

What to look for

Your child has been assessed, found to have a learning disability, and has a Statement of Special Educational Need indicating that these needs can only be met in a special school.

You and your Local Education Authority (LEA) may agree that your child needs the very specialist provision that independent (residential) special schools can offer, ie: in-depth knowledge of the learning difficulty, the high staff to pupil ratios, small classes, waking day curriculum. However your LEA may well suggest a school that you do not feel is appropriate or they may leave it up to you to find a school. Your LEA should have a list of local mainstream special schools and some independent special schools you can approach.

OAASIS has an information sheet '**Finding a special needs school**' that lists eleven websites and organisations for you to try in your search for the school that will offer the best care and education for your child. Please give us a ring if you are having problems, as we do compile lists from directories for schools/colleges that cater for certain conditions.

If you have found a few schools that seem suitable for your child, go and visit them

Most schools will welcome informal visits from parents; many will set aside a day a term for just such 'inspection' visits, so telephone them to check when the next day is planned. These visits are best done by the parents alone, not accompanied by the child, who may get very confused visiting several schools in different parts of the country.

What to look for

Try to visit schools during a normal school day. Don't just look at the 'hotel' aspects, the beautifully elegant Edwardian townhouse, the large country manor, the indoor swimming pool, the wonderful view, the individual bedrooms all decorated in pastel shades. The standard of such facilities is obviously important, but there are other things you should check.

The following is a list of things to either ask yourself as you walk around, and make notes on, or ask someone at the school

- Was the person delegated to show you around knowledgeable about every aspect of school life? Did they answer your questions helpfully? Were they friendly, and giving you the impression that they had all the time in the world for you, the prospective parents of a student?
- Were there locked areas you could not visit? If so, why?
- Were you encouraged to talk to staff and students? Were you offered opportunities to do so?
- Are Commission for Social Care Inspection and OFSTED reports available for you to see?
- Many schools may list your child's disorder under their 'special needs' provision - but will they be addressing the issues, and striving to lessen the problems your child has experienced in other schools? If not, they may just be 'containing', not 're-educating' and modifying behaviours.
- Does the school have specialist services and consultants it can call upon? Are there regular visits by doctors, speech therapists, psychologists, etc?

- Does the school encourage visits from parents, referring agencies and other professionals?
- How does it monitor its own standards?
- Is there a Complaints Procedure for students and parents to use?
- Is there a Risk Assessment policy for all activities which students might be asked to do?
- Even where the school is a boarding school, a daily 'head count' should still be seen as necessary. How is this carried out and monitored?
- If your child needs any special domestic arrangements – such as a special diet, bedding, etc – would the school be able to respond happily to these very individual needs?
- Are there always qualified first-aiders on site at all times?
- Are there staff on duty each night? Where are they located? Are they waking night staff, or do they sleep?
- Does the school keep an accident book for any incident, however small?
- Many independent schools are in large country houses: what is access like? Will you be able to visit regularly? Will your child feel isolated? Are there community facilities nearby that the students can use?
- Who runs the school: is there a Board of Governors? If not, who are the Heads/Principals answerable to?

Staff and students

- Did they seem happy? Do you see them smiling and laughing?
- Did you feel that there was a rapport between staff and pupils?
- You need a lot of commitment and enthusiasm to work in special education - is this evident amongst the staff?
- Does their care and concern for the well-being of their students come across? Not too far into the future, one of these students may be your child!
- Does the school – and all the staff that your child will meet there – have an in-depth knowledge about his particular learning disability and the problems which challenge him?
- What training do the staff undertake? Are staff encouraged to request further training if they feel this is necessary?
- Is there an Independent Person that any student can talk to confidentially if he has a problem?

The classrooms

- How many children per class?
- How many adults (teacher plus assistants) in each class?
- Are the rooms colourful and pleasing to the eye?
- Are they noisy? Too busy?
- Is there a quiet place?
- Is there an 'escape' area in the classroom, or very close by, for a student needing a brief 'time-out'?
- Are there activity areas?
- Do the pupils have their own work-bays?
- Is there a communal table for group work?
- Are there computers and other aids that your child might need?
- Does it look as if learning is fun?
- Are books easily accessible? Are they age appropriate?
- What are the standard procedures if, for example, a child needs the lavatory? Has a minor accident in class (cuts himself using scissors etc)? Gets over-wrought and rushes out of the classroom?

