

Starting School

Guidelines for Parents/Guardians of Children
with Special Educational Needs

NCSE 2016



The word 'parent' in this document should be taken to include guardians of children.

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Introduction

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Starting 'big school' is a significant milestone in any child's life and naturally as a parent, you want to support your child in any way you can. Most parents have some anxieties about how their child will manage school. This can be especially true for parents of children with special educational needs who may have additional concerns.

For example, you may worry about whether your child with special needs will be welcome in your local school or able to go there? Will your child need extra teaching support? Will your child be able to take care of him/herself in school? Will the school be able to meet your child's needs?

These questions and more may arise when your child is starting primary school, even though he/she may already be attending a preschool. Your child will also have his/her own concerns and will need extra help at this time. Similarly schools are keen to ensure that they are ready to meet children's needs once they start school.

This pamphlet is a guide to assist you as you plan for your child to start school.

Important steps in planning for your child to start school

There are a number of steps involved in planning for your child to start school. These steps are summarised below. Further information and advice about each step is provided in the sections that follow.

- Step 1:** Choose a school – as soon as possible
- Step 2:** Find out about the school's enrolment procedures
- Step 3:** Plan with the school
- Step 4:** Prepare yourself and your child for change

Step 1: Choose a school

The first decision you must make is which school your child will attend. This can be a big decision for all parents. You need to take time to think about your child's needs and to explore your options.

Most parents choose to send their child with special educational needs to the local primary school and research findings are clear that inclusion works for the majority of these children. All mainstream schools have a learning support teacher service to give extra help to children with learning needs. All schools can apply for extra teaching support and/or SNA support for students with disabilities who require such support. School transport is provided for students with special educational needs who are attending the nearest recognised: mainstream school, special class/special school, that is or can be resourced, to meet their special educational needs.

A small number of parents, whose children have more complex needs, may want to consider whether their child would be better attending a **special class** in a mainstream primary school or a **special school** (See section: Placement Options for Children with Special Educational Needs)

Most children with special educational needs attend their local mainstream primary school.

There are people who can guide you in making your decision, for example:

- School principal.
- If your child is deaf/hard of hearing or is blind/visually impaired, he/she may be linked with a Visiting Teacher who will be able to assist you in preparing for your child to start school.
- Health professionals involved with your child (for example, HSE speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists or physiotherapists) will be able to outline the type of educational setting that may best suit your child at this time.
- Your local Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) can assist by giving you information on the educational options that are available in your area, for example, mainstream classes, special classes or special schools. SENOs provide a direct service to the parents of children with special educational needs and to schools within designated geographical areas.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) holds information meetings for parents of young children with special educational needs, in the year before they start school. Parents tell us that they find it useful to attend this meeting as they hear about the various educational supports and settings that are available for their children. Your local SENO or HSE Disability Network Team will be able to provide you with details of when the meetings are held in your area – contact details are included at the end of this pamphlet.

As parents of a child with special educational needs you should expect that in school:

1. Your child is made to feel welcome.
2. Your child's teachers are knowledgeable about special educational needs.
3. Teachers are willing to learn about your child's particular needs.

When choosing a school you may find it helpful to:

1. Gather all the information you can about possible schools in your local area.
2. Make a list of the schools where you think you would like to send your child.
3. Find out as much as you can about each school. You can do this by talking to other parents, looking at websites and speaking to preschool staff.
4. Seek advice and guidance from professionals involved with your child, including your local SENO.
5. Read the NCSE Guide for Parents and Guardians of Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs: Choosing a School. This guide is available on the NCSE website at: <http://ncse.ie/information-booklets-pamphlets-2>.
6. You may wish to arrange to visit schools so that you are better informed when deciding where to send your child. Many schools hold open days that parents can attend or you could make an appointment to visit the school. It is always a good idea to have some questions written down so that you do not forget to ask a particular question during your visit.

Here are some questions that you may find it helpful to think about or ask when visiting a school:

1. Will the school have a place for my child?
2. How will the school support my child?
3. As a parent, how can I help the school to support my child?
4. How will my child be included in school/class activities with other children?
5. My child requires medication during school hours, how will this be managed?
6. What forms of home-school communication will be available?
7. Is there a specific person in the school with whom I can raise any difficulties that may arise?
8. If needed, will special school transport be available for my child?

Is there a specific person in the school with whom I can raise any difficulties that may arise?

Step 2: Find out about the school's enrolment procedures

When you have decided on your chosen school, you need to apply to the school for a place. Schools can have different rules and regulations about how children are enrolled. Many schools set a closing date by which a child must be enrolled. You can find out about this from the school principal or from the school's website.

