



Selecting a School for Your Child

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Selecting a school for your child who is coping with special needs can be a daunting task for any parent or guardian. In this article, we talk with the staff at the **Episcopal Center for Children** about what factors to consider when selecting a school for your child coping with special needs.

The Center is a nonprofit, nondenominational school and treatment program for children contending with emotional challenges from the greater Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. Accredited by the Joint Commission and certified by the District of Columbia Office of State Superintendent of Education, the Center serves children who are 5-14 years old in grades K-8. Their staff offer the following tips for selecting a school:

Visit the school

There are specialized schools serving children with special needs that will look at your son or daughter's paperwork and give you a yes or no

answer about acceptance. This might make it easier for you to make a quick decision, but the staff at the Center encourage prospective parents to visit the campus.

Realize the staff is also looking at your child and his or her needs. Brittany Pratt works at the Center and is the director of positive behavior interventions and supports. "I look at the behavior concerns and try to get a sense of the intensity of the behavior. Sometimes the way it appears on paper, is not how it appears in person," said Pratt.

When you visit the school, bring your notes along and check off questions as you go. You may want to ask a lot of questions and that's ok. A list can help you stay on track.

Observe students in one or more classrooms and watch how they interact with the teacher and other staff. Stay for more than just one or two minutes when watching the classroom. Notice how the teacher engages with the students and how they respond.

Linger a few minutes and consider if your child could learn and be successful in this classroom environment. Is there an objective posted in the classrooms you see? Is there an agenda being used by teachers and students? Stand in the classroom for a little while.

Don't be afraid to ask a lot of questions. Ask teachers about their approach to education. For example, if you talk with the reading specialist, ask what their method or approach is. They should tell you they are certified, but they may say we use the Lindamood-Bell Learning Processes, Wilson Reading System®, or a blended method for intensive reading instruction. Ask how their methods are applied in the classroom and how they might work with your child.

Be observant

Do the students you see in the hallways or classrooms look happy? How are they interacting with the staff and teachers? Are older and younger students intermingled at some activities, like lunch? Look for the culture of the school in action. Do they call the place where students eat lunch the cafeteria or the dining room? What posters or signs are on the walls? Does it feel friendly and warm? Or cold and institutional?

The approach at the Center is very much community-driven, as they use a therapeutic milieu. Pratt encourages parents to ask if there is a peer group that can help the student be successful. Ask about schoolwide activities and events. Concerts, assemblies, a gardening club, sports, a makerspace and other activities are all opportunities for your child to celebrate, and be successful.

Probe about how the school supports positive behavior

Ask how the school supports positive behavior. "You will want to know what systems we have set up to facilitate a child's progress or behavior support systems," said Robert Chuthaset, coordinator of behavior support services at the Center.

Discuss during the visit how the school responds to certain behaviors that are specific to your

child. For example, if you know your child is a runner or elopes out of classrooms, ask if the school has locked facilities. Find out what their policy is for how they handle children who run or elope out of classrooms.

If the school does physical restraints, ask if the staff are equipped with training in this area specifically, or if they have certifications or licenses for physical interventions. Ask what type of training the staff has? Is it just one staff member, or have all of the staff had the training?

Find out what behaviors would warrant a physical restraint. At the Center, a physical restraint is only warranted if there is an immediate safety concern for the child or anyone else. Inquire about what happens after the child is restrained.

Ask what schoolwide and classroom behavior management plans are implemented at the school. Sometimes individual classrooms will have additional incentive and behavior management plans to keep students focused and decrease problem behaviors. You might ask what is specifically done to support positive behavior.

Bring your child along for the school visit if you can

Letting your child see the school and getting their impressions will be important for your decision about placement. At the Center, parents or guardians are encouraged to bring a prospective student with them.

Seeing your child in person really gives the school a different perspective too. "We have the child see the psychiatrist, psychologist and the social worker. The record is not always an accurate reflection of the whole child and may place more emphasis on behavior concerns," said Stefanie Nash, chief program officer at the Center.

