

Education Options for Children with Autism

Starting school is a major milestone in a child’s life, and a big step for all children and their families; however this transition may be particularly challenging for a child with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Depending on where they lie in the Autism Spectrum, these children vary widely in their levels of ability and expression of autistic behaviours.

According to literature research, in regard to the most appropriate education setting for children with ASD no particular recommendation is made as to which setting is the most effective – positive outcomes are possible across a range of settings from specialist autism schools, integrated environment (i.e. partial segregation and partial inclusion) and full inclusion in mainstream schools. It is important to decide on the appropriate education environment on an ‘*Individual basis*’ on **what is best for your child**; this includes consideration of strengths and needs in communication, social skills, learning, sensory issues and behaviour¹.

The decision on where to enrol a child with ASD, and with what level of support, thus depends on a number of factors, including:

- *A student’s educational needs*
- *The expressed desires of parents and caregivers*
- *The capacity of the system to provide the level of support services required generally*
- *Location and the availability of support services at alternative locations (also transport issues)*

Transition to School

A specialist panel, **ISTIEI Early Learning Program Transition to School Support** facilitates the transition to school for a child with ASD. Each region has a regional placement panel, which is responsible for considering all applications for enrolment to **schools for specific purposes** as well as **support units in mainstream schools**². A child with Autism may be referred from a daycare, preschool or early intervention setting and is able to start school as early as 4 for early intervention, but does not have to start till age 5. Assessing school readiness is crucial, as well as a **Paediatric Progress Assessment**, the child needs to undergo a **Psychometric (IQ) Assessment** to assess their academic potential in terms of cognitive and preacademic abilities.

(Below is a simplified differentiation of the Autism spectrum³)

Autism spectrum

IQ can be anywhere on the scale, language delay

Atypical development areas: social, communication and repetition

Classic autism: high and low functionality

- High functioning autism (IQ>85, language delay)

¹ Education Options for Children and Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder – South Australia

² Who’s going to teach my child – *A guide for parents of children with special learning needs*

³ Autism and Asperger Syndrome: The Facts – Simon Baron-Cohen

- Medium functioning autism (IQ 71-84, language with or without language delay)
- Low functioning autism (IQ<70 with or without language delay)

Atypical autism (either atypical late onset or atypical having one rather than 2 of the core features of autism)

Pervasive developmental disorder – not otherwise specified – mild features, autistic traits

Asperger Syndrome (IQ>85 and there was no language delay)

To qualify for a special needs place the psychometric assessment of that child has to show a below average IQ score. The parents are then able to apply to the regional placement panel applying for a *special needs unit or school for specific purposes* place. A school education director (or nominee) convenes the panel. Assessment of risk behaviours and comments received from early intervention services and preschools are also factored into the decision process of choosing the appropriate school for the child, and although parents are able to evaluate and prioritise school options (i.e. 2-3 options in level of preference) the ultimate decision falls on the panel. The Panel convenes week 7 of each school term, and consists of 10 professional members, who include – representatives from the department of education, social workers, and early intervention workers.

As mentioned, ultimately the **Panel decides on the appropriate school** for the child applying for a *special needs unit or school for specific purposes* place based on eligibility criteria and appraisal of assessments (pediatric, psychometric (IQ)), risk behaviours and comments (OT, Speech Therapist, Psychologist, Preschool, Early intervention setting), which help identify the support needs of the child. There is a possibility that **parents may not get the choice they wanted**, in which case they may accept the panel decision, or alternatively:

- Opt to send their child to **mainstream school**
- **Appeal**

A right of appeal is available to parents or caregivers; Appeals can be made in writing or by phone to the regional director stating the grounds on which the appeal is being made⁴

- **Delay transition**

In the case that the regional placement panel determines that a place cannot be offered at that time, the **disability programs consultant** will assist you to find an appropriate alternative enrolment option. The principal will inform you of the decision of the placement panel⁵.

Something else to consider is that **a child's educational needs may change once they are in a particular setting**. There must be effective matching of needs to setting and the option of transition in and out of a specialist setting with clear eligibility criteria for entry into autism specific settings and clear processes for transition in and out of these settings as required e.g. movement from a special needs unit in a mainstream school to a mainstream class. A 'flexible' program concurrently allows the option of returning to a small group setting

⁴ Who's going to teach my child – *A guide for parents of children with special learning needs*

⁵ Ibid.

where it may be appropriate e.g. in the upper primary years preceding transition from primary to secondary school, a difficult point where the social gap between students with ASD and their typically developing peers grows.

