

Choosing a mainstream school for a student on the autism spectrum

How children on the autism spectrum get on in a mainstream school depends on the staff, their understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder, flexibility of rules, and willingness to understand and provide for the needs of these children.

There are positive reports from parents about schools which successfully meet the needs of the student, and teachers who have done their homework and make school a happy place to be, as well as poor stories of lack of understanding and inclusion.

Here are some tips to help you achieve a positive school placement.

What do you want for your child?

You need to think carefully about what you want for your child and what your child will be capable of in relation to school. Gather all the information you have about your child – assessment reports, progress reports and ask all those who have worked with your child what they think about schooling. Make some preliminary decisions about types of schools, and then start looking around. Contact the Department of Education and Training (DET) for lists of schools, ask other parents, and then visit schools on your short list. Their website also contains useful information about schools

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/parents/needs/Pages/autism.aspx>.

Once you decide on your school, the Principal should form a Student Support Group (SSG). This group will complete the application for enrolment and an Educational Needs Questionnaire. Later on the SSG is responsible for planning and monitoring the student's program. The SSG comprises school

representatives, parents, consultants (if necessary) and a parent advocate (if desired). If additional funding is granted the Principal determines how the funds are to be used, and should be guided by the SSG.



Student Support Groups (called the SSG)

Regular SSG meetings help to make and implement the goals for your child's educational, behavioural and social needs. Any student with a disability has a right to have SSGs, whether or not they receive additional funding from the Program for Students with Disabilities.

Guidelines for SSGs are in the DET Program for Students with Disabilities package and can be obtained from your principal, or from their website <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/diversity/Pages/handbook.aspx#H2N10063>.

A SSG usually happens once per term and is attended by the parent(s), teacher, integration aide, principal (or nominated person) and school psychologist/welfare co-ordinator/guidance officer. Any other professionals who are relevant to the educational well-being of the student should also be

present. You may also have an advocate to assist you. A private psychologist experienced in Autism Spectrum Disorders can attend a SSG, at a cost, to provide specific strategies and educate staff.

There are several specialist autism schools which can provide a consultancy service, at a small cost, to most schools. This support can be via telephone or in person. Contact should be made by the student's school with the relevant autism school.

If you're having difficulty communicating your concerns or being heard, contact the Association for Children with a Disability (ph 9500 1232 or 1800 654 013) for advocacy support.

If there are issues first try to resolve these with the help of an advocate and by talking with the Principal. If you can't resolve the issues you can contact the DEECD Regional Director.

Other tips to note

- Although many parents ask, Amaze can't recommend 'good' schools. We can't screen schools as there are too many factors – attitudes can change when a principal or teacher leaves or arrives, some schools have psychologists or guidance officers and some don't, some know about Autism Spectrum Disorders but don't carry out basic strategies, while others know nothing about Autism Spectrum Disorders but are willing to learn.
- Also each student has different needs and each family has different expectations. So a school that suits one student on the autism spectrum and his/her family, may not suit a different student or family.
- Talk with the principal of a school to get an idea of the philosophy of the school and what type of support they're willing to provide. If the principal isn't supportive then it's unlikely s/he will be prepared to support staff in implementing intervention strategies or encouraging staff to attend professional development sessions.
- When looking at school you can ask about the school's – knowledge of/experience of Autism Spectrum Disorders, willingness to learn about

Autism Spectrum Disorders and proven strategies, presence of integration teacher, Special Education trained staff, school counsellor or psychologist, flexibility with regards to rules and ability to accept assistance from parents and professionals.

- Were you welcomed by a senior teacher who was accepting of your child's right to attend their school and the needs of students on the autism spectrum – or was keen to learn?
- Did the staff member know about the Program for Students with Disabilities Guidelines and the process for applying for additional funding?



Are there other students with special needs attending the school?

Was there a buzz about the place – lots of different activities, and an attitude of treating the children as individuals with individual needs?

Lunch times are often the hardest times for children with on the autism spectrum – they're unstructured, noisy, chaotic and social – all the things most children on the spectrum find hard. Part of lunchtime spent in the library/computer room can be work in providing 'down time'. Ask about whether the teacher can give the your child important jobs to do during lunch, or join or start a club which runs at lunch time that is part of his/her special interests – chess, astronomy, dinosaurs, Melways, trains etc.

Where possible visual aids (schedules, charts, calendars, lists) can be used to help your child in following daily tasks. Some tasks will need to be broken down into small steps, with a clear process for your child to follow. Behavioural strategies such as a star chart and positive reinforcement can provide motivation and incentive to work on difficult areas.

Teachers should be aware of sensory difficulties caused by noise, bright lights, people brushing against skin etc. A plan should be in place for times when your child is anxious or overwhelmed – relaxation strategies, a space for ‘down time’ and a system for how your child will access ‘down time’.

You should also consider informing classmates of your child’s difficulties and how they can help.

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