

Choosing a school

It is never too early to start researching the local primary schools that your child could attend. But check the eligibility criteria before setting your heart on a particular one, advises Annette Rawstrone.



By Annette Rawstrone, early years writer, London

Not only is it disconcerting that your child is growing up fast and due to start primary school, but the process of selecting and applying for a school place can also be daunting. At least for many parents it means an end to paying nursery fees!

When should my child start school?

In the UK most children start primary school in the September following their fourth birthday. However, a child does not legally have to attend school until the term after they turn five-years-old.

How do I apply for a school place?

Most children attend state primary school. Contact your local council for a list of local schools and information on how to apply. You must apply for a primary school place by 15 January for the child to start September of that year.

Will they get in?

Before you set your heart on a particular school, it's advisable to check its admission criteria, which the council or school can provide. Criteria differs between schools but, for example, schools may give priority to children:

- Who have a sibling already at the school
- Who live close to the school (ask the school to clarify its catchment area)
- In care, being looked after or adopted
- From a particular religion (for faith schools).

If your child doesn't match the criteria then it's best to apply to alternative schools.

If your child has special educational needs, their statement or education, health and care plan will recommend a school for them. If you apply there, the school must give your child a place.

How do I find out about the quality of a school?

All state schools are inspected by Ofsted which makes judgements on areas such as achievements and standards, how the curriculum is taught and the quality of teaching and learning. You can access school Ofsted reports and their ratings online. These are listed as one: outstanding, two: good, three: satisfactory and four: inadequate. Also check school league tables to see how they fair academically but be cautious because these documents only offer a snapshot of the school.

Also, whenever you're in the park or at groups, chat to parents of older children to find out which schools they attend and their impressions. In the end, you'll only get a proper feel for a school by going to visit so, once you have identified a few preferred schools, contact them to arrange a visit or find out about open days.

What do I look for on a visit?

Even as you're walking through the school gates the most important thing to think of is whether you feel comfortable and whether you think your child will be happy in the environment. You know your child best and should follow your instincts.

Other things to look for and ask can include:

- Are the reception staff friendly and welcoming?
- Do the head teacher and other school staff address pupils by their name?
- Do pupils appear happy, polite and motivated?
- Ask how long staff have been at the school (if there are a lot of new staff this could indicate management problems)
- Is the school's academic ethos aligned with yours?
- Are the wall displays recent and do they show a range of abilities?
- What are school dinners like and is there much variety?
- Does the school offer extra-curricular activities, such as music and sports clubs?
- What provision is there for working parents - is there a breakfast and after-school-club?
- What is the outdoor area like?

It's up to you whether you take your child along on the school visit. You may prefer to go alone and then arrange a follow-up visit with your child later. Whatever, when you're allocated a school they will have opportunities to see the school and meet their teacher before they start attending.