School Options

Appropriate educational goals for children and students with ASD are the same as those for all children and students i.e. the development of social and cognitive abilities, verbal and non-verbal communication and adaptive skills, the reduction of behavioural difficulties and generalization of skills and abilities across multiple environments⁶

(1) SSP – School for Specific Purposes (Severe)

Schools for Specific Purposes or Special schools cater for students with special learning needs who also require **intensive levels of support in a specialized setting⁷**; this may include children with moderate to severe intellectual disability, physical disability, vision impairment, hearing impairment, and behaviour difficulties⁸. These schools cater to a wide range of disabilities, and disorders other than Autism, including: physical disability, Cerebral Palsy, Down syndrome, Epilepsy, Global Delay (e.g. Retts Syndrome). Requests for enrolment are considered by the **regional placement panel**.

It is uncommon for a child to have ‘just’ Autism, comorbidities often exist alongside an Autism diagnosis and these include:

- Psychiatric: depression, anxiety (particularly social anxiety), OCD
- Cognitive and learning disabilities: ADHD, ADD, ODD, learning difficulties, Global delay
- Medical: Immune disorders (Asthma, Eczema), Gastrointestinal problems e.g. IBS (~50%), Epilepsy, and Fragile X syndrome to name a few

For a child with **low-functioning Autism** an SSP school may be considered. An SSP school can prepare a child so that they are ‘ready’ to move into a support unit in a mainstream school as grade 1-3, e.g. help a child overcome particular barriers (e.g. language, toilet training)

(2) Support Units in Mainstream School

IM – mild intellectual disability

IO – moderate intellectual disability

IO/IS – moderate/severe intellectual disability

As discussed in a South Australian report ‘*Education Options for Children and Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder*’, for some children with ASD the impact of their autism can override their academic competency, and this can lead to challenges in their ability to learn in a mainstream school context, in these situations a support unit placement in a mainstream school may be considered.

⁶ Education Options for Children and Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder – South Australia

⁷ Who’s going to teach my child – *A guide for parents of children with special learning needs*

⁸ Ibid.

Classes are divided in terms of level of intellectual disability, and placement in a support class is subject to *eligibility* criteria. All applications are processed by the regional placement panel. Every support class has two adults, a teacher and a teachers aide special⁹. Teachers in **Support Units** are equipped with specialized training in dealing with disability, and like SSP Schools each class caters for children with diverse disabilities.

For a child with ASD the small group setting of a **special needs unit** provides a supportive environment for adjustment. This allows the child the opportunity to understand the expectations, boundaries, and routine that comes with starting school, and also to develop the ability to learn. These units also set a solid **foundation** which depending on the child's Autism severity can support the transition to a mainstream setting through skills building.

(3) Autism Class in Mainstream School

An Autism specific setting in a mainstream school employs ASD specialist trained staff to provide interventions that have demonstrated positive outcomes.

The educational methodology of autism specific education settings, particularly in the early years is based on the principles of explicit, direct teaching, with skilled use of scaffolding and visual systems to support children and students to access the curriculum. The aim is to equip children and students with the essential social, communication and behavioural skills to enable them to participate successfully in mainstream education.

Although specific to children with ASD, an Autism specific class because of the diversity in the spectrum will have children with very different needs. This environment however allows for **appropriate Autism intervention** catering to communication and social deficit, as well as pace and method of learning schoolwork, which may work better for children with ASD.

(4) Mainstream

Adjustment to mainstream may be difficult. Change can cause significant anxiety for a child with ASD and as they respond poorly to spontaneous change, being placed in mainstream without significant time to adjust can cause more harm than good for a child if they are unable to cope. Large classroom settings mean that less time will be spent on your child. In a mainstream setting the onus falls on the teacher to support inclusion whilst accommodating specialized individual requirements of a child with ASD. Adequate support including additional resources are required to support students' needs in mainstream classes¹⁰, and the availability of a **teachers aide** specially trained in dealing with ASD often depends on school and funding.

Emotional and physical abuse can often be an issue, and **bullying** is another possibility that is more likely to arise in this setting, furthermore it may be difficult for a child with ASD to communicate that they are being bullied or harassed at school. Suspension and exclusion from schools as a result of

⁹ Who's going to teach my child – *A guide for parents of children with special learning needs*

¹⁰ Ibid.

behaviours is also something that parents need to be aware of – school employment of behaviour management strategies and behaviour support as well as explicit teaching of social skills for students with ASD can greatly help minimise these outcomes.

