

Communicating with your child's school

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One simple thing some families find helpful is to make sure you document and keep everything. Reports, letters, assessment paperwork etc and follow up any spoken

conversations about your child's care with an email or letter.

You never know when you may need this in the future even if your son/daughter isn't struggling at school.

Who is the best person to contact?

Your child's class teacher or alternatively all schools have a 'SENCO' (Special Educational needs Co-ordinator) and it is their job to co-ordinate between parents, professionals and school staff to meet the educational needs of your son/daughter in school.

It is a good idea to ask for a meeting with the SENCO and also the class teacher so you can discuss any problems and work out solutions together.

What sorts of things should your child's school be doing?

Lots of difficulties autistic children face in school can be addressed using simple solutions, they just need school staff with creativity and the ability to 'think out of the box'. For example, struggling to stay on task and finish work can be helped using visual timetables and also by shortening/changing tasks more often.

Children who struggle with change to routines can also be helped with visual timetables and detailed preparation. Events such as Christmas, the lead up to and just after school holidays and supply teachers can all be really unsettling for children with autism and they might need extra preparation and support during these times.

Lunch-times and playtimes can also be difficult as they are times full of lots of sensory input (noise, movement, lots of people in one area, smells etc) they are also full of social interactions which is a core difficulty autistic children have. If your son or daughter is behaving differently or showing they aren't coping at these times, they may need somewhere quiet to go to.

Even knowing this option is there can be enough to reduce their anxiety enough to be able to cope. All of these are described as reasonable adjustments and your son/daughter is legally entitled to adjustments being made to allow them to access school and achieve.

What is the best way to maintain the relationship with my child's school?

Get to know who's who in your child's school and what their job roles are. Introduce yourself and find out who to speak to regarding specific issues. For example, to keep updated on day to day progression and problems, the class teacher or teaching/support assistant might be the best person to speak to.

If your child needs more input from outside professionals such as a Speech Therapist or Occupational Therapist, the SENCO might be better placed to help. Many schools have websites where they post information on events, provision, school staff etc and also ways to contact them.

Stay in touch. It sounds obvious but make sure you keep key school staff informed of any particular problems your child is facing and any issues you are having at home. This can help the school support your child especially if they are having an 'off day'.

A simple way to do this is requesting a home-school contact book so you and the class teacher, teaching assistant or both can communicate daily. It also provides you with a written record of your communication with the school.

If your child has therapies in school the Therapist can keep you and school staff updated via a contact book too. Another possibility is via email, however this may not be as secure confidentially.

Try to stay constructive. You might not always agree with the approach your child's school takes but try and work from the assumption that they are trying to support your child. The relationship between home and school is much more likely to be balanced, positive and effective when all parties are constructive.

Share information. Share as much information about your child as you feel comfortable with. For example, giving copies of reports and assessments to the SENCO, class teacher, TA can ensure the people working with your child on a daily basis are kept fully informed.

Talk to key staff. Informing your child's teacher, teaching assistant and other key staff about your child's personality, communication styles, their likes, interests, dislikes and triggers could potentially avoid difficulties and help school staff understand your child a lot quicker than if they spend time working this out themselves.

Give feedback. If you think something is working well, let them know! If your child's teacher uses a strategy that helps your child then tell them about the positive impact it is having.

Offer them your ideas and tips. You know your child better than anyone and if you are able to offer suggestions of ways they can support your child and also ways to help them avoid distress and upset they are more than likely going to be pleased.

Try and attend school events. Open afternoons, can be an excellent way for you to see first-hand how your child copes in school. They could also help you think of tips you can pass onto school staff on ways to help your child.

Parent's evenings and other events set up for teachers and school staff to share your child's achievements and discuss any issues are good ways to maintain communication with key school staff. However if it isn't possible for you to attend these, asking for alternative times/dates or possibly written updates from your child's school could be a good way of staying informed.

When things go wrong

If things go wrong and the relationship breaks down between you and your son/daughter's school, there are things you can do.

Request a meeting. Ask the school and any other professionals involved with your child such as Speech Therapist, Occupational Therapist, Educational Psychologist, Paediatrician to arrange a meeting to discuss the problems and ways to move forward.

Try and keep communicating with at least one key member of staff at your child's school. This way you can continue to support and be aware of what is happening with your child throughout this time. A home-school contact book can be a good way of achieving this.

It can be a really stressful time when things go wrong so give yourself time to cool-off before communicating with school staff and professionals. You are more likely to be able to get your concerns across effectively and also more likely to be listened to and taken seriously if you have these communications when you are composed and calm.

Schools should include parents in the planning and reviewing of their child's needs. When children have Special Educational Needs and receive support in school, the guidance says that 'schools should talk to parents regularly to set clear outcomes and review progress towards them.'

This guidance recognises the vital role parents play in their child's education and can be a really helpful 'tool' for parents to quote from to ensure effective parent/school partnership.

Ask your Local Authority if there is an [independent parent support group](#) in your area. They may have people there who know the educational processes and who can act as an advocate for you, for example accompany you to meetings and give you advice about educational rights.

Request an [assessment for an EHCP](#) in writing to your LEA. This way the professionals can identify what your son/daughter's needs are as well as how to meet them.

The new Code of Practice includes a duty on Local Authorities to provide independent disagreement resolution services to support parents in mediating with Local Authorities.

Independent support services are usually run on a voluntary basis and knowledge of SEN and educational rights can vary a great deal. You may find it helpful to ask any independent person about their experience and to also detail specifically how and in what situations they can support you.

It is also important to note that if you are already going through the appeal process, mediation is now a compulsory part of the process in order for both parties to resolve as much disagreement as possible before the hearing.

If you feel you cannot mediate with the Local Authority, you may be asked to sign a document stating it was offered to you and that you declined.

Throughout all of these processes it can really help to talk to other parents. Ambitious about Autism's online community, [Talk about Autism](#), is overflowing with information, tips advice and support from parents of children with autism who have been in all of these situations before.

Last updated: 27 September 2017

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Educational psychologist Julia Dunlop considers the benefits of close links between early years practitioners and the parents of young children with additional needs...

In my other articles I have outlined ways in which early years practitioners can identify children's additional needs and begin to take action. I have also examined the role of the SENCo in an early years setting. Now it is time to look at ways of establishing and promoting good relationships with parents – particularly with those parents whose children have additional needs.

Early years practitioners have long been aware that most parents have a deep commitment to their child's development. Not only are parents the child's first carers, they are also their offspring's primary educators. Once an infant enters an early years setting, the role of carer and educator becomes shared for the first time with adults beyond the immediate family circle. Research tells us that young children achieve more and are happier when early years practitioners work closely together with parents – sharing observations and pooling ideas about how to promote learning and development. This is true for all children – whether or not they have additional needs.

Parents' feelings

The arrival of a new baby makes a major impact on any family. New parents go through a wide range of emotions as they adjust to the new life in their midst. These feelings will naturally include love and pride, but will also encompass anxiety, fear and frustration. With some new babies it is obvious from the start that there is a special need or disability. In other young children the additional need only becomes evident over time. When this happens, in addition to the emotions already mentioned, the parents are likely to experience feelings of panic, confusion, denial, resistance, loss and even grief. We need to remember, though, that all parents are individuals and will react in their own way and at their own pace.

Parents' rights and wishes

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