

St. Helen's Junior National School

Limetree Avenue, Portmarnock, Co. Dublin.



Parent Information Booklet

Autism Classes

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School History

St. Helen's Junior School opened its doors on 1st July 1977 with Mr. Bill Lowe as founding Principal. There were 2 junior infant classes at this time. The new school building was formally opened in May 1981 under the principalship of Mr Pat Healy (R.I.P) & the school grew enormously over the following decade. There were over 500 pupils in the junior school by the mid-eighties. Mr. Healy served as Principal from 1981 to 1999.

In 2000, the new Principal, Mr Brendan Hennigan (R.I.P), was asked by the Department of Education to open up an autism class within St. Helen's. Mr Hennigan opened 2 autism classes and in March 2003, an early intervention class was added. As a tribute to Mr. Hennigan's vision and aspiration to support the inclusion of children with autism, the Gross Motor Room has been named '*Brendan's Room*' to honour his memory and dedication.

We now accommodate up to 18 pupils in our autism classes. In 2017, under our former Principal Miriam Dowdall, an extension was added to the wing of the school accommodating the autism classes. We would like to say a special thank you to Fingal Network Initiative, a group of local business people who kindly raised €10,300 over the course of three years. The group held a golf classic each year and the money raised added a much needed sensory room and a soft play room. These rooms have been a priceless addition to our school and are very much appreciated! Miriam Dowdall retired in 2019.

The school is now under the principalship of Lorna Lavin. Twenty years on the school was approved for the Emergency Works Programme which commenced in the summer of 2021. The comprehensive refurbishment included all new electrics and fire safety upgrades. In addition, the three autism classes were completely refitted and the resources were updated for the pupils. These improvements have benefitted all our young pupils throughout the school. In 2025, in the spirit of inclusion and with the support of our whole school community, the BOM took the decision to remove the title of Cabhair Centre.

We are blessed and privileged to have a great school community consisting of our wonderful pupils, their families, our devoted teachers and additional needs assistants (ANAs), secretary, caretaker, cleaners, Parents' Association and Board of Management.

A Message from Our Principal



Fáilte romhaibh go léir go Scoil Naomh Léan! As Principal of St. Helen's Junior School, I am delighted to launch our new autism classes information booklet and I hope that it helps to inform and clarify our current procedures and policies.

Our School motto 'Mol an óige, agus tiocfaidh sí', is at the heart of our holistic approach to education. It is our aim to develop the full potential of every child in our care and to celebrate their uniqueness and individuality. Here in St. Helen's we as a whole staff are committed to the role we play in the lives of young children whose education and wellbeing is entrusted to us.

St. Helen's Junior National School is a Catholic and inclusive school with Christ's teachings of love, peace and justice at the heart of all we do. We recognise that parents are the primary educators of their children and so we look forward to the opportunity to build on that foundation as we work together in developing and educating your children. Thank you for trusting us to do all that we can to support your child on this journey.

Le gach dea-ghuí,

Lorna Lavin
Príomhoide

Mission Statement

St Helen's Junior National School has a Roman Catholic ethos with an embracing spirit of respect for the differences and diversity of other faiths and cultures.

Our school provides a safe and happy learning environment. We aspire to enable all pupils to reach their personal, academic and creative potential, through a rich variety of educational experiences. We conduct our teaching ethically and responsibly.

All staff aim to encourage a high standard of empathy, respect and kindness towards others through positive behaviour strategies, supported by delivery of the Grow in Love Programme.

We promote inclusion by aspiring to meet the needs of all children with regard to their spiritual, emotional, physical and intellectual well-being.

The school endeavours to create a sense of environmental awareness, respect and care within our school and the wider community.

