



Choosing a School

a guide for parents



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a guide and checklist for parents

Choice of school is something that deserves careful consideration – it will be one of the biggest influences in your child's development and life; it's worth putting in the time and effort to think about what aspects are most important to your family, examining your options and deciding what will be the best place for your child.

It is a very individual choice – different people have different priorities for their children's education, and you may find that what you are seeking for your child is quite different to that which others close to you look for in their own school selection process.

Remember too that your priorities may change with time – you are making the best decision for your child right now, and not a commitment for their entire schooling. You will review this decision at later points, and may find another school to be the best option at that time. Whilst you do not want to change schools too often, it is worth remembering that your decision is always reversible if things change – or if you decide you made the wrong choice.

Preparing a shortlist

As a first step, draw up a list of all the schools that are available to you, bearing in mind factors such as:

- Geographic location – school catchment zones, how far you are prepared to travel, how will your child get there and how much it will cost?
- Cost of school attendance (government or independent system – and there is wide variation in the fee structures of different independent schools)
- Availability of before and after school care, if needed
- Religious or other affiliation
- Impact on, and commitment needed from, other members of the family

You can obtain lists of government and non-government schools from the internet: <http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/schoolsonline/> lists and gives details of all schools. For independent schools you can access a list at: www.ais.vic.edu.au/

Now revisit this preliminary list using your own list of priority considerations to condense it into a short list of schools you are prepared to consider. These considerations might include:

- Local environment (setting, socioeconomic characteristics of neighbourhood, safety factors)
- Social factors – where do siblings, friends, neighbours attend school?
- Size of school (primary and/or secondary, is the school large enough to provide wide educational experience but small enough to maintain a sense of community?)
- Class sizes
- School layout and grounds (including accessibility and safety issues) and school facilities – maintenance of all these
- Enrolment conditions (eg availability of part-time enrolment? what level of support will be available?)
- Co-educational or girls/boys only school

Mainstream or specialist

It is your choice whether your child will attend one of the local mainstream schools or a specialist school. Try to visit all the schools that you feel you could consider – even if you feel you have already decided whether to opt initially for a mainstream or specialist setting, it is likely to be beneficial to visit at least one example of each. There may only be a single specialist school option available to you, but there may well be more than one mainstream school, both within the government and independent school system. If you are able to visit a number of schools, you will probably quickly start to get a feel for what your priorities are, in finding the right place for your child.

Visiting schools

When you visit mainstream schools, focus on the overall attitude towards the inclusion of your child and disability in general. Again and again, a positive attitude by Principal, teaching staff and the school community has been shown to be the most important factor in successful inclusive schooling.

When you visit specialist schools, ask what they consider the difference to be between their programme and that in the local schools, and what they see to be the advantages or disadvantages of mainstream or specialist. Pay particular attention to the expectations of the teaching staff in regard to your child's potential and how they will support the child to achieve this – it is important that these expectations align with your own.

In all the schools you visit, ask to view a typical weekly timetable, and make a note of significant timetabling differences between settings.

Wherever possible both parents, or a parent and an advocate, should attend the school visit, as different perspectives encourage critical appraisal of each option, following the visit.

Finding the right school

Once you have a shortlist of schools to consider, try to arrange to visit each one on at least one occasion, in order to make a detailed study of each. The list below is a detailed checklist of points and considerations – not all will be relevant for you, so it is worthwhile addressing the list first and deleting the points which you do not deem significant for your choice.

Listen carefully to the answers you get at the school – make notes to help you remember them – and consider whether your questions are answered fully, appropriately and convincingly.

Your initial impression

- Was your first contact with the school positive and welcoming?
- Did you meet the Principal or a senior member of staff at your first visit?
- Does the school appear to offer a secure and caring environment?
- Do the students appear to enjoy being at the school?
- Is the atmosphere both orderly and relaxed?
- Do the staff and students treat each other with consideration and respect?
- Do the classrooms offer an organised and pleasant learning environment – how are they equipped?
- Do you feel the school is interested in your child?
- Did they have current knowledge of Down syndrome – or were prepared to find out?
- Did the school supply you with written information to assist parents of children enrolling?

