

Getting Ready for School

Tips & Ideas from the SMA Community

This booklet passes on tips, ideas and experiences from families in the SMA community and professionals. Thank you to them all. It covers:

- **What do parents and carers suggest we think about?**
- **What do they suggest we look for when we visit schools?**
- **How do we make a decision?**

1. **What do parents and carers suggest we think about?**

- Which schools are your children's friends / any siblings going to?
- Which schools link to any early years' settings your child is going to?
- What do local parents say about which schools are good?
- What does OFSTED say about schools in your area, including about their SEND provision?
- Have you a definite preference for:
 - mainstream or
 - mainstream with specialist physical disability provision (where they exist), or
 - special school
 - or are you looking at all options?

'It's a good idea to start exploring options in plenty of time'. **Parent**

- How far away from home is OK? Thinking about:
 - your daily routine and commitments (e.g. other children, work?)
 - how long it takes to get your child up and ready
 - how tired they get
 - what travel time is reasonable to add on to their day
 - how they will get there
 - making friends with children who can come and play
- If you have to choose, is a headteacher and SENCo with experience of including disabled children, or a 'can do' attitude more important to you?
- If you get a commitment to making the building accessible, are you confident it will happen? Or do you want the certainty of a school where the building is already accessible (e.g. for wheelchair access in toilets, changing areas and classrooms)?

'It is important to ask how willing the school seem to make necessary adaptations. If they seem negative, how important is it to you that your child goes to this school? Will you continue to have battles?' **Parent**

- Is it going to be important for your child to be in a school that will make it possible for them to have regular input from:
 - a physio or occupational therapist (OT)
 - a speech and language therapist (SALT)?
- If your child needs to use equipment or needs to be lifted, is it important that staff are already trained and / or that they have a commitment to appropriate training?

'Visiting schools and meeting staff can give you a 'feel' for a school that you cannot get in any other way.' **Parent**

2. What do they suggest we look for when we visit schools?

'Look out for open days when the school is 'on show' but it is also possible to request a quieter visit and, for example, ask to meet whoever is in charge of support for children with additional needs and the reception teacher'. **Parent**

- Does the school already have (or has it had) children with similar access needs to your child?
- How good is physical access? (e.g. for wheelchair access in toilets, changing areas and classrooms)
- How many children would be in the reception class? How do new children get settled in?

'It can be good to visit during school hours, when children are there and ask to speak to the SEN Coordinator' **Parent**

- How much space is there in classrooms and out of doors?
- What happens at break and lunch times? How would they work for your child?
- How would your child access trips or outdoor visits?
- What is the school's attitude, SEND Policy and set up? How do they usually organise support so that your child would be fully included in all the classroom and other possible activities?

- How would the school go about organising and making room for any specialist equipment (such as specialist seating, a height adjustable table, a hoist and slings, computer equipment) that your child needs? Ask the SENCo how access to equipment works and whether they will liaise with your child's physio or OT.
- What are the options for your child to get to school? If needed, would the local authority provide transport? What are the eligibility criteria and how would this work?
- What sort of outings, clubs or other activities like music and sports do they offer? Do they have experience of adapting them if needed?
- If your child needs support from a teaching assistant, how does this get set up and how will it work?

3. How do we make a decision?

"We went through all our questions and priorities, especially, how welcoming the school was and how they reacted to our child's support needs. Most had no previous experience of SMA, but we looked for the ones who showed a willingness to learn." **Parent**

"Whatever it said about inclusivity, it was important for us how staff spoke to our child when we visited." **Parent**

"Many primary schools will have experience of working with children who have extra learning, or communication, needs. Physical disability is relatively "low incidence" but look out for a can-do, inclusive attitude from all staff." **Professional**

"I looked at lots of primary schools and accessibility was very poor at most of them. For me, the attitude of staff is the MOST important thing, though. It didn't matter if they have previous experience with disabled pupils, but they need to have a can-do attitude and not be afraid of them. They need to see the child as a human and not a problem! They need to be able to think outside the box and ensure inclusion." **Parent**

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