Philosophy and Aims of our School

The staff of St. Helen's Junior School promote the intellectual, physical, social, spiritual, moral, religious and aesthetic development of all our pupils. The school community in general, and the teaching staff in particular, aim to develop in the pupils:

- a sense of personal identity and self-worth
- a spirit of inclusiveness
- a knowledge of God's invitation, to hear His word and explore how best they can respond in their own lives
- knowledge and skills
- positive attitudes to work
- a spirit of self-reliance, innovation and initiative
- a sense of wonder
- respect for the rights and beliefs of others
- expressive, creative and artistic abilities
- an appreciation of the beauty of our environment
- responsibility for caring for the environment
- tolerance
- physical, emotional, spiritual health

In working to achieve these aims we aspire to take the initial steps to enable our pupils to be tolerant, caring and responsible members of our community.

Board of Management

Our BoM is constituted in accordance with the rules of the Department of Education and Skills (DES). It has eight members who are appointed for a period of four years. The Board's main function is to manage the school on behalf of the patron and for the benefit of the pupils and to provide an appropriate education for each pupil at the school.

For more information on the function and work of the BoM and the names of our current members, please refer to the school website. sthelensjunior.com

Choosing an Autism Class

There are three types of provision to meet the range of educational needs found among students in primary and post-primary schools. These are:

- Mainstream classes in mainstream school.
- Special class/es in mainstream school (which include autism classes).

- Special schools. Special schools tend to have fewer students. They have a lower student-teacher ratio specified according to the category of disability. This means that classes have small numbers of students.

Wherever a child is placed, educational placements should be flexible. Educational placements should be reviewed periodically as a student's needs change.

Inclusive education means helping every student to achieve the most from school and encouraging each student to take a meaningful part in the everyday activity of the school. Most students with additional educational needs in Ireland are educated in mainstream schools. Special schools and special classes are available in cases where parents/professionals consider that mainstream education is not the most appropriate option for their child.

The key message in the EPSEN Act is that students with additional educational needs should be educated, wherever possible, in an inclusive environment with students who do not have additional educational needs. The EPSEN Act goes on to clarify that there are two exceptions to this commitment to educate all students together in an inclusive environment.

The first exception is where an assessment, carried out under the EPSEN Act, finds that this would not be in the best interests of the student with additional needs. The second is where this would be inconsistent with the effective provision of education for other students with whom the student is to be educated.

As a parent, you make the final decision about your child's educational placement. The decision for students with complex additional educational needs is usually informed by advice and guidance from education and health professionals such as class teachers, learning support teachers, speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, psychologists and so on.

Your decision will be based on how your child's needs are changing as they develop over time and available placement options such as mainstream or special settings.

It is important to give the school any information necessary to assist your child's transfer so that the school can plan to meet their needs to the greatest extent possible. 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 student with additional educational needs or medical needs (e.g. behaviour policies or administration of medications policy).

All this information is available in the document “Changing Schools - Special to Mainstream” (2016) on www.ncse.ie

[Our Autism Classes](#)

We have 3 Autism classes in St. Helen's J.N.S. Each of our classes has 6 children, one teacher and a minimum of 2 ANA's. This allows us to deliver a very personalised and tailored education to meet the individual needs of each child.

Children must be aged 3 on the year they enter our Junior 1 classroom which caters for Early Intervention. Occasionally we need to place school aged children in this classroom too.

Our Junior 2 classroom and Senior classroom both run parallel to our mainstream classes. This means that pupils spend a maximum of four years in our Autism classes once they are school age. For the first two years, pupils follow the infant day from 8.45am until 1:30pm.

For the second two years the day is from 9:00 am until 2:25pm. There is a reception time from 8:45am to 9:05am for all pupils.

The school principal in discussion with the autism class teachers decides the class allocation for the pupils. The allocation is mostly based on age but the specific needs of individual pupils can also play a key role.

[Our School Facilities](#)

Soft play room

This bright, colourful and fun space helps children to relax as they are in a closed-off and safe space. Our soft playroom is equipped with a much enjoyed trampoline.



