

# Handling the transfer to secondary school

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*Grandmother and Teacher*

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## Personal experiences of issues to consider when choosing a secondary school

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### Start early

Based on personal experience, the transfer to secondary education can be an anxious time and planning ahead can help. My granddaughter is 9 years old and in Year 4 at a local primary school and we have already started looking round the secondary schools. I am aware that the advice usually given to parents is to start this process in Year 5 (see Special Educational Needs Code of Practice – page 57) <sup>[1]</sup> however, we were advised by the head of the primary school to begin a year earlier and I now know why!

### What do you want?

This is a complicated question to answer and the answers will vary with every child and every family but let me try to help you to think it through. Do you want your child in mainstream secondary education or in a special school? Would you like to consider private education? Look at your child's needs and your view of what you want to get out of a secondary education. Do you want an academic education or a good, well-rounded social education? Has your child any special abilities or interests? Choosing the right school for your child entails striking a balance between what you need, what you want and what is available.

Do you want your child to be included in the school, working with peers or do you want appropriate withdrawal for teaching to meet specific needs? Would you be happy with your child being educated in a unit attached to a school? If so, consider the needs of the pupils within

the unit; consider the class size and the staffing ratio. On what occasions are pupils from the unit included in mainstream lessons? How much inclusion takes place? Is it decided upon to meet the needs of the individual child or is it for other reasons?

### Make a list

By this point, you may want to start a list of your conclusions. What do you really want and what are you willing to compromise on? Your decisions will inform the questions that you will ask when visiting the schools and the answers you will receive will inform your choice of school.

### More questions

Consider your child. This may sound obvious but if your child were to transfer to the same school as the majority of children in the primary setting how many of the peer group would be in the same class? It may be fewer than you think if the secondary school is large. If your child enjoys performing arts, there may be a school that specialises in this area. Does your child need a secure environment? Does your child escape at the first opportunity and have no realisation of the dangers that may follow such behaviour? Can your child communicate effectively or does effective communication depend upon the use of Makaton or another sign system? In which case you will have to ensure that this is used within the school.

How would your child cope with break and lunch times? Is there a base or centre within the school,



photo: Stephen Wyatt

which is always open and staffed, to which children may retreat at such times if they do not want to go outside? Would it be possible for them to eat their lunch in such a place if the hustle and bustle of the dining-room is too much for them? Could they be withdrawn to such a place for individual or small group teaching when appropriate?

### Support and communication

How does the school use its support staff? Your child may be used to individual support from one Teaching Assistant [TA] this may not be the practice in a secondary school. The secondary school may allocate several TAs to each child with a statement or they may allocate TAs to departments. Support is organised in many different ways within the secondary system.

How will the school communicate with you and how will you communicate with the school? Who do you contact if there is a problem or something of which the school should be

aware? Are there a variety of channels of communication used regularly or is the annual review, open evenings and the school report all that is offered? Are notes sent home with the child, are home/school books used, will someone ring if there is an issue and if so, who is it likely to be?

With regard to communication, my daughter has expressed that as a parent you want to know everything which is happening at school. In the 'junior' years, you need to know less than the infant years and by the time children reach secondary school one hopes that this 'need to know' will decline further still, as your child becomes more independent.

As a teacher, a mother and a grandmother of a child with a SEN (Special Educational Needs) I can understand her feelings entirely, but from a practical point of view, as a teacher, my opinion is slightly different. The 'need to know' was expressed to me by an educational psychologist in our area as follows: if it is an issue that the school would usually deal with without informing the parent, there is no need to inform the parents of a child who has the SEN label.

### **You are almost ready to visit the schools!**

By now you should have thought through the issues and have your list of questions.

I suggest that you discuss these issues with the SENCo (Special Educational Needs Coordinator). You will be visiting the schools with the parents of children in the current Year 6. You do not need to take your child with you at this point, but you do need to know the details of your statement, if you have one.

### **Your initial visit**

Take note of how the school 'feels' when you visit. What does your 'gut instinct' tell you? One of the schools which my daughter liked, I visited about three years ago and instantly felt that it was a 'happy' school where perhaps my granddaughter might eventually fit in. Does the school feel welcoming?

You may be shown around the school by existing pupils, use this opportunity to talk to your guides. You may know members of staff, or

parents of pupils, talk to them all. Talk to the head-teacher of your child's primary school, they cannot recommend a school but they will often give you very useful advice. Talk to your educational psychologist, they know your child and the schools.

My daughter and I came up with the following attributes for a SENCo: enthusiastic, excited at the prospect of having your child at the school, vibrant, welcoming approachable, a problem solver, empathetic, willing to listen and not over protective. We also agreed that the school has to be inclusive, that all the staff should be aware of the child, their needs and any potential problems. There should also be a willingness to share knowledge and expertise, to enable everyone to contribute to managing any issues which arise.

Make an initial visit to all the schools in your area armed with your list of questions. Visit the special school, even though this may not be the type of education which you feel appropriate. After your initial visit discuss your findings with the primary head if they are willing. You may find it necessary to make more than one visit to several schools. Make sure that you visit again when the school is in session. The schools which you are considering should make you feel welcome to visit as many times as is necessary for you to be as sure as possible that you are making the correct choice. Take someone with you, perhaps the parent of a child who has similar problems, perhaps a friend who works in special needs, anyone who you can think of who may be willing and able to help. A second person may bring a new perspective to what you are seeing and being told and it is always good to have someone to 'bounce your ideas off'.

You will be able to register your preferred school with the LEA in Y5 but this is not binding, you are free to change your mind later. The choice of secondary schools is usually made at the beginning of Y6, but registering your choice early makes it possible to ensure a smooth transition. It gives time for the SENCo from the receiving school to visit the primary school for annual reviews, it also gives plenty of time for the child to visit the school to meet the staff and explore the layout. An early

start will ensure that you have time to reflect on your choice and that there will be the time to prepare for a smooth transition. For more information, see the Code of Practice for SEN section 5/72.

1. Special Educational Needs Code of Practice. Retrieved 20 February, 2006, from <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/docbank/index.cfm?id=3724>