

Choosing a Primary School



And in the blink of an eye, the time has come to make decisions about where you would like your child to go to school.

Choosing a school for any child often comes with some fear and trepidation. As our children all have a little something extra, this process can seem additionally daunting at times. There are lots of decisions to be made. However you are not alone, we are here to help you as best we can and there are many others in the same situation.

Parents across the country have been through this and survived, and their children thrived! Here at Down Syndrome UK, we support many children and their families through this process. We feel it is helpful to share some top tips and questions to ask yourself, that we have learnt along the way, so we can best support you with your decision making.

1. Make a list of local schools in your area.

- Ask local parents on their views. (If you are part of a Down Syndrome UK's Network Group this can be a good place to start.)
- Bear in mind that every child with Down syndrome is unique and therefore one school may work well for one child, but may not suit another child in quite the same way.

2. Make an appointment to visit all the schools that you are interested in, as you need to make an informed choice. (Schools are busy places, and act within strict safeguarding perimeters, so please do not just turn up on the off chance you maybe able to have a school visit.)

- Do you want a traditional school, a faith school, and/or a school that has a strong outdoor curriculum?
- Think about location, is it local or will transport be needed?
- Do you have any other children, either older or younger? Are you wanting them to be at the same school?

3. Make an appointment to speak to the school's SENCo (Special Educational Needs Coordinator) and Head teacher, preferably at the same time as the initial visit.

These will be key people in your child's education, so it is important to meet them both and to have a meaningful conversation with them. Establish if either are retiring/changing roles, will they be in post when your child potentially starts?

4. When visiting the school try to:

- Arrive slightly early, so you can get parked and collect your thoughts before going in. (If unfamiliar with the school set up, ask what facilities there are for parking, some schools allow visitor parking on site, others don't have this option.)
- Ask for a guided visit when the school is open so you can see children and staff in action.
- Be open and positive about your child's character and needs.
- Be open about what you would like emotionally, socially, and academically for your child.
- Ask how many children in the school currently have SEN (Special Education Needs)?
- Ask how these children are supported?
- Ask if any of the teaching staff have experience and/or working knowledge of working with children with Down syndrome?
- Ask to see a copy of the SEN policy (these can normally be found on the school website.)
- Ask if the teaching staff have had any whole school SEN training recently and if so what was it about?
- Ask if staff would be able to attend training specifically around including a child with Down syndrome? If so, who would the school make available to attend such training – ideally whole school. If not, then certainly SENCo, teacher(s) and teaching assistants (TA) who will be working with your child in their first year.

- Ask if they would have a small team of TAs to work with your child?
- Ask if anyone has had any recent or previous experience of teaching a child with Down syndrome?
- Ask about home school communication, how does this work? What does it look like?
- Ask about extra-curricular activities and can all children access these?
- Ask if there is any wrap around care or homework clubs?

Take a notebook to record thoughts either during or after the visit. If possible, take another person with you, partner, friend, or someone from current nursery so you can compare observations after the visit. After the visit try and schedule in some reflective time, a visit to a coffee shop often works wonders.

As reference, we would consider it best practice for whole school training to include all staff, not just teachers and teaching assistants but also lunch time supervisors, kitchen and office staff etc, everyone who will potentially interact and engage with your child.

Questions to ask yourself after a school visit

1. How welcome were you made to feel?
2. How did the school answer my questions?
3. What questions, if any, did the school ask you about your child?
4. Will this school welcome my child and do everything they can to ensure my child is happy, safe, included and learning?
5. Will this school see my child as a child first and foremost, or be overwhelmed by their diagnosis?
6. Will I feel confident in letting my child go there?
7. Are the staff willing to work in partnership with me?
8. Is the SENCo/Head teacher receptive to training around supporting a pupil with Down syndrome?

Make a list of positives and negatives and do this after each school visit. Many parents feel that after visiting the “right” school they have an instinctive feeling that they have found it. This opinion is usually formed after visiting the school, looking at its physical set out, discussion with the Head teacher, seeing the staff and children in their settings and viewing the school as a whole community, including lunch time supervisors, reception staff and caretakers.

Some statements to consider

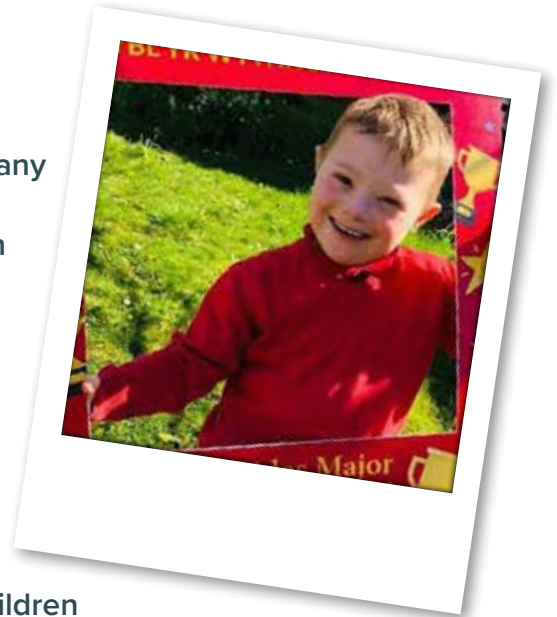
- An outstanding school, with great OFSTED reports that comes top in local league levels, may not always offer the best SEN provision in terms of ethos, inclusive practice and teaching commitment.
- Head teachers, teachers and teaching assistants can change from year to year and with that change can bring a different ethos to the school.
- A smaller school is not necessarily more welcoming and maybe limited in resources and funding.
- The right attitude and expectations can be as or even more important as experience.
- Signing ‘good morning, how are you today?’ in assembly does not constitute a fully inclusive environment.
- A larger school may have additional practical and physical resources.
- Don’t dismiss a school as it has no or limited experience of working with children with Down syndrome, as it may still be open to learning.