Sensory Room

Our multi-sensory room is an interdisciplinary space with specialised equipment to promote focused work on the senses. It is a unique environment within our school. It facilitates relaxation and personal quiet time for children through immersion in an environment of specialised equipment.

The room can be used with individual children or small groups. Each session is individualised according to the needs of each child. In our Multi-Sensory Room we have available for use;

- Fibre optics
- Wall projections
- Multi-media projector
- Twinkle lights
- Large bubble tube
- Interactive panel
- Tactile objects
- Music and movement



School Yard

We are fortunate to have two spacious yards in St. Helen's J.N.S. – a junior yard and a senior yard. The children benefit from two play breaks each day. We pay

particular attention to yard play. The children are supported to find friends and are encouraged to play suitable games. The pupils engage in a range of structured activities including cycling, GAA, playground games and PE. There is also a designated yard time for our autism classes and an inclusion yard when the autism classes share yard time with the mainstream classes.



Sensory Garden

Our sensory garden is located beside the junior yard. This space is transformed seasonally and promotes outdoor learning experiences. Our sensory garden is an interactive space that is accessed by all children in the autism classes and the wider school community. It is a garden environment that is designed with the purpose of stimulating the senses sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. The children are stimulated by plants and other materials such as wind chimes, tactile panels and different textured surfaces. Our vision is to create a space that is colourful, interactive, engaging and enjoyable for all pupils.



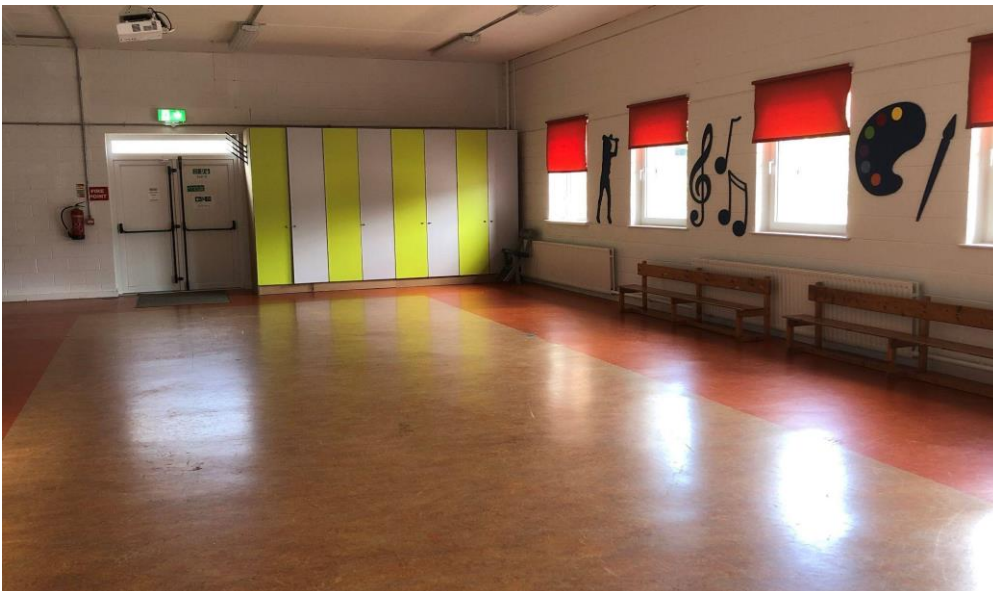
Library

Our school library is a bright inviting space that is enjoyed by all the children in St. Helen's J.N.S. It is a wonderful space where children enjoy listening to stories read by their class teacher and ANAs. Our children are given an opportunity to read independently. We have an extensive range of age appropriate books to cater for all class levels and interests.



School Hall

Our school hall is enjoyed by all students in St. Helen's J.N.S. It is a good size hall used for physical education classes and assemblies. We also use our hall for very special occasions such as our annual Christmas concert and graduations.



