

The School Visit Guide

A clear guide for parents exploring schools for autistic and neurodivergent children aged 5–11

Warm Practical Parent-friendly



Built for School Visits

Quick jump

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How to use it

Skim first. Mark the pages that matter most for your child. Come back to the prompt bank before your visit, not during a busy moment the night before.

Quick reminder

You do not need to sound like an expert. Calm, honest questions are enough. If something matters, ask to see it, ask again, or ask for it in writing.

Welcome - you're not alone

A gentle start for parents feeling uncertain after a diagnosis or when a school no longer feels like the right fit.

What this stage can feel like

If you have recently received a diagnosis of autism or ADHD for your child, this stage can feel overwhelming.

You may be wondering what kind of school will support your child emotionally, socially and academically.

You are not expected to have all the answers straight away. This guide is here to help you notice what matters, ask meaningful questions and reflect afterwards.



What you are really looking for

A setting where your child can feel safe, understood, included and supported to grow.

School options - what are you actually comparing?

There is no one-size-fits-all answer. The right fit depends on your child and the school, not just the label on the door.

Mainstream school

A general primary or secondary school where children with SEND are supported through reasonable adjustments, staff support and, at times, small-group or one-to-one help.

- Can they flex their approach so your child feels safe and able to learn?
- Are the strategies practical, visible and used day to day?
- Would your child cope with the pace, noise and shared spaces?

Special school

A setting designed for children with more complex needs. These schools often have smaller classes, more specialist staff and therapeutic support built into the day.

- Will your child be supported and still encouraged to grow?
- Does the curriculum still match your hopes?
- Will the environment feel calm without becoming limiting?

What matters most is not whether a school sounds good in theory. It is whether the support feels real, specific and achievable in practice.



What to expect on a school visit

Most visits are simply a chance to see the environment, hear how support works and ask the questions that matter to you.

Most visits include

Being met by a member of staff, such as the SENCO, headteacher or office team; a tour of classrooms, playgrounds, calm spaces, toilets and shared areas; time to ask how the school responds when a child is struggling, overwhelmed or dysregulated; and the option to ask to see something specific. Visits often last 30 to 60 minutes, but this varies.

Getting ready for your visit

Before you go

- Prepare a few key questions.
- Bring the guide on your phone or tablet, or print the pages you need.
- Take a copy of your child's EHCP or a short summary of their needs if you have one.
- Pack water, tissues and a comfort item if your child is coming too.

What helps most

You do not need to sound expert. A calm, honest question is enough. It is fine to ask staff to slow down, repeat something, or show you an area again.



**Gentle reminder: take a breath before you go
- you are doing your best.**

Top tip: you do not need to notice everything in one go. Use the visit to get a feel for the school and follow up afterwards if needed.

EHCs in England - a simple guide

This section is for families in England. Other UK nations use different systems and different wording.

What an EHC plan is

An Education, Health and Care plan is a legal document for children and young people up to age 25 who need more support than is normally available through SEN support. It sets out the child or young person's educational, health and social care needs, the outcomes being worked towards, and the provision that should be put in place.

Who can ask for an EHC needs assessment?

A request is most often made by a parent or carer, a young person aged 16 to 25, or a school or post-16 setting. Other people can also ask the local authority to consider an assessment. If you feel your child needs more than ordinary SEN support, you do not have to wait for everything to fall apart before raising it.

Who is usually involved?

The process often includes you and your child, the school, the local authority caseworker, an educational psychologist, health professionals such as speech and language or occupational therapy where relevant, and social care if that is part of your child's needs.

The process step by step

1

Request made - you, the school or another professional ask the local authority for an EHC needs assessment.

2	Decision to assess - the local authority decides whether to assess. This should usually happen within 6 weeks.
3	Assessment - advice is gathered from you, the school and relevant professionals. If the council decides not to issue a plan after assessing, it should tell you by 16 weeks and explain your rights.
4	Draft plan - if a plan is agreed, you receive a draft and usually have 15 calendar days to comment and ask for a school to be named.
5	Final plan - the final EHC plan should usually be issued within 20 weeks from the original request.
Keep in mind	Timescales can slip in real life, so keep copies of letters and emails, note dates, and ask for updates in writing if things go quiet. If a decision does not feel right, get advice early.

Who may be involved

Not every professional will be involved in every case. This section is simply here to make the language feel less confusing.

SENCO	LSA or TA
Makes sure the right support is planned and coordinated in school.	Works directly with children to help them access learning and routines.
Local authority	EHCP caseworker or coordinator
Helps with placement decisions and wider SEND processes.	Supports the assessment, drafting or review process.

Speech and Language Team (SALT)

Helps with communication, language and interaction needs.

Occupational therapist

Supports sensory needs, everyday functioning and practical skills.

If your child comes with you

You are not looking for a perfect response. You are just collecting clues.

What to notice

- Do they seem calm, curious, hesitant or overwhelmed?
- Are there places they could retreat to if needed?
- How do staff interact with them?
- What seems to help or unsettle them?
- Do you notice signs of relief, interest, tension or shutdown?

