

# Starting School

Guidelines for parents and guardians of children  
with special educational needs

National Council for Special Education (NCSE) 2023

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We use 'parent' in this document and it includes guardians of children. This document uses gender inclusive language.

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# Introduction

**Starting primary school is a significant landmark in any child's life...**

As a parent, you want to support your child in any way you can. And as a parent, it's natural that you have some anxieties about how your child will manage school.

Indeed, parents of children with special educational needs may have more concerns than others.

We have written this guide in order to help you feel more informed and prepared for what is ahead.

### Questions you may have

You may find yourself asking many questions such as:

Will my child:

- be able to go to the local school
- be welcome there
- need extra teaching support
- be able to take care of themselves in school?

These questions and worries may arise as you prepare to start primary school. This is true even if they are already attending a preschool. Your child will also have their own concerns and will need extra help at this time. Schools are keen to make sure that they are ready to meet children's needs as soon as they start school.

**This pamphlet is a guide to help you plan for your child to start school.**

## Steps in planning for your child to start school

Below we summarise the steps involved in planning for your child to start school. We give more information and advice about each step in the sections that follow.

- Step 1:** Gather information
- Step 2:** Enrol in a school
- Step 3:** Plan with the school
- Step 4:** Prepare for change

# Step 1: Gather information

## **Choosing a school**

The first thing you must decide 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.

## **Inclusive education**

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) advises that students with special educational needs should be educated in a mainstream primary school with children their own age. However, we advise this only when it is consistent with their best interests and the interests of the other children in the same classroom.

## **Deciding what is the best school for your child**

Most parents choose to send their child with special educational needs to the local primary school. Research shows clearly that inclusion works for most of these children.

All mainstream schools have special education teaching support to give extra help to children with learning needs. Most schools also have at least one Special Needs Assistant (SNA) to support students with significant care needs. Access to SNA support and special education teaching is based on needs and not diagnosis. This means you no longer need a diagnosis to get the support of a SNA or special education teacher.

School transport is provided for students with special educational needs who cannot use the transport in place and who are attending the nearest school or special class that can meet their special education needs.

### **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. Generally they get additional support, as necessary.



## **Some children with complex needs attend special class**

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 autism early intervention class, it doesn't automatically follow that your child needs to go into a special class in primary school. You should discuss this with relevant people like:

- teachers
- HSE professionals
- school principal
- Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENOs)

## Some children may attend a special school

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
- special school

Deciding what setting is best for your child will depend on things that include your child's:

- strengths
- needs
- preferences

The views of your child are the most important things to consider. You should try to find out their wishes and preferences before deciding.

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

Consider all options and discuss them with relevant professionals. Then, you can decide in collaboration with your child where your child will go for primary education. It can be:

- mainstream
- special class in a mainstream school
- special school

## People who can help you decide

There are people who can guide you in making your decision, for example, the school principal. Here are others who can help.

### Visiting teacher

If your child is Deaf or hard of hearing; or is blind or vision impaired, they may be linked with a visiting teacher who will be able to help you to prepare your child for starting school.

### Health professionals

Health professionals involved with your child, for example HSE:

- speech and language therapists
- occupational therapists
- psychologists or physiotherapists

These health professionals can outline the type of educational setting that may best suit your child.

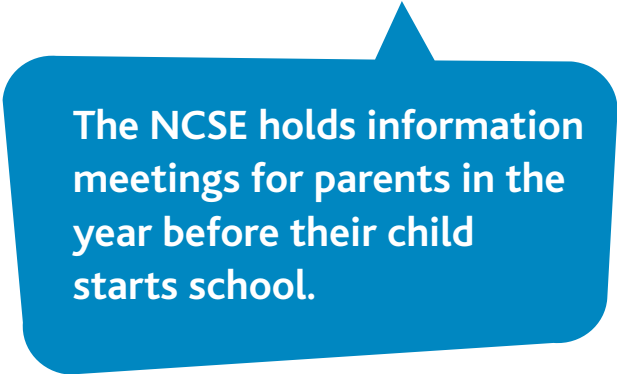
### **Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO)**

Your local Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) can give you information on the education options that are available in your area.

For example:

- mainstream classes
- special classes in mainstream schools
- special schools

Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs) provide a direct service to the parents of children with special educational needs and to schools within designated local areas.



**The NCSE holds information meetings for parents in the year before their child starts school.**

## National Council for Special Education

### Information evenings

Parents tell us that they find it useful to attend an information meeting. The meeting provides information about the educational supports and settings that are available for children. Your local Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) can give you details of meetings 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 the following in school.

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

## Things to consider when choosing a school

1. Gather any 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.
4. Seek advice and guidance from professionals involved with your child, including your local Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO).
5. [Watch the NCSE video for parents and guardians on starting school.](#)

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 remember to ask them all during your visit.