Millennium Garden

The Millennium Garden in St. Helen's J.N.S. is a special space enjoyed by all children and staff in our school. It is located in a courtyard in the very centre of the school. In 2021 we transformed this space into our outdoor classroom and it is now fully equipped with colourful tables and benches for children to enjoy lessons and lunch.



Home/School Communication

Most of our home-school communication is via email. The class teacher in each autism class sends regular communication messages home. For urgent matters the school will contact the parent by telephone.

Formal Parent/teacher (SSP meetings) for children in the Autism Classes are held twice a year. See the section below for further details. Informal meetings may be arranged at other times throughout the school year by appointment via the school office.

We communicate regularly with parents via the following means:

- Aladdin (parents need to download the app from the App Store (iphone) or Play Store (Android phones) and add themselves to St Helen's J.N.S group. Aladdin is free to download and we ask that ALL parents download the app to ensure they are kept up to date on school activities and event
- Text messages via Aladdin
- Telephone
- School website

Please note that staff are not permitted to respond to private messages sent to their personal telephone, email or Facebook regarding school related matters. Please refer to the school's Communication Policy for more information (available on the website or from the school office).

The school contact details are:

Telephone: 01 8461763

Email: secretary@sthelensjunior.com

Website: www.sthelensjunior.com

The school office is open daily from 8.45am until 2.30pm and our school secretaries are Marcella and Aisling, who are always happy to answer most queries, take payments for books, trips etc and pass on messages to teaching staff etc. If you wish to speak to a member of school staff or with the Principal, please make an appointment via the office.

Emergency Contact Details

Parents / guardians must supply the school with their up-to-date addresses and phone numbers, contact numbers for childminders and the name of other nominated contact persons in the event of parents not being available. It is essential that people listed are available to respond to contact by the school. At the start of each school year parents are asked to check their child's contact and medical details held on Aladdin connect and update their own details as necessary. Please inform the office during the year if your details change. A contact book is compiled each year by the school secretary and updated as necessary. A copy is kept in the school office and in the Principal's office. Each teacher receives a copy of the information for their own class.

The SSP Process (Student Support Plan)

All children enrolled in the Autism Classes will be provided with a Student Support Plan (SSP). The SSP addresses the individual needs and strengths of a child and formulates learning targets for the year. This process is completed in consultation with parents and any other relevant professionals. The learning

needs of children with autism may focus on the development of communication, social skills, self-help and academic skills. We ask the parents to fill out a form on the needs and strengths of their child prior to the SSP meeting. The SSP is prepared by the teachers after the meeting and sent to parents. The SSP meeting takes place in the first term, and is reviewed with parents at a review meeting in May. Parents are encouraged to book any additional meetings with the teacher if and when issues arise.

We ask that you keep your child's class teacher up to date on any therapy sessions that your child is attending outside of school. It is important that you provide the school with a copy of any new reports and recommendations that you receive from other professionals and agencies (Psychologists, Occupational therapists, Speech and Language therapists, etc). These inform teaching and planning and how we can best support your child.

[Our Curriculum](#)

Our school provides a broad curriculum that encourages and facilitates the development of each child to their full potential. We endeavour to do this in a positive, caring, warm environment, where our children are respected, nurtured and encouraged.

We work with the Curriculum set out by the Department of Education and Skills and the NCSE (National Council of Special Education).

Subjects include :

- Language (English and Gaeilge)
- Maths
- SPHE (Wellbeing) (Social, physical and health education)
- SESE (Geography, History, Science)
- Visual Arts (Art, Drama, Music)
- Religious Education

[Methodologies we use in St. Helen's J.N.S.](#)

The range of teaching approaches for children with autism is extensive and it would be impossible to list all methodologies in this booklet. Teachers draw on many programmes in order to best meet the learning needs of each individual child. Some of the approaches employed include visual supports (e.g. AAC

devices, core boards and visual pictures), social stories, Attention Autism, and Lámh. Teachers, parents and children will work together in the choice of suitable methods to be used with each individual.

