

**The right place?**



# The right place?

*A parents' guide to choosing a  
residential special school*

**Jenny Morris**

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The **Joseph Rowntree Foundation** has supported this project as part of its programme of research and innovative development projects, which it hopes will be of value to policy makers, practitioners and service users. The facts presented and views expressed in this report are, however, those of the author and not necessarily those of the Foundation.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation  
The Homestead  
40 Water End  
York YO30 6WP  
Website: [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

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First published 2003 by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

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ISBN 1 85935 149 2 (paperback)  
ISBN 1 85935 150 6 (pdf: available at [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk))

A CIP catalogue record for this report is available from the British Library.

Cover design by Adkins Design

Illustrations © Angela Martin

Prepared and printed by:  
York Publishing Services Ltd  
64 Hallfield Road  
Layerthorpe  
York  
YO31 7ZQ  
Tel: 01904 430033 Fax: 01904 430868 Website: [www.yps-publishing.co.uk](http://www.yps-publishing.co.uk)

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The idea for this booklet came from parents who were interviewed for research carried out by the Norah Fry Research Centre on residential special school placements.<sup>1</sup> They said they would have appreciated more help in seeking out a school for their children and that this help was rarely available.

Kim Auman and Lizzie Batten from aMaze, a Brighton-based voluntary organisation that works to empower parents of children and young people with special educational needs, got together a group of parents to help with the writing of the booklet. These parents are listed at the end of the preface, which they wrote. The booklet was only possible because of their expertise, based on their personal experiences.

Thanks also to Angela Martin for, yet again, producing such wonderful cartoons. And finally, thank you to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation for funding the booklet.

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1 Abbott, D., Morris, J. and Ward, L. (2002) *The Best Place to Be? Policy, practice and the experiences of residential school placements for disabled children*. York: York Publishing Services for Joseph Rowntree Foundation

## PREFACE

We are all parents who have been down the very long and sometimes difficult road of trying to find a suitable residential special school for our children. We want what every parent wishes for their child; that as they grow, they become more confident, at ease with themselves, optimistic about the future and not fearful about what might happen to them.

We had hoped that our children would flourish at their local school, but they did not. Often it took years to get other people to notice how badly things were going wrong for our children and how schools and local services were failing them. We all tried hard to find a local school where our children would be happy but it wasn't possible; the risks and compromises were too great.

Every one of us struggles with guilt and fear about 'sending our child away'. Each child is so loved and so vulnerable and when they are away at school we worry and we miss them terribly. All of us, though, know that we are trying to do what is best for our children.

Some of us have yet to find the right school; it isn't easy. One of the hardest things we faced was a lack of information, advice and support. This is why we came together as a group to help write this booklet. It includes questions some of us thought to ask and others wish they had. You may want to read it all right now or, if your child is already away at school, you might just dip into it. Some parts may seem more relevant at different times and some issues more significant as your child gets older.



We hope this booklet will offer you the advice that we never received, and so help you in choosing the right place for your child.

Lizzie Batten  
Angela Bull  
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Joanna Cousins  
Colette Fawn  
Brigid Fayers  
Stephen Fayers  
Carol Funnell  
Brian Mander  
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Sue Thomas



# INTRODUCTION

This booklet has been written with parents whose children attend a residential special school. These parents had found that local schools and support services were not meeting their children's needs and they began to look at residential schools. Usually, they came to this conclusion very reluctantly and worried a lot about how to find a school that would best meet their children's needs. They said they had very little information or advice from their education authority (or from social services) to help choose a school.

