAT DO I DO NOW?

Tell your LA. Most independent special schools need the LA to approach them on a formal basis requesting a placement. The school needs to look at the child's Statement and relevant paperwork first of all to see just what the problems are. If the school has a vacancy in the right year group, and knows that their particular expertise will help this child and his particular difficulties, they will start their admissions procedure. This may involve visiting the child at home or his school, then inviting him to visit their school.

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IF YOUR LEA REFUSES:

THROUGH THE STATEMENT, TO PROVIDE YOUR CHILD WITH THE LEVEL OF HELP AND SUPPORT YOU FEEL HE NEEDS, OR REFUSES TO NAME THE SCHOOL YOU FEEL WILL SUITABLY MEET HIS NEEDS **YOU CAN APPEAL**. DON'T DELAY, THERE ARE TIME LIMITS – THERE IS CLEAR ADVICE AND GUIDANCE ON THE SEND WEBSITE:

www.justice.gov.uk/tribunals/send

YOU MAY NEED SPECIALIST HELP TO DO THIS: CALL US FOR ADVICE OR DOWNLOAD THE Cambian INFORMATION SHEET "LEGAL HELP".

USEFUL BOOKS:

1. **Securing Appropriate Education Provision for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders** by Allison Hope-West, currently Head of Education at a special school. She has previously worked in a local authority special school, was Deputy Head of a residential autism provision, a LA SEN department, Director of Special Educational Needs Placements for the Cambian Group:

www.jkp.com/catalogue/book/9781849051538

2. **The right place? A parents' guide to choosing a residential special school** by Jenny Morris, compiled after consulting a group of parents. Downloadable FREE from Joseph Rowntree Foundation: www.jrf.org.uk/publications/right-place-parents-guide-choosing-residentialspecial-school

3. **Choosing a School for a Child with Special Needs** by Ruth Birnbaum a chartered educational psychologist with 27 years experience. Available from Jessica Kinglsey Publishers: www.jkp.com or Amazon: www.amazon.co.uk

4. **'SEN Code of Practice.'** This is the publication for England that sets out the Identification, Assessment, Provision, Statutory Assessment and Statementing procedures as followed by LEAs, Head Teachers, Governors and professionals published by the Department of Education. The document can be downloaded from The Department of Education at: <http://media.education.gov.uk/assets/files/pdf/s/special%20educational%20needs%20code%20of%20practice.pdf> or you can ring: 0845 602 2260 for a free copy to be sent.

USEFUL WEBSITES:

The National Autistic Society
Choosing a School in England and Wales.
Website: www.autism.org.uk/living-with-autism/education/primary-and-secondary-school/choosing-school-in-england-wales.aspx

Education Rights Service
(including Tribunal Support Scheme).
Tel: UK wide service 0808 800 4102

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All the information sheets are checked and amended annually. Please ensure you have the current version.



Cambian is the largest provider of specialist residential education and care for young people with Autism, Asperger Syndrome and other associated complex needs in the United Kingdom. Cambian is trusted by hundreds of parents and over 70 Local Education Authorities. www.cambianguroup.com

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