The children in the Autism Classes take part in a social programme every Friday. This is a very important part of our week and involves a trip to the local playgrounds, shops and cafes in the local community.

Transport Information

School transport is provided for students with additional needs who are attending the nearest recognised mainstream school, special class/special school. An escort is employed by the school to travel with the child in the taxi. The taxi and escort collect and transport the child safely from an adult at home to an adult in the school and vice versa.

The application forms, (available on NCSE website) for eligible students are processed by the school. We will work with parents/guardians to complete application forms for transport for eligible students, which must be signed by the school principal and Special Education Needs Officer (SENO). The SENO will then forward the application form to the relevant department. Certain criteria must be met for students to qualify for the free transport scheme including attendance at the nearest recognised school that meets the student's special educational needs. If your child is enrolled in a special class and subsequently integrates into mainstream in their school, they will retain their transport eligibility for the duration of their education in that school. If your child transfers to another school, they must engage in the application process again. Further information is available on the NCSE website.

Additional Services/Clinical Supports

We work closely with any clinical provider (public or private) working with your child, on the request of parents. We can facilitate visits and multidisciplinary meetings with the class teacher where possible.



Preparing for your child's First Day at School

Your child's first day of school is one to remember for the rest of their lives. With your help we want to make this day both exciting and memorable.

- Before starting in the autism class, the class teacher will contact parents asking for helpful information on how to support the child. It is important you provide this information which will be used to help motivate and assist the children and staff why they are getting to know each other and build relationships. This information may include the child's likes/ dislikes, communication methods, people in their life, details on how they learn best, supports needed throughout their day, toileting/care needs information, allergies and dietary information.
- The school can provide a social story of starting school, pictures of the staff working with your child, photographs of the different rooms the children will use throughout the day and a video of the classroom. Please request any of all of the above if it will help to support their transition into school.
- If you have any specific concerns regarding your child please do not hesitate to contact the Principal on secretary@sthelensjunior.com



Packed Lunches

We understand that your child may have sensory or dietary requirements and food aversions. For this reason, while we encourage healthy eating, the school's healthy eating policy does not apply to any child with these needs.

We encourage independence and will encourage your child to open and close their own lunch boxes/bottles/fruit if able. Please ensure all containers included in your child's lunch are easy to open and labelled.

NB: We are a nut free school due to serious allergies.

Morning Time and Home Time

School begins: 8.45am-9.00am

School Ends: 1.15pm – 1.30pm (junior day)

2.15pm - 2.25pm (senior day)

(These times vary to accommodate taxis/ transport to drive up to the school).

If your child avails of transport, they will be escorted to their classroom by an ANA when their taxi arrives at the school and they are escorted back to their taxi at the end of the school day by staff.

If your child does not avail of transport, cars are not permitted up or down the school avenue between 8.30am and 9.00am. If you use the avenue after 9.00am please drive with care and be mindful that pupils may still be walking on the avenue. Vehicles are not permitted to drive up or down the school avenue between 1.20pm - 1.40pm and 2.20-2.40pm.

The autism classes have their own side entrance which is located on the right hand side of the school which students are welcome to use to gain access to their classes. Follow the signs for the junior yard. This entrance door is used as a drop off/collection point for many of the students in our autism classes. The teachers and ANAs will meet you here each morning and take your child to their classroom. You will collect your child here at the end of their school day. Some of our students line up with their mainstream class at the beginning of the school day in the Junior or Senior yard. And others may finish their school day by lining up with their mainstream class. In these instances refer to the autism class teacher or mainstream class teacher for your designated drop off/collection points.

Absences, Attendance and Punctuality

Pupils are expected to attend school regularly and punctually and this is monitored by class teachers and management. If we have concerns, we will discuss them with parents and offer support to improve attendance and punctuality.