It is a big decision choosing the right school for your child. You may well shortlist 2 or 3 schools or instinctively know which is the right one - decision made! We would suggest you have a follow up meeting with the SENCo and/or Head teacher to speak in greater detail around some of the issues that need to be considered before your child starts. We would recommend that you talk through and have a good understanding of the school's approach and commitment to the following, and consider how this would work for your child:

1. Transition visits – plan dates, who will attend and what the objectives are. Consider staff from nursery attending, not just a parent. Short and frequent visits are better than just one or two long visits. Also important for school staff to visit your child at home and in their nursery setting.
2. Transition resources – ideally prepare a **Going to school** book featuring photos of key places and people at the school, eg entrance where your child will be dropped off, where their coat will be hung up, toilets, classroom, play areas, where lunch will be eaten etc, together with photos of staff your child will regularly engage with.
3. Training Makaton – do they already use Makaton, does anybody need training? Supporting a child with Down syndrome – has anybody accessed recent training? If not, who will and when? Be mindful of school's limited budgets. If training is specified in your child's EHCP then the Local Authority has to fund it. If not, the school has to find the money and may simply not have the budget.
4. External specialist Down syndrome support - does the school have access to professionals with experience, training and understanding of the Down syndrome specific learning profile, who can work with a school on a regular (ideally at least termly) basis?
5. Allocation/appointment of teaching assistants – we generally advocate better to have 2 or 3, rather than just 1 as child may become over dependent. Different TAs will bring different skills and experiences and engage differently with your child; however, expectations of learning and behaviour need to be consistent.
6. Social inclusion – one of the biggest benefits of mainstream education is for the child to be socially included. It is important to set out expectations from the start – for the child to be a fully included member of the class, and for staff to support and promote social engagement. TAs must be mindful that they do not over support a child nor become a barrier between the child and classmates.

7. Equipment – consider whether the school will require any new equipment, particularly seating in the classroom and at mealtimes. Ensure school will obtain input from OT, physio and S<. Consider toileting facilities for suitability.
8. S< – for some speech and language activities, it is beneficial to be in a quiet area – is there such a space that can be used?
9. Home school communication – consider frequency and expected content for day to day. Generally, our children are unable to come home and recount what they got up to, yet want to share, so promote the use of photos with brief info, available on an iPad that travels to and from home or printed/shared online on the day. Important for child to also take photos at weekends/holidays to take into school to share. Also consider parental engagement with teacher and with SENCo.
10. Preparation – recommend reading DSUK’s publication ST&Rting school – full of practical tips and advice for schools receiving a pupil with Down syndrome.



Finally - have **realistic expectations** - don't expect a school to tick every box and don't be too demanding. Be realistic around what a school can and can't do, look to work with staff as a team. You are starting a potential 7 year relationship so don't go in all guns blazing or put people's backs up before your child has even started! Be reasonable, be considerate and be understanding and **relax** – it's not going to be perfect on day one, but with the right preparation and attitudes it will be more than good enough!

If your child already has an EHCP in place, school should have read this and considered any areas they have concerns or questions around.

Some local Down syndrome charities deliver training and provide external specialist support. DSUK's ST&R programme offers a range of online training and support services.

Background information

At DSUK we recommend your child's EHCP is in place at least the term before they start at school.

The EHCP carries with it a pot of money that the local authority pays to the school. This is the cost to provide the provision set out in the EHCP, this may be in the region of c£12,000 for 1:1 full time TA support, c£1,500 for training, c£1,200 for speech and language provision etc. The amounts will vary dependent on your child's individual needs. It is worth being aware that for each school they are expected to fund the first £6,000 of your child's EHCP from their existing budget.

Education is every child's birth right and we all know that our children can and do learn.

Inclusion is more than a policy and more than a token gesture, it needs to be a way of life. A school that truly values everyone, celebrates diversity and individuality, understands that every child is unique and accepts that inclusion is everyone's responsibility.

We wish you and your child all the very best in the next steps of their education journey.

Written by Maggie Hart, a Down Syndrome Specialist Teacher and Nicola Enoch, CEO of Down Syndrome UK, each proud parent to a young man with Down syndrome.

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Additional information can be accessed via ST&R Facebook groups:



ST&R for professionals



ST&R for parents



Additional information

Down Syndrome UK

A range of resources and details of training can be accessed via DSUK's website

