



Special School

Guide in choosing schools for your child with special needs

by Dr Vanessa von Auer

FINDING A SCHOOL which helps mold your child into a happy, confident, innovative and well-rounded individual is any parent's dream. Finding the "right" school is even more of a priority for parents of children with special needs. In their case, it is not only important to find a school which will guide their children into success-hood, but more importantly, a school which is genuinely able to cater to their children's unique learning styles. Schools which are not able – or worse, not willing to embrace the child holistically, are not the schools parents should want to consider.

What are special needs?

Did you know that everyone of us has special needs? Yes, think about your particular likes or dislikes. Some of us,

even as adults, still cut off the crust of our toast or avoid crowded shopping centres on Orchard Road on the weekends. Some of us cannot stand the humid, hot weather in Singapore, and others will avoid vacationing in cold, snowy countries at all cost.

In children with special needs, their likes and dislikes, their abilities and inabilities may be more pronounced, which ultimately may impact some or multiple areas of their daily functioning. For example, some kids may only talk at delayed ages, others may not be able to read or understand what they are reading even into their teenage years, and others yet may find it difficult to understand and adhere to social conventions. Officially, children with special needs are those who need specialised support most commonly seen in the school environment,

resulting from learning difficulties, physical disability, or emotional and behavioral difficulties.

Special needs and related learning difficulties have increased dramatically in recent decades. In response to such growth here at home, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has developed the educational arena by supporting and funding 20 special education schools (as of January 2010). These schools offer varying programs for different student profiles, who are unable to succeed in a mainstream school. Although we should consider ourselves lucky to live in a society which is cognizant and supportive of children with special needs, many of these specialised schools have long waiting lists, spanning from several months to even years! Time is of the essence in raising a child with learning

differences. The earlier these children can enter a programme suitable to their needs, the better their prognosis.

So how do you find a suitable educational setting for your child?

There are general key checkpoints which you should consider before you make a decision.

Key checkpoints

Don'ts

1. Don't get dazzled by sparkly, expensive facilities. Who would not be impressed initially by an Olympic-sized pool, a huge soccer field or modernly designed furniture? With fancy facilities come costs – to the parents and to the school as a business. To upkeep this sparkly exterior, some things may become less of a priority, e.g. the student-teacher ratio, the teaching quality, the relationship between child and teacher, and the school as a warm and supportive community.



2. Don't place emphasis on location. It is not in the best interest of the child to make a decision based on the school's location. Although it may be situated in a more convenient or prestigious location, the school's philosophy and its ability to support your child's educational needs may not be in line with your child's needs.



3. Don't want your child in a school more than the school wants your child. If the school you are banking on most does not seem to be able to cater to your child's learning and developmental requirements, then do not force the issue. Look into your second and third options.

Dos

1. Do consider all possibilities. Tour all schools which are, in theory, able to accommodate your child. Do not be too choosy – give even the lesser-known schools a chance. Do not go for the “name or brand” purely. During your tours, meet with the admissions personnel, talk to teachers and get a sense of the learning culture. Getting a sense of the place will help you understand whether your child will feel nurtured, respected and will be stimulated in areas of academic, emotional and social development.

2. Do prepare questions. When you visit schools, find out what the school's expectations are for their students, and think about whether these match your hopes and expectations for your child. Naturally, there will be some slight variations in parental and school expectations, but they should not differ too much.

3. Do insist on a flexible yet challenging curriculum. The ideal school for your child with special needs will offer a flexible yet vigorous curriculum. Sounds somewhat contradictory? Well, schools that are able to offer a flexible school curriculum help students learn at their own pace and modify the lesson plans according to each individual's strengths. At the same time, just because a child has special needs or learning difficulties does not mean that schools should not challenge these students and bring about progression.

4. Do start with smaller class sizes. Numerous studies have demonstrated that the impact of smaller class sizes directly relate to increased student achievement. In particular, gains have been noted especially for children in the preschool and primary grades.

5. Do be a positive realist! Although parents should never underestimate their children, it is important to have realistic expectations for the child. If a child has dyslexia or autism, these are disorders which will never just disappear. These are life-long conditions. Students with such conditions can, however, learn to compensate for their weaknesses and be successful in their own right. In fact, many successful people such as Richard Branson, Cher, Albert Einstein, and Robin Williams (to name a few) were all diagnosed with learning difficulties.

Finally, be flexible yourself and take the school search for your child in stride. There will be frustrations, excitements and disappointments on this journey. But at the end of it all, you will be rewarded with knowing that your child is in a school which provides him/her the biggest support! eh



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