

## **Questions to ask when you are visiting a school for the first time.**

It is most important that you do try and see the school in person. Schools can have 'off days', hopefully not when you visit, but you can always return for a second look. Some things are not obvious the first time around so take someone along with you, if only to take notes or prompt you to ask questions. Some questions apply to both Mainstream and Special schools, some only to the one type of school. You may not need to ask all of these questions and it is possible that I have not covered every area but I hope you will find it a useful starting point.

### **BOTH SCHOOLS**

1. When you telephone the school for an appointment are the secretaries and office staff helpful?
2. Do you get a prompt reply to your call if the person you want to talk to is unavailable?
3. What is the general appearance of the school when you got to visit? Does it look well cared for? It does not have to be a brand new building or in the most glorious location (but that does help!) If the school takes a pride in how it presents itself to the public then it will take pride in its pupils and staff too. Look for litter blowing about, untidy flowerbeds, messy grounds, overflowing waste-bins.
4. Inside the building is there a reception area for you to wait in. does someone meet and greet you? Do you feel welcome or are you regarded as an intruder –interfering with the daily routine?
5. Ideally the Head should be there to show you around or at least be available at some point to answer questions. They can be very busy but you can make it clear when you arrange the appointment that you want the chance to speak to them during the visit.
6. Look at your surroundings as you are taken around the school. Are there pictures on the wall, pupils' work, records of achievement or some special event commemorated? Is it a bright and cheerful place or does it appear tatty and unloved and uncared for?
7. When you go into the classroom, are you introduced to the teacher and the class? (Does your guide check first if it is an appropriate time to drop in – some children do not react well to strangers or may be having a special lesson?) Asking first shows that the staff have respect for each other and the pupils.
8. Who cooks the meals - the school canteen or is it delivered in? What about special dietary requirements? Does your child need feeding through a gastric tube, can the school deal with this type of feeding (most special schools can but very few mainstream schools are able or willing to do this.)
9. It is important to check what medical facilities are available. Is there a school nurse on-site fulltime or only part-time. If there are school trips and away stays will there be a nurse to accompany the trips? Are the teaching staff trained to administer drugs in an emergency? (Some drugs for controlling epilepsy have to be inserted rectally and often children are refused trips because the staff are not trained or it's considered a health and safety issue.)
10. Behaviour management. What strategies does the school use to manage challenging behaviour? How do they monitor if it is working?
11. What therapists visit the school and how often? Does the school have regular access to a Speech Therapist? Do the physiotherapists and occupational therapists visit regularly? How often does the Educational Psychologist visit the school? Is there a long waiting list?
12. After-school activities. Are there any? Who gets to attend? How often a week. What type of activity, Is it integrated? What support can they offer your child?

## **SPECIAL SCHOOLS**

13. Are there links with other schools, particularly mainstream? What sort of link, is it an afternoon a week, one day? Does the whole class go or just individuals? Who accompanies them from the classroom? What happens to the staffing level in the class if one assistant has to go on a link? What are the transport arrangements? Is the link well established? If no link exists, is the school planning to set one up?
14. Take a look at the pupils in the classroom. Are they engaged in a meaningful activity? Are they just sitting around? Do they look clean and cared for? If you visit after lunch you can see whether the less able children have had their faces and hands washed. Check that their teeth get brushed after eating lunch. Where do they eat lunch- In the classroom or a dining room?
15. Often, if your child cannot communicate, the only way a parent can find out what goes on in class is through a Home-School book. This is a book that both teachers and parents use to pass on information on the child's' health and progress, what sort of day they have had. Ask the school if they will let you look at a home-school book to see how well it is kept, is it up-to-date? Do the teachers write useful comments?
16. If you get a chance have a look at what happens at the start of the day. Does the Head greet the children as they arrive? Do the buses arrive on time and deliver the children safely?

## **MAINSTREAM SCHOOLS**

17. If your child is going into Mainstream and needs one-to-one support ask what training is given to the LSA (Learning Support Assistant). Will your child get the same LSA every day or a different one each day? And check carefully what will happen at lunchtime and playtime. You may find that 25hrs one-to-one support does not cover these breaks.
18. Talk to the school SENCO (Special Educational Needs Coordinator) and find out how many children have statements and how many others have special educational needs (SEN). How do they monitor progress? Ask to see an IEP (Individual Education Plan) and that will give you an idea of how the school sets targets, monitors and makes changes to the plan if it does not work.
19. If your child is likely to take part in sports and swimming and needs support, check with the school who will go with the child, the LSA or someone different. (Not all LSA are prepared to go swimming).
20. If your child has speech and language difficulties ask what method will the school use for communication – Makaton, PECS? Do they have access to any computer assisted communication tools?

Don't forget that your own instincts can be a very good guide as to whether you feel the school can offer the right type of teaching for your child. As you look around check to see if the children are happy. Look at how the staff interact with the children. Do they seem caring and interested? A second visit would be useful as you may not see everything the first time around.