It is also a good idea to:

- talk to other parents
- look at websites
- speak to preschool staff

## Is there a specific person in the school I can speak to about difficulties that come up?

### Questions to ask schools

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. What is the deadline for applications?
3. How will the school support my child?
4. As a parent, how can I help the school to support my child?
5. How will my child be included in school or class activities with other children?
6. How will the school manage my child's medication during school hours?
7. How will my child access assistive technology, if needed?
8. What forms of home-school communication will be available?
9. Who in the school should I contact if my child is having difficulty?
10. Will special school transport be available for my child?



## Step 2: Enrol in a school

When you have decided on the school or schools you and your child prefer, you need to apply in writing for a place. All schools publish Admission Notices on their website before the new school year, typically in the autumn. Admissions Notices give:

- the deadline
- the procedures
- the number of places being offered in the next school year

Some parents can sometimes have difficulty finding a place for their child in a local primary school. This can happen when schools have more children wanting to enrol than there are places available. Sometimes, there may be no place available in a special class or special school for your child.

**If you cannot find a school place for your child,** there are people to help you. All parents can contact the Tusla Educational Support Service (TESS). Contact details for TESS are available on the Tusla website on the [Get in Touch section](#).

**If you cannot find a school place for your child, there are people to help you.**

As your child has special educational needs, you can also contact your local Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO) for help. Their contact details are available on the NCSE website under the [SENO Contact Information](#). We advise early contact and planning with the SENO.

## Step 3: Plan with the school

Careful planning and preparation will make it easier for your child with special educational needs to make a successful start in school.

The school will work hard to create and maintain a support plan for your child. We outline the steps taken below.

### **Planning meeting**

Once your child has a confirmed place in a school, it is useful to start planning for their 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, the parent
- the school principal
- the class teacher if possible
- other professionals, if possible (see below)

At this planning meeting, you can let the school know about your expectations for your child's education and any anxieties your child has about starting school.

## **Providing reports and information about your child**

It is also important to give the school any information that might help it meet your child's needs. This includes any relevant professional reports from psychologists, speech and language therapists and occupational therapists.

These can help to make sure that the school knows 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. This could look at things like behaviour policies or giving your child medications.

## **Planning with professionals**

If advice from other professionals is needed, the school must first get your permission. These are professionals who were involved with your child before they started school.

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 or vision impaired
  - Deaf or hard of hearing

- preschool staff
- psychologists
- speech and language therapists
- occupational therapists
- physiotherapists

### **Consulting with a doctor and others**

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 how to adapt the rooms and space for your child. You may wish to discuss who in the school will have access to any confidential information about your child.

### **Creating a support plan**

All of this information will help the school to develop a student support plan for your child. Many different types of plans can be support plans, for example:

- a care plan
- a behavioural plan
- an individual learning profile
- an individualised educational plan

**Parents and schools should exchange relevant information to help plan for students with special educational needs.**

## Getting a support plan in place

### **Your child's support plan**

A support plan may include information on your child's needs, including information on their:

- learning needs
- social needs
- care needs
- sensory needs
- physical needs

The type of information about your child that will be in your support plan. It will include information about:

- learning needs
- social and communication needs

Your support plan for your child will include their care needs, for example:

- dressing
- toileting
- mobility
- medication

Your support plan for your child will include their sensory needs such as sensitivity to:

- noise
- textures
- lights

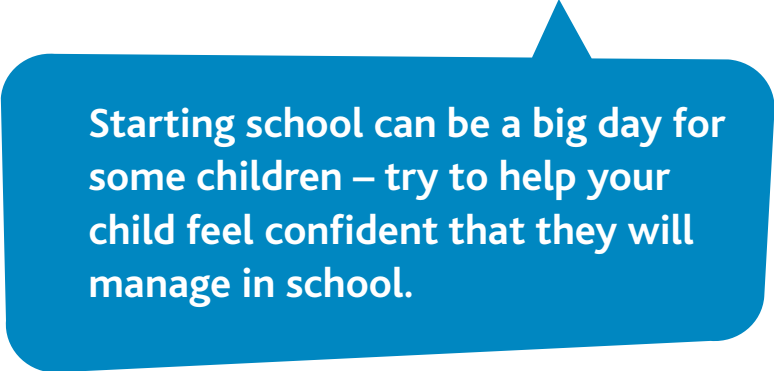
Your support plan for your child will include their physical needs that require environmental adaptations like:

- adapting the school building
- adapted seating
- other specialised equipment

If necessary, the school may consult occupational therapists or physiotherapists or both about adaptations.

The plan can make clear who you can speak with if you have any questions or concerns. It is 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.