Attendance

Our end of year reports state the number of days a child is marked absent during the school year. Please note that any pupils arriving at school after Roll Call (10am) will be marked as absent for that day, unless parents have advised us in advance of a late arrival.

Tusla and Reporting Absences

The National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB), now under TÚSLA, was established as part of the Education Welfare Act 2000. Under section 21 of the Education Welfare Act, 2000, the school Principal must maintain a record of the attendance or non-attendance on each school day of each pupil registered at the school. The school attendance record contains the following information on each pupil on the school register:

- Attendance or non-attendance on each school day. A pupil is in attendance if he/she is present when attendance is checked under the school's normal procedures. (i.e. By 10am Roll Call).
- If a pupil has been suspended for any number of days these will be recorded as absences in the normal way, and categorised appropriately.
- Reasons for failure to attend on each school day will be recorded.
- If your child is absent from school, you are required to complete the online absence form via Aladdin. It is important that we receive a reason for absence from you, as "unexplained absences" are a cause for concern. We automatically write to parents periodically if their child's attendance goes over 10 days. If your child's attendance reaches 20 days absent, it is considered a serious attendance issue requiring a report to be submitted to the Education Welfare Officer (TUSLA), regardless of the circumstances surrounding the absenteeism.
- The Education Welfare Act obliges parents/guardians to inform the school in writing when their child is absent, stating the reason. If your child is absent from school, you will receive an Aladdin message with a link to an online absence form to complete. It is not necessary to phone the school office if your child is absent unless they have a contagious illness or are absent for a prolonged period.

Please do not send your child to school when ill. There is no staff cover for indoor supervision during playtimes so if your child is not well enough to go outside, they should not be in school.

Our School Uniform

We recognise that some children may have sensory sensitivities towards clothing. For this reason, children attending our special classes may modify our uniform (wear more suitable clothes) to suit their individual needs. Most children in the Autism Classes opt to wear the school tracksuit on a daily basis which is acceptable.

Our school uniform consists of:

- navy jumper V neck or cardigan.
- blue shirt
- Navy trousers or skirt
- navy tights for girls
- navy tie
- **or**
- School tracksuit bearing the school crest
- Blue polo shirt

Our school tracksuit, blue polo shirt bearing the school logo and tie are all available from O'Farrell Schoolwear & Sportswear, Portmarnock. A blue polo shirt, blue shirt, navy jumper/cardigan, navy trousers, shirt and tights may be purchased anywhere.

Footwear: We recommend straps or velcro for safety reasons and to facilitate getting them on or off.

P.E. Uniform– as above with runners.

Please **label** all your child's belongings – uniform, lunch –box, jumpers, coats etc.

School Policies

All school policies are formulated by the principal, deputy principal and the staff, in consultation with parents, and then ratified by the Board of Management in consultation with DES (Department of Education and Skills), INTO (Irish National Teachers Association) and NEWB (National Education Welfare Board) guidelines. These policies are regularly reviewed and updated as necessary and we very much welcome any comments and suggestions from parents. Please see our school website for details of our policies.

Additional Information

Homework

Homework is an important part of your child's development.

It serves several purposes:

- consolidation of school work
- an opportunity to develop independent work
- helps parents to know what their child is learning in school

If homework is appropriate for your child, we will discuss this with you at your child's SSP meeting.

ICT

While IT is not a curriculum subject, interactive whiteboards, iPads and children's personal AAC devices can be helpful resources for pupils and teachers alike. As there is access to the internet on these devices, children are only allowed to use them while being supervised. Interactive whiteboards are also used in the classroom to enhance the children's learning.

Acceptable Use Policy

The aim of the Acceptable Use Policy (AUP) is to ensure that pupils will benefit from learning opportunities offered by the school's internet resources in a safe and effective manner. Consent regarding the AUP is requested in the parental permission section on the school enrolment form.