A very small number of parents can sometimes have difficulty finding a place for their child in a local primary school. This can happen when schools are over-subscribed i.e. the school has more children wanting to enrol than places available in the school. It can also sometimes happen that there may not be a place available in a special class or special school for your child.

If you are unable to find a school place for your child, there are people to help you. All parents can contact the Educational Welfare Service. Contact details for their services are available on the Tusla website at: <http://www.tusla.ie/get-in-touch/education-and-welfare/>.

As your child has special educational needs, you can also contact your local SENO for assistance. His/her contact details are available on the NCSE website at: <http://ncse.ie/seno-contact-list>.

If you are unable to find a school place for your child, there are people to help you.

Step 3: Plan with the school

Your child with special educational needs is likely to make a more easy and successful start in school when careful planning and preparation is in place. Once your child has a confirmed place in a school, it is useful to start planning for his/her arrival at the school.

Schools often hold a planning meeting before children with more complex special educational needs start school. This is good practice. The planning meeting should include you as the parent, the school principal, if possible the class teacher and as necessary other professionals who have been involved with your child before he/she started school.

At this planning meeting, you can let the school know about your expectations for your child's education and any particular anxieties your child has about starting school. It is also important to give the school any information that might help the school to meet his/her needs. This includes any relevant professional reports (e.g. reports written by psychologists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists and so on) as these can help to ensure that the school is aware of your child's strengths, abilities and needs. This information can also help the school to decide if school policies need to be developed or revised around caring for a child with special educational needs or medical needs, e.g. behaviour policies or administration of medications policy.

The school staff may find it helpful to consult with relevant professionals who work or have worked with your child. The relevant professionals may include visiting teachers for children who are blind/visually impaired and those who are deaf/hard of hearing, preschool staff, psychologists, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists or physiotherapists and so on.

Planning and preparation help your child to make an easy and successful start in school.

Where a child has a serious medical condition, the school may wish to consult with your doctor. The school will seek your permission to contact these professionals. If necessary, some of these professionals may visit the school to assess the adaptability of its environment. You may wish to discuss who in the new setting will have access to any confidential information about your child.

All of this information will assist the school to develop an individualised support plan for your child. Many different types of plans can be described as support plans for example, a general plan for support, a behavioural plan, an individual learning profile, an individualised educational plan, a personalised learning plan and so on.

As appropriate, a support plan may include information on your child's needs as follows:

- Learning needs
- Social and communication needs
- Care needs, for example, dressing, toileting, mobility and medication needs
- Sensory needs such as over sensitivity to noise, textures, lights
- Physical needs that require environmental adaptations such as adaptations to the school building, adapted seating or other specialised equipment. If necessary, the school may consult occupational therapists and/or physiotherapists about adaptations to the environment.

The plan can make clear how and with whom parents can communicate should any queries or concerns arise. It is also good to agree a joint approach for any difficulties that may arise. The school should make clear how relevant information from professional reports will be shared with teachers.

Schools also use the information and professional reports to apply, on your behalf and with your consent, to the NCSE for additional supports for your child, where these are necessary. Such additional supports can include: resource teaching, transport, assistive technology and access to special needs assistant support.

Schools also submit relevant applications to the Department of Education and Skills for necessary adaptations to school buildings, specialist equipment and so on. The school principal needs copies of professional reports to make such applications.

As a parent, you can help the school to plan by:

- Arranging to have your child's professional reports forwarded to the school, as the school will need these to apply for any additional supports for which your child is eligible. This will mean that the necessary supports can be in place before your child starts school.
- Giving your permission to the preschool to pass on their knowledge and information about your child to the primary school – his/her likes and dislikes, strengths and achievements along with what works best to support him/her to learn.
- Sharing your own knowledge and experience of your child's strengths, abilities and difficulties and what works best in helping your child to learn. This information could be very useful to the staff in the new school to allow them to plan for your child.

Parents and schools should exchange relevant information to assist planning for students with special educational needs.

Step 4: Prepare for Change

It takes time to prepare for the changes ahead. You will need time to prepare your child for the school you have chosen; to prepare yourselves as parents to let your child become more independent; to allow time for any adaptations that have to be made to the school building, or other supports to be in place. It is good to make early contact with your child's school so that planning and supports are in place when your child arrives in school.

Many children have their own worries about starting school. Some children with special educational needs can be particularly anxious about making changes. It is good to try and find out what, if any, your child's particular concerns are. It may be that he/she is worried about making friends; managing in the play-ground; managing the toilet; keeping up in big school. Some children are worried that their teacher may be cross if they are not able to understand or follow instructions.

