



INFORMATION SHEET

CHOOSING A SCHOOL FOR THE STUDENT WITH AN AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER.

*This information sheet is taken from items published by Autism Victoria in our quarterly newsletter, **Autism News**, in 2002. The first item was written by Laura Addabbo, psychologist and Autism Victoria Family Counsellor. The second item is a family story, written by Jan Hall (Secretary, Autism Victoria 2002+). We are happy for these items to be reproduced, provided Autism Victoria and the authors are appropriately acknowledged.*

HOW DO WE CHOOSE A MAINSTREAM SCHOOL?

Taken from March and September 2002 issues of Autism News, Family Counsellor Notes written by Laura Addabbo.

One of the most frustrating issues for parents, and a frequent topic of discussion within the Autism Victoria counselling service, is that of school difficulties. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder attending a mainstream school can have an awful time, due to poor staff understanding of Autism, Asperger Syndrome and PDD-NOS, inflexible rules, or a lack of willingness to understand and provide for the needs of these children. Having said that, there are many positive reports from parents about schools which successfully meet the needs of the student, or teachers who have done their homework and make school a happy place to be.

Here are some tips that may help you achieve a positive school placement.

To start with, you will need to think carefully about what you want for your child and what your child will be capable of in relation to school. Gather all the information you have about your child – assessment reports, progress reports and ask all those who have worked with your child what they think about schooling. Make some preliminary decisions about types of schools, and then start looking around. Contact the Department of Education and Training office for lists of schools, ask other parents, and then visit schools on your short list. Their website also contains useful information about their schools - <http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/schoolsonline/>

Once you decide on your school, the Principal should form a PSG or Program Support Group. This group will complete the application for enrolment and an Educational Needs Questionnaire. Later on the PSG is responsible for planning and monitoring the student's program. The PSG comprises school representatives, parents, consultants (if necessary) and a parent advocate (if desired). If additional funding is granted the Principal determines how the funds are to be used, and should be guided by the PSG.

Program Support Groups (called the PSG).

- Regular PSG's are vital to forming and implementing the goals for your child's educational, behavioural and social needs. Any student with a disability has a right to have PSG's, regardless of whether or not they receive additional funding from the Disability and Impairment (D&I) program.
- Guidelines for PSG's are in the Dept of Education & Training D & I package and can be obtained from your principal. Autism Victoria holds a copy of the latest package in the library.

- A PSG should occur approximately once per term and be attended by the parent(s), teacher, integration aide, principal (or nominated person) and school psychologist/welfare co-ordinator/guidance officer. Any other professionals who are relevant to the educational well-being of the student should also be present. Parents may also have an advocate to assist them. A private psychologist experienced in Autism Spectrum Disorders can attend a PSG, at a cost, to provide specific strategies and educate staff.
- There are several specialist autism schools which can provide a consultancy service, at a small cost, to most schools. This support can be via telephone or in person. Contact should be made by the student's school with the relevant autism school (see details on page four).
- If parents are having difficulty communicating their concerns or being heard, and need a liaison between themselves and the school, then the Association for Children with a Disability (ph 9500 1232 or 1800 654 013) can assist with advocacy support.
- If issues arise and cannot be resolved with the assistance of an advocate and discussions with the Principal, then parents can contact the Dept of Education & Training Regional Director. Be aware that the Regional Director will expect parents to have attempted to address their concerns with the Principal prior to contacting the regional office.

Other tips to note.

- Autism Victoria is unable to recommend 'good' schools, as we are so often requested to do. It is simply not possible for us to screen schools as there are too many variables - attitudes can change with the arrival/departure of a principal or teacher, some schools have psychologists/guidance officers and some do not, some purport to know about Autism Spectrum Disorders and then fail to carry out basic strategies, while others know nothing about Autism Spectrum Disorders but are willing to learn. Another variable we have observed are the needs of students and expectations of families – a school that suits one student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder and his/her family, may not suit a different student or family.
- An initial interview with the principal of a school should give parents an indication of the philosophy of the school and what type of support they are willing to provide. If the principal is not supportive then it is unlikely s/he will be prepared to support staff in implementing intervention strategies or encouraging staff to attend professional development sessions.
- Facets to look for in a potential school are – knowledge of/experience with Autism Spectrum Disorders, a willingness to learn about Autism Spectrum Disorders and proven strategies, presence of integration teacher, Special Education trained staff, school counsellor or psychologist, a willingness to be flexible with regards to certain rules and finally a willingness to accept outside assistance from parents and professionals.
- Were you welcomed by a senior teacher who was accepting of your child's right to attend their school and the needs of students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder – or gave an open willingness to learn?
- Did the staff member know about the Program for Students with Disabilities and Impairments and the process for applying for additional funding?
- Are there other students with special needs attending the school?
- Was there a buzz about the place – lots of different activities, and an attitude of treating the children as individuals with individual needs?
- Lunch times are often the hardest times for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders – they are unstructured, noisy, chaotic and social – all the things most children with Autism Spectrum Disorders find so very hard. Part of lunchtime spent in the library/computer room can be very effective in providing 'down time'. Or give the student important jobs to do during lunch, or start a