The bedrooms

- Do they look 'homely' - is there 'normality' - posters, hi-fi systems, family photographs?
- Do they look clean?
- Are they tidy? Most teenagers would not see a tidy bedroom as a Number One priority! But if you see an unmade bed at three o'clock in the afternoon, ask why? There may be a very valid reason (an individual development plan required the bed's owner to air and then make the bed himself; the student may have been poorly and in bed all morning, etc).

Other

If it's a termly boarding school -

- What do they offer at weekends?
- Is there a separate television lounge?
- What rules are there on time spent in front of the television, video-viewing, internet access?
- What level of contact is there with 'the outside world'?
- Do students go to local youth clubs, the cinema, local shops and sports centre? Activities should be kept at a normal family level - if they are too high your child may have excessive (and costly) expectations when he comes home.
- Check the menus - go into the kitchen if you can. You child is going to LIVE here - it's going to be his second home - check it out!
- What sort of training is given on independent living skills?
- Are older students taught to budget, shop, cook, wash, iron, mix and socialise with the wider community? What other skills appropriate for your son or daughter's level of abilities are taught? Eg: how to fill in forms, what they can expect to find at post offices, libraries, council offices, and other local community resources, how to use a telephone directory, etc?
- Do they have a work experience initiative at this school? Is this carefully monitored and risk assessed?

Note: The OAASIS Information Sheets use 'he'/'his'/'him' rather than the cumbersome 'he / she'/'his / her'/'him / her'. No sexism is intended. The sheets are checked annually; please ensure you have the current version.

Don't ignore intuitive thoughts - if everything looks wonderful, but you just don't feel that a school is right for your child, and then listen to yourself. Remember - people can thrive in the most outlandish of places and unkempt of homes: genuine affection, enthusiasm, patience, concern and knowledgeable understanding from staff rate far higher than fresh coats of paint and new curtains.

I've found the right school - what do I do now?

Tell your LEA. Most independent special schools need the LEA to approach them on a formal basis requesting a placement. The school needs to look at the child's Statement and relevant paperwork first of all to see just what the problems are. If the school has a vacancy in the right year group, and knows that their particular expertise will help this child and his particular difficulties, they will start their admissions procedure. This may involve visiting the child at home or his school, then inviting him to visit their school.

If your LEA

- Refuses to do a statutory assessment of your child's educational needs
- Refuses, after a statutory assessment of a learning disability, to issue a statement
- Refuses, through the statement, to provide your child with the level of help and support you feel he needs, or refuses to name the school you feel will suitably meet his needs

You can appeal. You may need specialist help to do this: see the oasis information sheet "legal help".

Useful Books

1. "Special Education Handbook" 9th edition. Advisory Centre for Education. Practical advice on meetings with schools, examining a statement, disability rights, choosing a school, taking an appeal or complaint through the system. Publisher: ACE, 1b Aberdeen Studios, 22 Highbury Grove, London N5 2DQ. £17.99 + p&p. To order by credit card
Web: at www.ace-ed.org.uk **Tel:** 020 7704 3370

2. "Special Educational Needs Code of Practice" (date of issue Nov 2001) Publisher: DfES. For a free copy, telephone DfES Publications: Tel: 0845 602 2260, order online at www.dfes.gov.uk or it can be downloaded at http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/_doc/3724/SENCodeOfPractice.pdf.

3. "The right place? A parents' guide to choosing a residential special school" by Jenny Morris. Compiled after consulting a group of parents. Downloadable FREE from Joseph Rowntree Foundation www.jrf.org.uk/bookshop/

Other useful websites

The DfES (Department for Education and Skills). The Special Education Needs section has useful information on how to appeal and what to expect at a Tribunal.

Web: www.dfes.gov.uk

The list of accredited schools for pupils with dyslexia

Web: www.crested.org.uk

The OAASIS Helpline

Web: www.oaasis.co.uk **Tel:** 01590 622880

The IPSEA (Independent Panel for Special Education Advice)

Web: www.ipsea.org.uk **Helpline:** 0800 018 4016

The National Autistic Society

Web: www.nas.org.uk **Helpline:** 0845 070 4004



www.cambianeducation.com

Cambian is the largest provider of specialist residential education and care for young people with Autism, Asperger Syndrome and other associated complex needs in the United Kingdom. Cambian is trusted by hundreds of parents and over 70 Local Education Authorities

OAASIS publications

- SEN Information Sheets
- First Guide to ...
- Cards explaining 9 learning disabilities
- Legal advice Information Sheets
- SEN 'How to' guides

All OAASIS publications can be downloaded from www.oaasis.co.uk