

Handling the transfer to secondary school – part 2

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Personal experiences of issues to consider when choosing a secondary school - continued from Down Syndrome News and Update 5(2)

Visiting the school

My daughter went armed with the list of issues that she wanted to raise with the Special Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo). Possibly the most important amongst these was the issue of security; my granddaughter Megan is a child who, if not closely supervised, will vanish. A second issue is her difficulty with communication; she has oral dyspraxia and still depends upon signing if she is having difficulty expressing her thoughts. Amongst the remaining issues were encouraging her independence, support and home/school communication.

Five schools were visited, all mainstream secondary whose number of pupils varied between 500 and 1200. What follows is a short account of the replies

which were given by the SENCos and information gathered from talking to teachers, pupils and parents.

The smallest school had only one exit which was covered by CCTV. A member of staff monitored children who had a history of escaping, at break times. Movement within the school was based on using a 'buddy system,'

but a Teaching Assistant (TA) would follow, at a distance, when moving from one side of the school to the other. All staff knew of the children, their needs and issues which may arise. Support was available within each class, and there was one key TA for each child who was statemented; this TA was responsible for the paperwork for the child. School Based Addition Tuition (SBAT) was available as they had their own full time, specialist teacher.

A visual timetable was given to the child, and communication on issues arising during the school day were discussed with the parents by phone. The aim of their support was to encourage independence and encourage the child to seek assistance when needed. At a later date it was discovered that this school is to be rebuilt on a nearby site. The new school will take in half of the pupils from a local secondary, which is to be closed, thereby almost doubling the intake. We were made to feel welcome, and encouraged to revisit the school, when it was in session, on as many occasions as we felt was necessary.

At the second school, which was one of the largest schools, the children with SEN were taught in

a separate unit. They joined their own class for registration, PE and Personal and Social Education. It was admitted that they had "never had a child who was so disabled" and that it would "be a brand new learning curve" for them. We were assured that a TA would set the child a task and then the child would work independently. When asked what would happen if the child could not read worksheets, the reply was that they had never experienced that problem. The support within the unit was one TA to 14 children. A SBAT teacher was employed to teach English and Maths to groups in Year 8. We were assured that children do not escape from the school.

When asked if it would be possible to arrange additional visits to the school for the child we were told that this had never happened. The one visit with the primary school was sufficient, and the SENCo asked if we were asking for additional visits because the child was shy. The meeting closed at this point.

Things can only get better, or can they? The third school was a split site and children and staff walked from one site to the other through the middle of town. A result of this was that there was

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a reduction of staff on site at break times and lunch times, and the school day was extended. There was no form of security, such as CCTV, and the pupils had access to the car park and the main road outside the school.

The unprofessional behaviour of the SENCo, who kept doing impressions of other SENCos in the local schools, and who obviously was more interested in discussing the other schools which we had visited, left us with a negative impression.

The next school had an equally odd SENCo, who considered that the main “selling feature” of the school was the heating system and the lack of drafts. When asked about support we were told that we could have whatever we wanted. When enquiring about an IEP, we could also have one if we wanted. The school had 50% of the pupils on the SEN register and there was not a learning support base. The SENCo could envisage no problems in having our grand daughter in the school as she was “extremely experienced with special needs.” Extra visits to the school could be arranged, and the TA from the primary school could accompany our grand daughter to show her round. It did occur to us that the primary TA might not know the school.

By this point disbelief and despair were beginning to set in, but the final school restored some belief in the possibility of finding a suitable school. This was one of the larger schools, but had a safe base where the pupils could go at break times or lunch times. It could even be arranged that they could have their lunch in the base. The base was open throughout the school day to be used as and when needed.

Three TAs would be allocated to each child and would work on a rota. Children would be

taken to reception on arrival at school, and would be collected from there by a TA who would accompany them to the base. Spot checks were made on children who were ‘known’ escapees and everyone would be informed of their ‘habit’ to ensure their security. If the child chose to go outside at lunchtime support would be allocated.

The SENCo would attend the annual review in Year 5 and Year 6, whereas all other SENCos had indicated that they would attend the Y6 review. The SENCo would visit the primary school in Y6 to talk to the SENCo and the class teacher, but not to the TA, as it was felt that a ‘clean break’ was desirable. As many visits as were needed would be arranged for the child. On the first visit, a TA would take the child around the school and they would use a digital camera to help make a visual map of the school and a book. Parents were welcome to go to the school, when it was in session, as often as they wished.

Forms of communication would be discussed at a later date and a package would be designed to meet the requirements for each child. All forms of communication would be considered. As with one other school it was emphasised that the aim was to make the child independent.

Following these visits and prolonged discussions with my daughter, it was agreed that in the summer term we would both visit two of the schools, when they were in session. My daughter has also decided to visit the special school, but we have been told that they use one of the schools, that we have rejected, as a link school. The other option, which is still to be explored, is private education. All we need to do next is to work out what issues we have not yet covered!

Inclusion resources

NEW: *Development in Practice – Educating children with Down syndrome at primary school (DVD) (2006)*. See page 28 for more details.

Education for individuals with Down syndrome – An overview (2000). Sue Buckley and Gillian Bird. Portsmouth, UK: The Down Syndrome Educational Trust.

Accessing the curriculum – Strategies for differentiation for pupils with Down syndrome (2000). Gillian Bird, Sandy Alton and Cecilie MacKinnon. Portsmouth, UK: The Down Syndrome Educational Trust.

Utilising information communication technology to assist the education of individuals with Down syndrome (2003). Bob Black and Amanda Wood. Portsmouth, UK: The Down Syndrome Educational Trust.

Including All. Jane Beadman. Devon Learning Resources.

Working with Hannah (2000). Liz Wise and Chris Glass. Routledge/Falmer.

First steps in inclusion – A handbook for parents, teachers, governors and LEAs (2002). Stephanie Lorenz. David Fulton.

Children with Down’s syndrome – A guide for teachers and Learning Support Assistants (1998). Stephanie Lorenz. David Fulton.

Enhancing self-esteem in the classroom (1996). Denis Lawrence. Paul Chapman Publishing.

Schooling children with Down syndrome (1998). Christopher Kliewer. New York: Teachers College Press.

All the resources listed above are available from The Down Syndrome Educational Trust. Please visit the downsed online shop at <http://shop.downsed.org/>

Down to Earth (DVD on primary inclusion). English version, originally produced in the Netherlands in 1998. Available from: <http://www.downsyndroom.nl/>. See page 32 for more details.

Down Ahead! (DVD on secondary inclusion). English version, originally produced in the Netherlands in 2002. Available from: <http://www.downsyndroom.nl/>. See page 33 for more details.

Transition from Primary School to Secondary (2006). Sandy Alton. Available from the Down’s Syndrome Association at <http://www.downs-syndrome.org.uk/>

Editor’s note

We look forward to the final instalment and hope the right school has been found for Megan.

Please send us your experiences of looking for a secondary school for your child.