Children need time to be children and to play and enjoy the holidays before they start school!

There are many ways that you, as a parent, can help your child to make a successful transition into school. However it is important to get the balance right between preparing your child for school and not overwhelming him/her by focussing too much attention on starting school. Children need time to be children and to play and enjoy the holidays before they start school! Here are some ideas that might help you to prepare your child. As a parent, you will know which of these might suit your child best.

You can support your child by talking about starting school, listening to his/her worries and answering any questions he/she may have. You can explain about any supports he/she may have in school and any new arrangements around uniform, lunch or after school activities.

Arrange to meet up with some other children who will be starting school on the same day. Make sure that he/she is familiar with the school by showing him/her the school you have chosen. You can do this simply by walking or driving past the school and letting your child know that it will be their 'big' school.

Schools usually have a day when all new children go to visit the school. In some cases, schools arrange for children with special educational needs to have an extra visit so that they can become even more familiar with the school surroundings. This is an opportunity to ask if you can take photographs of the school, classroom, entrances, yard and teachers and so on. You could then make a little booklet or photo file about the school and use this to talk with your child over the summer.

Encourage him or her to become as independent as possible before he/she starts school. If the school has a uniform, you could buy this in advance so that your child becomes familiar with how it looks, the textures of the material and so on. Help him/her to practice listening to and following instructions at home. If possible, make sure that he/she is toilet trained and is able to put on, take off and hang up their own coat and open his/her lunch-box. You can also think about what he/she will be able and willing to eat independently for lunch in school.

Your child will be less anxious if he/she knows how to behave when they get to school. You can explain to him/her about lining up in the school yard and play games that involve taking turns. You can practice activities such as jigsaws, drawing and colouring at a table. This will help him/her to be able to sit at a desk and focus on an activity at school.

The following two websites have very useful suggestions for parents to help their young children to learn:

- The parents' section of Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum at: www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Parents/Early_Childhood/Early_Childhood.html.
- NALA's Help My Kid Learn at: www.helpmykidlearn.ie. This useful website is for parents of 0-12 year olds. Information is divided across five different age groups: 0-2 years, 3-4, 5-7, 8-9 and 10-12 years.

You can also help your child by preparing yourself to let him/her go. Starting school is a big day for both children and their parents! It will help your child if you manage your own anxieties and they see that you are confident that he/she will manage in school. This will help your child to settle down and feel comfortable in the new setting. In turn this will promote a sense of belonging and self-worth. This can take time and your child will require your support and patience.

NCSE publications to assist parents

The NCSE has published a general **Information Booklet for Parents of Children with Special Educational Needs**, a booklet on **Choosing a School** and **nine information leaflets on particular areas of special educational needs**, to explain how the education system supports students with special educational needs.

Starting school can be a big day for some children.

The information leaflets cover: general learning disabilities; specific learning disabilities; emotional and/or behavioural difficulties or disorders; physical disabilities; blind/visual impairment; specific speech and language disorder; deaf and hard of hearing; and autism spectrum disorder. There is also a leaflet to explain the SNA scheme.

The information booklets and leaflets are available from your local SENO or on the NCSE website at www.ncse.ie.

Placement Options for Children with Special Educational Needs

Most children with special educational needs attend their local primary school in a **mainstream class** with other children of different ability levels and with additional support, as necessary.

Some children with more complex special educational needs attend a **special class** in their local mainstream school. These classes have lower pupil teacher ratios, for example, a class for children with a moderate general learning disability will have one teacher for every eight students. Students enrolled in these classes may be included in the regular mainstream class for a part of the day or the week, in line with their strengths and abilities.

Special schools are generally for children with very complex special needs who wouldn't manage in a mainstream school even for part of the week. Special schools have very small class groups.

If your child is in an ASD early intervention class, it doesn't automatically follow that your child needs to go into a special class in primary school. This matter should be discussed with relevant people such as teachers, HSE professionals, school principal, SENOs.

Useful Contacts

NCSE SENOs: Through your school or at:	www.ncse.ie
Health Centre:	www.hse.ie
Department of Education and Skills:	www.education.ie
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Aistear Curriculum:	www.ncca.ie/
National Adult Literacy Association (NALA) Help My Kid Learn:	www.helpmykidlearn.ie
National Parents Council (Primary):	www.npc.ie
Special Needs Parents Association:	www.specialneedsparents.ie
Tusla:	www.tusla.ie
Visiting Teacher Service: (for children who are blind/visually impaired or deaf/hard of hearing)	http://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Services/Visiting-Teacher-Service

