

Choosing a high school: teens with ASD

This is a transcript of the Raising Children Network video available at http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/asd_choosing_high_school_video.html. In this short video, parents talk about choosing a high school for their children with ASD. They talk about questions to ask when visiting schools. It helps to know what you want high school to achieve for your child. Availability of services varies around Australia, and contacting your education department is a good starting point.

Frances Burns [*specialist clinic teacher consultant, Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne*]: Across Australia there are a number of options for high school. The two main areas, the two main decisions that have to be made is will my child go to a mainstream school or will I choose a specialised setting? In mainstream options we have three sectors to choose from. There are government schools which are not fee paying, and all children are entitled to go into a mainstream government setting. Parents can also choose an independent school or a catholic school and those are fee paying options. There are also a number of special school settings and there's a huge variety of those as well.

Elena [*mother of Alex (15) who as ASD*]: When it came to high school he had a choice of either an autism class or an IM class, they call it, which is mild intellectual disability. We eventually ended up getting an IM class which is the mild intellectual disability class in a local high school, but it's a selective high school which has a support unit.

ONSCREEN TEXT: Find out what's available in your region

Frances Burns: If you're choosing a school for your child, the main concern I think for parents is what's going to be available in your region, and that varies across Australia and it varies across the state. The more metropolitan residential area you live in the greater the choices. So, you will need to limit your choices to what's available in your region. The best way to find that information out is to contact the Department of Education and speak to one of their coordinators.

Dolores [*mother of James (14) who has ASD*]: Through the Department of Education, the system is that you work with your primary school. They help you with the whole application process and they will ask you what your preferences are and why, and they will also guide you as to where they think your child will be, you know, is best to go to. You are offered a placement and you either take up that placement or you say 'No I don't want that' and basically you go back into the mix.

Frances Burns: One thing that I remind parents about quite often is the need to plan well in advance. Gathering information and reports that you'll need to present to a new school can take between 12 and 24 months. So, if you've got a child with special needs particularly coming at year seven, you'll need up-to-date assessments and that will require some visits to specialists who have to then do formal assessments and prepare reports and write letters so that the school will get a profile of your child's strengths and

weakness. So, it sounds like a long time to do school hunting when your child is in grade five but that's probably the best place to start.

Lillian [*mother of Tash (13) who has ASD*]: It's different for us. We've not ever been part of the public system. We've always gone to a special independent school that specialises in autism because Tash has specific sensory needs and there's therapists there that understand autism completely.

ONSCREEN TEXT: Ask schools about their experience with children with ASD.

Frances Burns: Ask about the staff's understanding of children with this condition. The good news these days is most schools, most classrooms will have a student with an autism spectrum disorder of some kind and teachers are more familiar, so parents will get a feeling when they enter the school and they talk to staff and they talk to the heads of the school, does the school understand what an autism spectrum disorder is? Have they had experience with a range of children with that disorder? Have they had their staff have some professional development in dealing with the concerns and the issues of particularly an adolescent with autism spectrum disorder?

Dr Richard Eisenmajer [*psychologist, The ASD Clinic*]: It's very important that a parent is actually interviewing the school rather than the school interviewing the parent and what can you provide? My child may be bright but he's immature, what's your history of looking after ASD children?

ONSCREEN TEXT: Feel confident in asking a lot of questions.

Dr Richard Eisenmajer: Do you modify programs? He won't do ten subjects, eight teachers, seven different classrooms. Does he have to do one or two things that he's going to drop over time anyway? Can we focus on his strengths rather than his weaknesses? If he has behavioural issues what's the culture of the school to unpack the reasons as to why those issues are happening, or do they just go down the traditional punitive approach which doesn't really work with this group of children. I ask parents often, start - especially if you are a member of a parent support group, ask parents who have gone through this with you already.

ONSCREEN TEXT: Find out what a school offers beyond year seven.

Frances Burns: Assess what's going to be best for your child and the expectations that you have for them to continue their education right through to post-school options. The main consideration I suppose for parents is to answer a very simple question is, what are the educational goals that you have for your child?

ONSCREEN TEXT: Plan educational goals based on your child's strengths.

Frances Burns: What is it that you want high school to achieve for them? Are they academically based? Are you looking for a really rich vibrant academic program? Are you looking or some improvement in a child's socialisation skills? Are you looking very specifically for clear pathways towards employment or tertiary studies?

Nancy [*mother of Andrew (19) who has ASD*]: We were looking, because Andrew is non-verbal, at the school where they would look at his needs and communication and in language development as well as in his social development.

Lillian: Tash has always enjoyed the company of neuro-typical children and Tash has always loved watching other children, so Tash has always spent one or two days a week integrating into a normal school with a carer from Giant Steps and she has thoroughly enjoyed that and prospered with that. So, we do have a difficulty at this time because she finished the K to 6 program in the primary school she was integrating into but we're having difficulties finding a high school that will accept her for just one or two days with the carer and just allowing her to be in the environment.

Frances Burns: I really find that it's more than acceptable to trust a parent's instincts about their feelings, and their child's instincts, about going to the school, speaking to the staff, whether or not it's welcoming. It's really like entering somebody's home. If you feel welcomed and heard and listened to, and you're questions however many you might have, if they're taken seriously that's a good indication of how the school is going to deal with issues as they come up.