club which runs at lunch time that is part of his/her special talents repertoire – chess, astronomy, dinosaurs, Melways, trains etc.

- Where possible use visual aids (schedules, charts, calendars, lists) to assist the student in following daily tasks. Some tasks will need to be broken down into discrete steps, with a clear process for the student to follow. Behavioural strategies such as a star chart and positive reinforcement can provide motivation and incentive to work on difficult areas.
- Teachers should be aware of sensory difficulties caused by noise, bright lights, people brushing against skin etc. A plan should be in place for times when the student is anxious or overwhelmed – relaxation strategies, a designated space for ‘down time’ and a system for how the student will access ‘down time’.
- You should also consider informing classmates of specific difficulties and how they can assist.

Resources.

There are many books that have been designed to assist with school and classroom issues. The following books would be useful for school staff (and parents). These are available for loan from the Autism Victoria Library (our library reference number is in brackets).

1. *Asperger Syndrome: A Practical Guide for Teachers (1619)*, Cumine, Leach & Stevenson
2. *Asperger Syndrome- practical strategies for the classroom: A Teacher's Guide (1662)*, National Autistic Society
3. *Understanding and Teaching Children With Autism (1248)*, Jordan & Powell
4. *Autism – PDD: Creative Ideas During the School Years (1586)*, Janice Adams
5. *Incorporating Social Goals in the Classroom (2012)*, R. Moyes
6. *Inside Out – What Makes A Person with Social Cognitive Deficits Tick? (2114)*, M. Garcia Winner
7. *Visual Strategies for Improving Communication (2106)*, L. Hodgdon
8. *Making Visual Supports Work in the Home and Community (2113)*, Savner & Smith Myles
9. *Navigating the Social World (2115)*, J. McAfee
10. *Teaching Your Child the Language of Social Success (2107)* Duke, Nowicki & Martin
11. *Meeting the Needs of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (1950)*, Jordan & Jones
12. *Higher Functioning Adolescents and Young Adults with Autism: A Teacher's Guide (1551)*, Fullerton et al
13. *Taming the Recess Jungle (1913)* and *How to Respond to a Bullying Attempt (1993)*, Carol Gray
14. *Autism: A Social Skills Approach for Children and Adolescents (1690)*, Aarons & Gittens
15. *What Does It Mean To Me? A Workbook and Guide (1892)*, C. Faherty
16. *Making it a Success: Practical Strategies and Worksheets for Teachers (1971)*, A.C.E.S.
17. *Asperger Syndrome – what teachers need to know (2323)*, M. Winter

These books can be used to assist peers/siblings in understanding Autism Spectrum Disorders:

18. *Asperger's Huh? A Child's Perspective (2103)*, R. Schnurr
19. *Tobin Learns to Make Friends (2104)*, D. Murrell

20. *Children with Autism: a booklet for brothers and sisters (1034)* and *Able Autistic Children: children with Aspergers Syndrome (1138)*, J. Davies
21. *Andy and His Yellow Frisbee (1713)*, M. Thompson
22. *Little Rainman (1611)*, K.L. Simmons
23. *My Friend with Autism (2336)*, B. Bishop
24. *What Does It Mean to Have Autism? (2380)*, L. Spilsbury

Most of these books can be purchased through the specialist Autism bookstores. If there is more than one student with an Autism Spectrum Disorder at your school you may like to request that the school purchase some of these books.

A useful website is run by O.A.S.I.S. They have an entire section dedicated to Education, which provides articles, strategies, teaching tools, educational videos, examples of Individual Education Plans, and a Letter of Introduction that can be provided to teaching staff to introduce them to Autism Spectrum Disorders and the strengths/difficulties of your child. Go to www.udel.edu/bkirby/asperger

Specialist Autism Spectrum Disorder Schools in Victoria.