Curriculum information

- Does the school have a Mission Statement and a School Charter which include progressive short and long term goals?
- Does the school philosophy specifically acknowledge different abilities and different learning styles?
- How does the school encourage children to develop respect, tolerance and consideration for others?
- What attention does the school pay to the spiritual and moral development? What values are taught – and how?
- How does the school deal with issues of discipline?
- Does the school have an introductory programme to assist children transitioning into the school or an organised transition programme for children moving from primary to secondary?
- How structured (prescriptive or open-ended) is the curriculum? Is there enough flexibility in the programme to allow modification for different learners?
- How does the school extend high ability learners and how does it support those students needing additional support?
- How does the school cater for individual difference in their students (eg visual learners, students who have difficulty attending to large amounts of spoken information, students who are slow learners)?
- What does the curriculum offer beyond the statutory subjects? Co-curricular activities?
- Does the school offer clubs, interest groups, camps, outdoor education experiences?

- Do all students have access to specialist facilities (eg library, art rooms, science and technology laboratories, gymnasium)
- How often are excursions and incursions offered (what was offered in this respect last term)?
- How and where is ICT (information and computer technology) incorporated into the programme? What access do children have to the computers (class time and recess time...)?
- Homework policy and how it is implemented – is the homework checked by staff?
- What is the extent of the sporting and physical education program? What range of sporting activities is offered?
- How does the school encourage healthy lifestyle habits and fitness in all students?

Teaching staff

- Is there a balance between male and female staff members, young teachers and mature teachers?
- Do the teachers appear keen and competent to address the needs of different learners in the classroom?
- To what extent does the school provide for professional development of teachers?

Communication

You need regular information and open communication with the school to keep in touch with your child's progress. You will probably want to meet his/her teacher at least once a term, but it is also good to be able to regularly chat with the teacher on a more informal basis. Getting the right level of communication and partnership between home and school is also very individual – some families will want lots of consultation and input, whilst others will prefer to confine input to attending a termly meeting. You should ensure that the level of communication and involvement you expect is understood by, and acceptable to, the school.

- How does the school see the role of home and family in the education process?
- What input would the school expect from the family?
- How will you be able to stay in touch with progress?
- How often do you get to speak to your child's teachers?
- Is it possible to speak informally to the teachers at the end of the day, or keep in regular email contact?
- How does the reporting and assessment system work? Parent-teacher interviews?
- What parental involvement in school activities is welcomed?

Inclusion and special provision for children with disabilities

- Does the school have established inclusionary practice?
- Does the school have a written policy in relation to students with disabilities
- How many children with disabilities (or receiving additional funding) does the school currently have?
- Who is responsible for the students with disabilities?
- What time release from teaching is allowed for this role?
- Is the school familiar with the process for special education funding?
- How would the school envisage using such funding to support your child?
- What support staff are employed (eg support and welfare personnel, classroom aides, specialists, therapists)
- Will the family have any input in the process for employment of an aide?
- How are the specialist staff and aides allocated and used? What do they do?
- What arrangements are there for visiting and external resource and support staff?

In relation to your child

- Do they have any previous experience of including a child with Down syndrome? (A note of caution: schools or teachers that profess to have extensive experience of Down syndrome may have various pre-conceived notions about your child hidden within that experience, schools which admit to knowing little or nothing about Down syndrome should not be discounted – what is more important is a willingness to find out, or learn with the child).
- How will the school ensure that both your child and his/her school-mates feel that s/he belongs in the class?
- How does the school expect to address the specific learning needs and difficulties of your child?
- Will your child have the opportunity to actively participate in all school activities?
- What proportion of time (if any) will (s)he be withdrawn from the regular class?
- In what way (if any) would your child's programme be different from that of any other student?
- What areas does the school see as needing careful attention? Potential issues?
- How will the school manage any medical or health issues your child has?
- Who will be responsible for deciding on, and making, any modifications to the programme to adapt it for your child? (The classroom teacher should always retain responsibility for the learning of all the children in the class – no matter how good the aide may be.)
- Are the school aware of Down Syndrome Victoria and other external support resources? Have they made use of these resources in the past – and if so, for what?
- Would the school like you to provide them with some preliminary resources about Down syndrome? (note the reaction to this question!)