**Starting school can be a big day for some children – try to help your child feel confident that they will manage in school.**

### **How schools use information about your child**

Where needed, schools also use the information and professional reports to apply to us for additional supports for your child. They do this on your behalf and only with your consent. These additional supports can include transport and assistive technology.

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



### **To help prepare, you can:**

- Send reports to the school
- Give your permission to preschool to pass on information
- Share your knowledge about your child

## **We need the help of parents**

### **Send reports to school**

As a parent, you can help the school to plan by sending your child's professional reports to the school. 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.

### **Give permission to preschool to pass on information**

Please give your permission to the preschool to pass on their knowledge and information about your child to the primary school. Mo Scéal is a resource preschools and schools use to support you and your child as they transition to primary school.

For more information, please go to the NCCA website and their [Mo Scéal Reporting Templates](#).

## **Share your knowledge about your child**

It really helps if you share your knowledge and experience of:

- your child's strengths, abilities and difficulties
- 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.

## 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
- prepare yourselves to let your child become more independent
- allow for any adaptations that have to be made to the school building
- allow 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 worry 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 they are worried about:

- making friends
- managing in the playground
- managing the toilet
- keeping up in primary school

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

Some children are worried that their teacher may be cross if they are not able to understand or follow instructions.

There are many ways that you, as a parent, can help your child to make a successful transition. However, it is important to get the balance right between preparing your child for school and not overwhelming them by focusing too much attention on starting school.

Children need time to be children and to play and enjoy the holidays before they begin! 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.

### **Talk, listen, answer**

You can support your child by:

- talking about starting school
- listening to their worries
- answering any questions they may have

### **Uniform, lunch, activities**

You can explain about any supports they may have in school and any new arrangements around uniform, lunch or after school activities.

### **Meet other children**

Arrange to meet up with some other children who will be starting school on the same day.

### **Show your child the school building**

Make sure your child is familiar with the school by showing them the school you have chosen. You can do this by walking or driving past the school and letting your child know that it will be their new school.

### **Take advantage of visit to the school**

Schools usually have a day when all new children 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.

### **Take photographs of buildings**

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 independence**

Encourage them to become as independent as possible before they start school.

### **Buy the uniform early**

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.

### **Teach your child practical skills**

Help them to practise listening to and following instructions at home. If possible, make sure they:

- are toilet trained
- can put on, take off and hang up their own coat
- can open their lunchbox

### **Food they can easily eat**

You can also think about what they will be able and are willing to eat independently for lunch in school.

### **Lining up, playing games and taking turns**

Your child will be less anxious if they know how to behave when they get to school. You can explain to them about lining up in the schoolyard and playing games that involve taking turns.

### **Practise school activities**

You can practise activities like jigsaws, drawing and colouring at a table. This will help them to sit at a desk and focus on an activity at school.

The Preparing Young Children for Primary School booklet has very useful suggestions for parents to prepare their young children for starting school. You can download it on the NCSE website.

[Preparing Young Children for Primary School A Resource for Parents, Early Learning and Care Settings and Schools.](#)

## **Prepare yourself for how it will affect you**

You can also help your child by preparing yourself to let them 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 they 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 need your support and patience.

## **NCSE publications to assist parents**

The NCSE has published a general booklet:

- [Information Booklet for Parents of Children and Young People with Special Educational Needs.](#)

We have also published nine information leaflets on particular areas of special educational needs. These explain how the education system supports students with special educational needs.

The information leaflets cover:

- general learning disabilities
- specific learning disabilities
- emotional and behavioural difficulties or disorders
- physical disabilities



- being blind or vision impaired
- specific speech and language disorders
- being Deaf and hard of hearing
- autism

The information booklets and leaflets are available from your local SENO or on the NCSE website at [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

### **NCSE Video supports**

You can also check the National Council for Special Education YouTube channel for useful videos on:

- [Starting Primary School](#)
- [Getting Help in Mainstream Schools](#)

**There are parental information booklets and leaflets available from SENOs or on the NCSE website and useful videos on our YouTube channel.**

## Useful contacts

### **NCSE Special Educational Needs Organiser (SENO)**

[ncse.ie/seno-contact-information](https://ncse.ie/seno-contact-information)

Through your school or at:  
Health Centre

[www.hse.ie](https://www.hse.ie)

### **Department of Education**

<https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation/department-of-education/>

### **National Parents Council (Primary)**

[www.npc.ie](https://www.npc.ie)

### **Tusla**

[www.tusla.ie](https://www.tusla.ie)

### **Visiting Teacher Service**

(for children who are blind or vision impaired; or Deaf or hard of hearing)

[ncse.ie/visiting-teacher-support](https://ncse.ie/visiting-teacher-support)