Assessment

Assessment is done by the class teacher to inform planning and record progress. We use a combination of formal and informal assessment tools.

School Tours

School tours are organised in the summer term with mainstream classes. Children in the Autism Classes attending inclusion, may attend the school tour with their mainstream class.

Birthdays

We have to be mindful of the small number of children in school with specific food allergies, so birthday cakes or treats cannot be brought in and shared in the mainstream classes as it is against the Healthy Eating policy.

Birthdays are an important social occasion and are celebrated in the smaller autism class setting as they provide learning opportunities for the children. Please check with the class teacher before setting in treats to be shared with the class so that all dietary considerations and allergies are respected.

Book Rental Scheme

We operate a book purchase and rental scheme. The school orders all the textbooks, copy books and stationary over the summer. Booklists are shared with parents. Payment for books can be made via Aladdin Connect.

Complaints

If you are worried about your child at school or you have a complaint about the school, please contact your child's teacher in the first instance.

If your complaint is about a staff member (excluding the principal), you should contact the school principal.

Complaints regarding the principal should be directed to The Board of Management. The Board of Management can only investigate complaints made in writing. For advice and to arrange a meeting with a member of staff or the school principal to discuss your concerns, please talk to Marcella in the office.

Head Lice

Head lice are a common problem in all primary schools. According to the Irish Pharmacy Union, one in ten children in Ireland suffer from head lice at any given time. Therefore, please check your child's head regularly and if you discover any "little visitors" we ask that you let us know. When we are aware of an outbreak we inform parents and no individual child is identified. Long hair should be tied back while children are in school. Remember, head lice like clean, healthy heads so do not be offended if you find any! For more information on how to identify and treat headlice, see the HSE website www.hse.ie/eng/health/az/H/Head-lice/Detecting-head-lice.html

Injuries

Accidents can occur despite supervision. Minor accidents are treated at school. Slight cuts and grazes are normally treated by cleaning the wound with water. In the event of a more serious accident/ child becoming ill, every possible effort will be made to contact the pupil's parents or the person delegated to take responsibility for the pupil. It is important that we have a current list of persons to contact in the event of an emergency – please contact the school office to update your contact details. All major accidents are recorded. Please refer to our Health and Safety Policy for more information (available on the website or from the school office).

We inform parents of any injury caused to children in the Autism Classes as the child may not be able to tell parents what happened.

Insurance

All pupils attending St. Helen's JNS have Personal Accident Insurance (paid for as part of the annual booklist fee), provided by Allianz Insurance and taken out on their behalf by the school. The cover is 24 hours, 365 days a year (beginning at the start of the school year). The policy covers medical and dental expenses following an insured accident within or outside school. (Certain activities are not covered). There is no time limit for paying insured expenses. No excess applies to the policy ensuring all expenses can be recovered. If you hold a medical card or private health insurance and these do not cover the full expenses, then the outstanding expenses can be recovered under the Pupil Personal Accident

Insurance Policy. As with all insurance policies, terms and conditions apply. Please see www.allianz.ie/schools and read the details under the Pupil Personal Accident section.

Lost Property

We encourage parents to label all your child's clothing and other items with his/her name to facilitate identification. Any lost property not claimed by the end of each school term is disposed of or given to charity. The school is not responsible for lost property. We ask that children do not bring in their personal objects/ toys unless this has been discussed with the class teacher.

School Calendar

A calendar is sent home at the end of the school year listing closures for the following year. This calendar is also available on the school website or from the school office. The school website also has an up-to-date calendar with upcoming events and activities.

Class Representatives

Each class in the school has a parent representative who liaises with the other parents of children in that class via a class WhatsApp Group. This is run by the parents, for the parents and is a perfect forum to discuss class related issues with other parents.

Final Note

We hope you have found this Parent Handbook useful. If there is any information missing that you think would be useful, please let us know. Once more, welcome to our school. We look forward to having your family as part of our school community.