"Sometimes the way a child presents on paper – we never see here – because they are not in a classroom with twenty plus students (like at their home school). Their behavior may not have the same level of intensity that brought them here," said Nash.

It's also important to watch the interaction of staff with your child while you are on the visit. Note how they talk with your child and with other children.

Your child may not always articulate in words their feelings, but they will observe certain things. They might say the campus looks cool or lunch smells good. The big question is – is this the school that they could see themselves coming to? Can they see themselves here?

Ask about services and supports for the entire family

Parenting a child coping with special needs can bring its own unique challenges for any family. Parents should also consider what types of services the school will offer for them and for the rest of the family.

As a parent you have a right to know what your child does throughout the day. You want to feel like you are part of the process and part of the program. How does the school build those connections and help you?

Ask how the school ensures that what is going on at school, carries over into the home. Are there daily, weekly, or monthly updates? Will you be communicating with one person or several people? Because the Center communicates with a parent or guardian every day for each student, it's important that families be prepared for that communication.

Take a strengths-based approach

So often when we talk about children receiving special education services, our conversations are about deficits and problems. Flip this perspective on its head, by considering your child's strengths. Think about your child's strengths and ask if there are things in the program that support those strengths.

"If you have a child that really loves music, sports, or the arts – and that's an area where they thrive – then look at what sort of programming they offer that speaks to your child's strengths,"

said Catherine Tafur, director of related services & activities and occupational therapist at the Center.

She says to consider the opportunities the school offers for children to succeed. "It's important to know the bones of the education, but they are kids – what's there to tend to the needs of the child? How do they provide opportunities for success and successful participation?"

The staff should also be thinking about your child and his or her needs, and visualize how that child can fit into the school culture. In her role, Tafur considers whether the Center has the capacity to meet the needs of prospective students.

Making your final decision

It can be challenging for parents to make a decision about a school placement. Nash notes that parents sometimes can find a school that "had my child's best interests at heart, but may not have offered needed programming.

She says it's important to look at all of the information you gather about the school you are considering and to make an informed choice. Nash encourages parents to be an active part of the decision-making process, ask lots of questions, and make decisions about what works best for their child.

"We know that parents have often been through a grinder and selecting a school can be nerve-wracking. People will throw names of schools out to you and all sorts of ideas. But it comes down to your child and his or her needs – not what worked for someone else. You want to look for what's right for what your child," said James Cowan, director of education at the Center.



Checklist

- What is the educational program at the school?
 - What is the treatment program? What is the school's underlying philosophy about treatment or therapy?
 - What are the behavior support systems the school uses? Do they use PBIS (Positive Behavior Intervention System) or another approach?
 - How does the school manage difficult behavior?
 - Is the facility locked or open?
 - What is the environment and culture of the school? How does it feel to walk through the hallways?
 - How do students transition throughout the day? What is a typical daily student schedule?
 - What is the typical class size? What is the student to teacher ratio?
 - What does the school do to excite students about learning?
 - What is the school's policy on medication and administering medication?
 - What types of training and certification does the staff have? In education? In behavior support? In treatment?
 - Are there social workers at the school? Or other mental health professionals? Will they provide therapy and treatment? How often?
 - What is unique to the school's program that is not offered in another school?
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- How does the school communicate with the family? What is the expectation for me as a parent from the school to be involved? Are there meetings, calls? How often?
 - What supports does the school provide for parents or guardians? For the family?
 - Do you have a peer group for my child? Can my child have successful peer interactions?
 - How long is the school year? If the school has an extended year, what is the program like?
 - How long will my child be at this school? What's going to be the plan after they leave this school?
 - What is my child's opinion about this school?
 - How do the staff interact with my child?
 - Do I feel comfortable with this school?
 - Are the staff responsive to me? To my child?
 - Can this school meet my child's needs?
 - Can I see my child being successful at this school?

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More information about the Episcopal Center for Children can be found at ECCofDC.org