An advantage of mainstream schooling is that it provides opportunity for interaction and engagement between children with Autism Spectrum disorder and their typically developing peers. However it is important for parents to know that *the majority of children with autistic disorders do not learn by copying their age peers*¹¹. Instead inclusion in this way assists the child in developing their capacity for generalization of skills they have learned. For a child with **high-functioning Autism** or **mild Autism** (e.g. Pervasive developmental disorder where only autistic traits are displayed), a mainstream setting may be the preferred option. Supported transition to mainstream from a **support unit** based on 'exit criteria' such as skills of independence i.e. ability to work in a less specialised setting is another instance where mainstream school might be appropriate.

For **Asperger's syndrome** where the child is often of normal or above average intelligence mainstream school is often opted for, however because of ASD behaviour (*e.g. lack of social insight, find unexpected change difficult to manage, face difficulties socializing and communicating, restrictive interests and repetitive behaviours*) a teaching support assistant should be considered to help him or her remain in mainstream classroom, alternatively another option is to attend a special school or unit for children with Asperger syndrome (if available)

(5) Other Support Classes in Mainstream School

These include ED classes and behaviour classes, which provide intensive, individualized educational and management programs within a mainstream school or a special school setting

ED Classes

Emotional disturbance support classes are available for children with ASD who exhibits significant behaviour(s) characteristic of **mental health** conditions. Mental health issues in ASD (including Anxiety, and depression) may exist in absence of intellectual disability, and is the main issue that indicates an ED class setting especially if it is having a serious effect on the child's learning and emotional well-being. Eligibility has to be approved, and a current report is required detailing the nature of the behaviour concern – the report may be obtained from a **medical practitioner** or **registered psychologist**.

It is also important in all class settings that a child's progress and **emotional adjustment** in the school is monitored and changes made if necessary.

Behaviour Classes

ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) and ODD (Oppositional Defiant Disorder) are common comorbidities with ASD. Challenging behaviour(s) can themselves be disruptive and interfere

¹¹ Autism and Asperger Syndrome: The Facts – Simon Baron-Cohen

with an individual's learning, as well as disrupting other members of the class and delivery of educational programs by the teacher. Behaviour classes assist in management of **challenging behaviours** through specific interventions and strategies.

Informed Decision Making

As a parent of a child entering school it is important to **obtain information** that will allow you to plan. Talk with teachers, pediatricians, allied health professionals, other parents, and support services that can assist in developing an **informed decision regarding the educational needs of your child**.¹² As part of the initial evaluation process **school visits** are necessary, they allow opportunity to see teacher-student, peer-peer interaction, facilities and resources that the school has to offer.

Collaboration is an important part of school transition, and collaboration between teachers, families as well as allied health professionals (i.e. continued involvement of Speech Pathologist, Psychologist, Occupational Therapist) as well as supporting learning, paves **consistency** between school, home and community environments for the child. Collaboration is important in the transition process; and also in working with teachers and schools to plan for the educational needs for your child into the future.

The **Partnerships** built through collaboration are sustained throughout the child's educational career, it is important that all members work for the one outcome – that is the **best outcome for the child**. An individualized learning program in one or more curriculum areas (*identifying what needs to be taught, how it is going to be taught, who is going to teach it, when it will be taught and where it will be taught; and considering appropriate learning adjustments and accommodations to the class program and effective teaching strategies for your child*) as part of a learning support plan should be developed for the child. Regular monitoring of your child's educational needs will show areas of progress and areas that need more development – this monitoring forms part of the ongoing **reappraisal processes**, where a **formal review meeting** held once per year for a child enrolled in a support class or a special school receiving itinerant support teacher services – parent role in this formal review is crucial. The meeting supports consideration of changes to the placement, the program or the type and level of support for your child, as their educational needs change.

¹² Who's going to teach my child – *A guide for parents of children with special learning needs*

[Parent Support Materials](#)

Time to start school. A parent's guide to starting kindergarten (2006)

<http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/media/downloads/schoolsweb/gotoschool/primary/parentbook.pdf>

Ten Tips for Parents of Children Starting Preschool

<http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/gotoschool/primary/tentips.php>

Information for parents translated into over 40 languages

<http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/>

<http://www.det.nsw.edu.au/languagesupport/index.htm>

Transition to school guidelines for young children with special learning needs (2000)

https://www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/student_admin/general/transition/pd02_29_transition_to_school.pdf

<http://www.schools.nsw.edu.au/studentsupport/programs/disability.php>

List of different schools and brief summary of what they provide, linking to individual school websites for more information