

Information Sheet

Choosing a Mainstream School for a Student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder

Compiled May 2004, Reviewed and updated April 2011.

How children with Autism Spectrum Disorder get on in a mainstream school depends on the staff, their understanding of Autism, Asperger Syndrome and PDD-NOS, 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 Early Childhood Development (DEECD) office for lists of schools, ask other parents, and then visit schools on your short list. Their website also contains useful information about their schools

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/findaservice/Home.aspx>

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

Program Support Groups (called the PSG)

Regular PSGs are vital to forming and implementing the goals for your child's educational, behavioural and social needs. Any student with a disability has a right to have PSGs, regardless of whether or not they receive additional funding from the Program for Students with Disabilities.



Guidelines for PSGs are in the DEECD Program for Students with Disabilities package and can be obtained from your principal, or from their website <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/healthwellbeing/wellbeing/disability/handbook/default.htm>

A PSG should occur approximately once per term and be 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. Parents may also have an advocate to assist them. A private psychologist experienced in Autism Spectrum Disorders can attend a PSG, 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 (see details on page four).

If parents are having difficulty communicating their concerns or being heard, and need a liaison between themselves and the school, then the Association for Children with a Disability (ph 9500 1232 or 1800 654 013) can assist with advocacy support.

If issues arise and cannot be resolved with the assistance of an advocate and discussions with the Principal, then parents can contact the DEECD Regional Director. Be aware that the Regional Director will expect parents to have attempted to address their concerns with the Principal prior to contacting the regional office.

Other tips to note

We are unable to recommend 'good' schools, as we are so often requested to do. It is simply not possible for us to screen schools as there are too many variables – attitudes can change with the arrival/departure of a principal or teacher, some schools have psychologists or guidance officers and some do not, some purport to know about Autism Spectrum Disorders and then fail to carry out basic strategies, while others know nothing about Autism Spectrum Disorders but are willing to learn.



Another variable we have observed is the needs of students and expectations of families – a school that suits one student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder and his/her family, may not suit a different student or family.

An initial interview with the principal of a school should give parents an indication of the philosophy of the school and what type of support they are willing to provide. If the principal is not supportive then it is unlikely s/he will be prepared to support staff in implementing intervention strategies or encouraging staff to attend professional development sessions.

Facets to look for in a potential school are – knowledge of/experience with Autism Spectrum Disorders, a willingness to learn about Autism Spectrum Disorders and proven strategies, presence of integration teacher, Special Education trained staff,

school counsellor or psychologist, a willingness to be flexible with regards to certain rules and finally a willingness to accept outside 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 with an Autism Spectrum Disorder – or gave an open willingness 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 Autism Spectrum Disorders – they are unstructured, noisy, chaotic and social – all the things most children with Autism Spectrum Disorders find so very hard. Part of lunchtime spent in the library/computer room can be very effective in providing 'down time'. Or give the student important jobs to do during lunch, or start a club which runs at lunch time that is part of his/her special talents repertoire – chess, astronomy, dinosaurs, Melways, trains etc.

Where possible use visual aids (schedules, charts, calendars, lists) to assist the student

in following daily tasks. Some tasks will need to be broken down into discrete steps, with a clear process for the student 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 the student is anxious or overwhelmed – relaxation strategies, a designated space for 'down time' and a system for how the student will access 'down time'.

You should also consider informing classmates of specific difficulties and how they can assist.

Resources

There are many books that have been designed to assist with school and classroom issues. The following books would be useful for school staff (and parents). These are available for loan from the Autism Victoria Library (our library reference number is in brackets).

1. Asperger Syndrome: A Practical Guide for Teachers (1619), Cumine, Leach & Stevenson
2. Asperger Syndrome- practical strategies for the classroom: A Teacher's Guide (1662), National Autistic Society
3. Choosing a School for a Child with Special Needs (3261), Ruth Birnbaum
4. Access and Inclusion for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (2052), Matthew Hesmonahalgh & Christine Breakey
5. Understanding and Teaching Children With Autism (1248), Jordan & Powell
6. Autism – PDD: Creative Ideas During the School Years (1586), Janice Adams
7. Incorporating Social Goals in the Classroom (2012), R. Moyes

8. Inside Out – What Makes A Person with Social Cognitive Deficits Tick? (2114), M. Garcia Winner
9. Visual Strategies for Improving Communication (2106), L. Hodgdon
10. Making Visual Supports Work in the Home and Community (2113), Savner & Smith Myles
11. Navigating the Social World (2115), J. McAfee
12. Teaching Your Child the Language of Social Success (2107) Duke, Nowicki & Martin
13. Meeting the Needs of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (1950), Jordan & Jones
14. Higher Functioning Adolescents and Young Adults with Autism: A Teacher's Guide (1551), Fullerton et al
15. Relationship Management in the Primary Classroom: Strategies in Legal and Social Context (2552), Siobhan Pirola-Merlo
16. Taming the Recess Jungle (1913) and How to Respond to a Bullying Attempt (1993), Carol Gray
17. Autism: A Social Skills Approach for Children and Adolescents (1690), Aarons & Gittens
18. What Does It Mean To Me? A Workbook and Guide (1892), C. Faherty
19. Making it a Success: Practical Strategies and Worksheets for Teachers (1971), A.C.E.S.
20. Asperger Syndrome – what teachers need to know (2323), M. Winter
21. Asperger's Huh? A Child's Perspective (2103), R. Schnurr
22. Tobin Learns to Make Friends (2104), D. Murrell

These books can be used to assist peers/siblings in understanding Autism Spectrum Disorders:

23. Children with Autism: a booklet for brothers and sisters (1034) and Able Autistic Children: children with Aspergers Syndrome (1138), J. Davies
24. Andy and His Yellow Frisbee (1713), M. Thompson
25. Little Rainman (1611), K.L. Simmons
26. My Friend with Autism (2336), B. Bishop
27. What Does It Mean to Have Autism? (2380), L. Spilsbury

Most of these books can be purchased through the specialist Autism bookstores. If there is more than one student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder at your school you may like to request that the school purchase some of these books.

A useful website is run by O.A.S.I.S. They have an entire section dedicated to Education, which provides articles, strategies, teaching tools, educational videos, examples of Individual Education Plans, and a Letter of Introduction that can be provided to teaching staff to introduce them to Autism Spectrum Disorders and the strengths/difficulties of your child. Go to <http://www.aspergersyndrome.org/Bookstore.aspx>

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