Secondary school choices some extra considerations

When choosing a secondary school, there are some additional significant considerations. Give serious consideration to what your expectations are in regard to your child's secondary education outcomes – what learning do you want your child to be offered in secondary school? To which career paths and choices do you expect this secondary education might lead?

With this in mind, consider which secondary education path will best support your son or daughter to achieve their potential and their dreams. Also question the school carefully regarding their expectations for your child's secondary education. Some mainstream secondary schools may enthusiastically enrol a student with Down syndrome at Year 7, but as the gap in skills widens in comparison with age peers, find the curriculum modification more challenging.

- How flexible is the school's curriculum? To what extent will they try to fit the curriculum to the student rather than the student to the curriculum?
- Where do young people leaving the school progress to?
- What proportion of school leavers do so at Year 10 and Year 12?
- Which school leaving qualification courses does the school offer?
- What information does the school have regarding VCAL, VET, TAFE courses, SBA (school-based apprenticeships) and FFYA (Futures for Young Adults program)?
- What work experience opportunities does the school offer, and when?
- How does the school assist in transition planning to further education or employment?
- What is the time frame for this planning?
- How can the school assist your son/daughter to build and maintain friendships with peers?
- Is there a lunchtime activities program?

Other factors to take account of include social opportunities and peer relationships. Friendships and peer relationships play an important role in development and emotional wellbeing throughout teenage years and this may impact on your school choices. It is also important that your son or daughter is involved in making the decision about their secondary schooling. Ensure that you elicit their input.

Attitude

The attitude of the school to your child, and whether this aligns with your own, is of crucial importance. You want a school that is happy and willing to have your child (not just prepared to enrol him or her) and embraces individual differences. You want somewhere that will acknowledge your child's difference but will not allow the difference to define the child.

A final word

Difficult though it may be, if you sense that the school is not really willing to enrol your child, it is very important to pursue and clarify this. Whilst the Disability Discrimination Act provides that schools cannot refuse to enrol a child on the basis of a disability, the reality is that if the school does not want your child, you face an uphill battle, the outcome of which is more likely to benefit those who come after you than your child.

Please do not hesitate to contact the staff at Down Syndrome Victoria if we can be of further assistance or if you have additional questions.

Good luck in your search!

How to use this booklet

Choosing a school – a guide for parents is intended to help parents consider their priorities in selecting a school for their child with Down syndrome and formulate the questions that will help them find the right place.

You may wish to extract the points you feel are relevant to your selection process and adapt them into your own checklist to take with you when you visit schools.

On the following pages are three different checklist templates. You may wish to print and copy the template that most appeals to you and hand-write your questions to ask on a school visit.

The templates are also available in Microsoft Word format on the website www.downsyndromevictoria.org.au



Down Syndrome Victoria

Down Syndrome Victoria is the statewide peak membership organisation representing people with Down syndrome and their families. It is a not-for-profit organisation established in 1978 to provide support, encouragement, information and resources to people with Down syndrome, their families and the broader community.

Down Syndrome Victoria provides a whole of life service offering:

- Personal support and information to families
- Advocacy, information, support, mentoring and training for adults with Down syndrome
- An education support service to assist students with Down syndrome and their teachers in mainstream schools
- Peer support groups around the state
- An annual Family Fun Day and other events
- Annual conference and education/information sessions
- A quarterly journal
- Information and professional development for health and education professionals
- A library of Down syndrome specific resources.

Education Support Service

The objective of the Education Support Service (ESS) is to provide educational programs and services that will maximize the developmental achievements of students with Down syndrome both in their educational environment and in the wider community.

ESS Services include:

- Teaching and learning strategies
- Classroom organisation and strategies
- Behaviour management
- Speech and language development
- Attendance at Student Support Groups
- Loan and/or sourcing of resources
- School selection
- Transition to primary and post primary settings.

Learners with Down syndrome is intended to provide a comprehensive introduction for teachers who have students with Down syndrome in their classes.

The handbook has been compiled from the work of a number of well known specialist educators around the world. Down Syndrome Victoria hopes this handbook will help education professionals to understand learners with Down syndrome and successfully include them in the classroom.

While it does not offer a blueprint for how to teach a learner with Down syndrome, we hope it will help and inspire teachers to develop strategies and techniques to support students who have Down syndrome - and along the way help meet the needs of other students in the class. **RRP \$9.90**