Go gently: a short visit can tell you plenty. You do not need to push your child through every room or every conversation.



After the visit

It is okay to...

- Email or call with follow-up questions.
- Ask for a second visit or a shorter visit with your child.
- Request written information about how support works in practice.
- Compare this visit with other schools before deciding.

Ask yourself...

- Did I feel welcomed and listened to?
- Did the answers feel clear and specific?
- Could I picture my child feeling safe here?
- Would I need more information before deciding?

No school will be perfect. What matters is whether the setting feels like a workable fit for your child's needs, their wellbeing and the kind of support that is actually available day to day.

Prompt bank - questions you can actually use

Pick the questions that matter most for your child. Pay attention not just to what the school says, but how clearly and confidently they answer.

Environment and sensory

- How do you help children who become overwhelmed by noise or busy spaces?
- Are there quiet areas or lower-stimulation spaces children can use?
- How do you support transitions between rooms, activities or adults?
- What does a calm or sensory break look like here?
- If my child needs movement, how is that supported during the day?
- Are there any times of day that tend to feel busiest or hardest for children?



Support, behaviour and regulation

- What do staff do when a child is distressed, dysregulated or refusing?
- How do you work out what a behaviour might be communicating?
- Do you use sensory supports, visuals, breaks or calm plans?
- How do you build trust with children who are anxious or demand avoidant?
- How do you share strategies with parents so support feels consistent?
- What support is in place for emotional regulation over time?



Mainstream school prompts

- What adjustments do you make for children with autism or ADHD in everyday lessons?
- How do you support children with focus, organisation and memory?
- How do you help children manage busy times such as lunch, assembly or lining up?
- What happens if a child is academically able but needs a lot of emotional or social support?
- How do you help peers understand difference and inclusion?
- How do you decide when a child needs extra support, and what does that look like?

Special school prompts

- How do you balance support with high expectations?
- What does the curriculum look like for children at different learning levels?
- How are communication, independence and friendships supported through the day?
- What access do children have to therapists or specialist input?
- How do you prepare children for change and future transitions?
- How do you work with families so the support plan makes sense at home too?

Follow-up email starter

Hello,

Thank you for taking the time to show us around the school. The visit was helpful, and I appreciated the chance to get a feel for the environment and the support on offer.

I still have a few follow-up questions:

- [Add your question here]

- [Add your question here]

- [Add your question here]

I would also like to know whether it would be possible to [arrange another visit / speak with the SENCO / bring my child for a shorter visit].

Thank you again for your time and support.

Best wishes,

[Your name]

Helpful support and advice

These are useful starting points for parents who want extra support after reading this guide.

Find your local SENDIASS

Use the national directory or search online for: your council name + SENDIASS [Open link](#)

Official SEND and EHC plan guidance

The GOV.UK overview of SEND support and EHC plans. [Open link](#)

Legal SEND advice and EHC plan guidance

Useful if you want clearer legal guidance around assessments, plans and appeals. [Open link](#)

Family advice and helpline support

A broad source of support for families with disabled children. [Open link](#)

Autism education support

Help with choosing schools and understanding education options. [Open link](#)

ADHD information and support

Useful if ADHD is part of the picture too. [Open link](#)

Simple tip: to find your local SENDIASS, search on Google using your council name + SENDIASS.

Frequently asked questions

These answers are written for parents who want the plain version, not the polished version.



Parent-Teacher Meeting

Do I need to ask every question in this guide?

No. In fact, trying to ask everything can make a visit feel more stressful. Pick the questions that matter most for your child and listen carefully to how the school responds.

What if I like the school but the answers feel vague?

That matters. A warm welcome is good, but you still need clear, specific answers. It is okay to ask for examples, written information or a follow-up conversation.

What if my child is very anxious and cannot manage a full visit?

That does not mean the school is wrong. It may just mean you need to pace the visit differently. Ask for a shorter visit, a quieter time of day or a staff-only visit first.

Can a mainstream school still be right if my child struggles a lot?

Sometimes yes, but only if the support is real and consistent. A mainstream placement works best when staff understand your child, routines can flex and practical support is actually in place.

Does special school automatically mean better support?

Not always. Some children do thrive in special schools, but the right setting still depends on your child's needs, personality, learning profile and what the school can actually offer.

Should I wait for an EHCP before looking at schools?

No. You can still visit schools, gather information and start working out what kind of setting might suit your child. That information can also help you during the EHCP process.

What if the local authority says no to an assessment or no to a plan?

Get advice early. SENDIASS and IPSEA can help you understand what the decision means, what your options are and what you may want to do next.

How do I know whether a school really understands neurodivergent children?

Look for concrete signs: flexible routines, calm spaces, thoughtful answers about regulation, realistic examples, and staff who talk about support without blaming the child.

Trust your instincts. You know your child best.

No school will be perfect. What you are looking for is a setting where your child can feel safe, understood, supported and able to grow.

Notice Ask Reflect Choose what fits