Bulleen Heights School (for primary and secondary aged students)

Pleasant Road BULLEEN

Phone: (03) 9850 7122

bulleen.heights.sch@edumail.vic.gov.au

Wantirna Heights School (or primary aged students only)

Kingloch Parade WANTIRNA

Phone: (03) 9720 7492

wantirna.heights.sch@edumail.vic.gov.au

Mansfield Autistic Centre (residential school for regional families, short term placement only)

81 Highett Street MANSFIELD

Phone: (03) 5775 2876

autistic@mansfield.net.au

Southern Autistic School (for primary aged students only)

12 Margareta St BENTLEIGH EAST

Phone: (03) 9563 8139

southern.autistic.sch@edumail.vic.gov.au

Western Autistic School (for primary aged students, with a unit for secondary students attached to Essendon Keilor Secondary College – Niddrie campus)

Garnet Street NIDDRIE

Phone: (03) 9337 9175

western.autistic.sch@edumail.vic.gov.au or visit their website at www.westaut.vic.edu.au

NICK'S STORY – JAN HALL

*This item was published in the September 2002 issue of Autism News. **Postscript** – May 2004. Nick is in his second year of a Work Education Program at Holmesglen TAFE. The skills he developed at school have helped enormously in his transition to the much larger and busier tertiary setting. He continues to cope well and was particularly proud to gain his driver's licence recently.*

After a very difficult and puzzling early childhood with countless visits to various doctors and specialists, Nick was finally diagnosed with Asperger Syndrome at the age of seven. It was a huge relief for me to know at last that there was a real reason for his inexplicable behaviour, and I went straight to Autism Victoria where I was given information and support.

We made it through Primary School with the help of an aide, but there were many problems – every time the phone rang I was sure it would be the school with another complaint. Nick badly wanted to have friends but this just didn't happen so there were no party invitations and he (and I) were generally excluded. School camps were an issue, with Nick wanting badly to attend while the school would prefer that he remained at home. On one occasion Nick was told that he could attend the next camp if his behaviour during the term was good, but when the time came the school wanted to exclude him although they agreed that he had been well behaved. Nick was so upset and this seemed so unfair that I contacted the Regional office and the school reconsidered it's position and Nick attended and enjoyed the camp.

As the time for Secondary School approached I visited several schools and settled on a local school which seemed happy to accommodate his differences and offered an excellent orientation program which Nick enjoyed.

Unfortunately even after all this preparation it was obvious right from the beginning of the year that there were enormous problems. Even with a great deal of assistance Nick was overwhelmed by all the kids, the noise, the lockers, changing classrooms, in fact the whole environment. He started running away from school, damaging equipment and being quite violent. The school suggested that as he was so out of control, there may be some psychiatric problem as well as the Asperger syndrome, so Nick spent six weeks in Adolescent Psychiatric Unit at Monash Medical Centre 'being assessed'. As I expected they concluded that there were no psychiatric problems and that Nick's unmanageable behaviour was a result of his inability to cope with his school environment.

The search was then on for a school which could meet Nick's needs and it was immediately apparent that there were very few options for him, especially as I was unable to pay private school fees. I was persuaded to visit Ashwood School, and went along with very mixed feelings. I had never believed that a 'Special School' was appropriate for Nick as he seemed 'normal' intellectually.

I was greeted and shown around by a lovely lady and was immediately made to feel very welcome. When I had explained Nick's background she suggested that I bring him for a couple of sessions to see how he liked it. After a good deal of fast talking on my part Nick agreed to go 'just once' because he wasn't going to any 'Special School'. I took him along with great trepidation and was amazed when he came out with a look of wonder on his face saying "everyone was kind to me and nobody teased me".

This was the beginning of a 'miracle' for us. At first Nick was extremely difficult and the staff were severely tested many times by his behaviour, but we were always treated with respect and felt very supported by the school.

Gradually things started to improve – Nick was much easier to manage at home, the phone started to ring for him and he had friends at last! For the first time in his life he was getting good school reports and was becoming popular with both the students and staff. He attended school camps every year, was elected a member of the SRC and the phone rang for him non stop!

Now in his final year of school, Nick is School Captain, has participated in and made a speech at the school's Deb Ball, had a lead role in the recent school production, has had a lovely girlfriend for the last 18 months, and is a very happy and likeable young man who shows every promise of becoming a valued member of society.

If you are agonising about choice of school for your child don't rule out the possibility of a 'Special School'. Sometimes the option of 'fitting in' and being happy and accepted can outweigh the benefits of 'academic achievement' for our kids. I know that in Nick's case Ashwood School has been very special for him!

Ashwood School can be contacted on (03) 9808 7444 – they will make you feel very welcome.

You can contact Jan via Autism Victoria on (03) 9885 0533, or writing a letter addressed to her and sent to Autism Victoria.

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