



Information Sheet

Questions to Ask Schools

Choosing a school can be a stressful and difficult time for many parents; however, there are questions that you can ask the school to help you decide whether they will be able to meet your child's specific needs. Updated April 2016

Will you provide my child with an Individual Learning Plan (ILP)?

Individual Learning Plans include S.M.A.R.T. goals (goals which are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely), written specifically for your child. Ask about the way the school writes and reviews ILPs. It is strongly recommended that this be a collaborative approach with input from professionals (school staff/therapists) and parents/carers. Goals that address the 'hidden curriculum' (areas such as social skills in the playground or during assembly) should be included. ILPs need to be reviewed **at least** twice a year.

Will a Student Support Group (SSG) be set up for my child?

SSGs are made up of the key people in your child's life and educational journey, such as:

- Representatives from the school (teacher, educational support officer, principal, specialist teacher);
- Professionals (psychologist, occupational therapist, speech pathologist); and
- You!

The group writes and reviews ILPs, discusses funding arrangements and appropriate strategies. SSG meetings should be conducted every term.

For more information about the Program for Students with Disabilities (PSD) in Victoria and to download the latest version of the SSG guidelines, visit: www.education.vic.gov.au/school/parents/needs

For information from the Catholic Education Commission: www.cecv.catholic.edu.au/publications/CECV-Intervention-Framework.pdf

For information from Independent Schools in Victoria visit www.is.vic.edu.au/schools/gov-programs/special-education.htm

What disability-specific supports are available to my child?

The kind of support a school may provide will depend on what kind of school it is, whether your child has additional funding, and whether the school has previously set up supports for other students on the autism spectrum.

Support could include:

- an educational support officer (teacher's aide) in the classroom;
- facilities such as an accessible toilet if your child has toileting difficulties;
- the purchase and use of visual schedules or fidget toys;
- alternative indoor activities during lunch breaks or the establishment of a quiet "chill out" area.

Supports could also include further training for staff members or input from allied health professionals such as speech pathologists, psychologists, or welfare officers.

What assistance will be provided in the playground?

School is more than just classroom learning: it is important children also learn from the social world of the playground. Your child may require

support and strategies to assist them to form positive relationships with their peers. This information may need to be included in the ILP and discussed regularly by the SSG. Ask if the school has lunchtime sports, clubs, or other extracurricular activities that your child can be involved in.

How does the school handle bullying?

A successful anti-bullying program will target prevention, as well as having procedures in place to deal with bullying incidents if they occur. Strategies that focus on building confidence and resilience are great. 'Buddy' programs, in which your child is 'buddied' up with another older child (a mentor) or a child the same age, are also very effective. This could be a valuable introduction to the playground and the social world of school. It might also mean that your child has a regular partner on excursions or to sit next to during assembly.

How will the teacher and I communicate?

It may be through a daily communication book, or you may exchange email or have a weekly catch up in person. Whatever method you choose, it is important that a means of communication is established early. When you communicate, ensure that you and the teacher are not merely cataloguing your child's behaviours. This is a chance to talk about their strengths and what strategies are working for them.

What support is there for transitions?

Many students on the autism spectrum have difficulty transitioning between places, activities or people. Transitions to *new* places such as a school trip to the zoo; *new* activities such as music instead of drama; or *new* people such as relief teachers or visitors can be especially difficult.

Developing a 'transition plan' with your child's support staff, which clearly explains and sets out parameters, is advisable. This plan may identify who assists the child from the classroom to the library or from the bus to the classroom. It could be an introductory program for moving to a new grade or a social script used at home and at school to support excursions, swimming programs or school concerts. The plan could also include procedures to advise home about a change in staff or schedule early in the day via electronic means.

What behaviour management approaches and support does the school use?

Look for an emphasis on proactive rather than reactive strategies to behaviour management.

Proactive strategies focus on planning and support, whereas reactive strategies focus on consequences. An effective proactive strategy involves reinforcing positive behaviours. If your child exhibits behaviours of concern, discuss these during SSG meetings and devise a behaviour support plan that all staff will need to follow in the event that behaviours are exhibited at school.

Remember: look for a positive approach and attitude from all parties involved in your child's education.

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