They found that often the best advice and support came from other parents, but they recognised that many people don't have local sources of support to tap into. This booklet cannot cover everything, but it covers tips about:

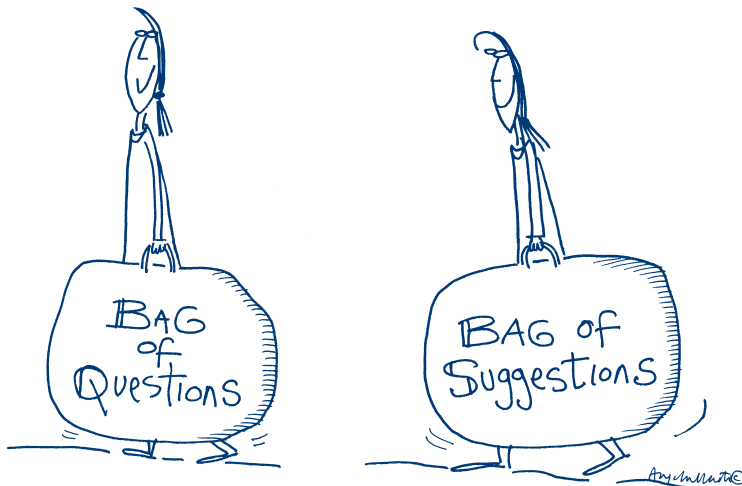
- how to find out about the availability of residential special schools
- how to get information about a school
- what to look for and ask about when deciding which school would be best for your child
- what should ring alarm bells for you when looking at a school.

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Some of the quotes used in the booklet are from parents who helped to write the booklet; other quotes come from parents and children who were interviewed for a research project on residential school placements.

When parents sat down together to think about the information they wanted about a school, and the questions they might want to ask, they came up with a lot of things. The whole list of these questions might seem daunting. It would be difficult to ask them all at once and it may even be difficult to get answers to all the questions. Also, it may not be necessary to ask all the questions – some parents say that when they visit a school they just know from the atmosphere and the attitude of those who work there, whether it is right for their child.



Nevertheless, we hope that the issues we cover in this booklet will help you as a parent to decide what is best for your child. We also hope that the booklet will help those professionals responsible for choosing placements to make decisions.

Deciding to 'send Jamie away' was the hardest decision I've ever had to make. Would he be happy? Was it really the best thing for him? Why was I doing this? What would people think? All these thoughts buzzing in my head and then the guilt! You don't know the meaning of the word until you're confronted with a decision like this. Now I look at my beautiful 18-year-old son, who has achieved more than anyone ever thought possible, and I know I did the right thing.



# 1 HOW TO FIND OUT WHAT RESIDENTIAL SPECIAL SCHOOLS THERE ARE

When you start looking for schools you will find that some schools are called 'independent', some 'non-maintained' and some are called 'state' or 'maintained' schools.

- 'State' or 'maintained' schools are those funded by the local education authority (LEA).
- 'Non-maintained' schools are run by charitable trusts and do not make a profit. They charge fees and most pupils are paid for by LEAs who place children with them (usually as a result of a Statement of Special Educational Needs).
- 'Independent' schools are wholly funded by fees and can be run on a profit-making basis. Some are approved by the government (the Department for Education and Skills) as suitable for children with special educational needs and most pupils at these schools are funded by their LEA.

Information about schools will tell you the sorts of special educational need they cover. To start with, you may want to draw up a 'long list' of schools specialising in your child's particular need.

The following are the places you might look to find out about what schools there are, what they offer and where they are.

## **Disability organisations and charities**

Charities and organisations for a particular condition often have information about schools that cater for that group of children. You may already be in contact with an organisation concerned with your child's particular condition. If not, you can find a relevant organisation from Contact a Family. This national organisation has a free telephone helpline (0808 808 3555) for disabled children, parents and carers, and provides information on all medical conditions affecting children, and information on local and UK-wide support groups for specific conditions.

Your local social services department should be able to provide information about local voluntary organisations, so ask them for a list. There may be a local organisation of parents of disabled children, or a local charity, which could provide you with information about schools and may also be able to help you find a school.

Social services put us in touch with a local organisation of parents and I got most of my information from other parents.

## **Local education authorities (LEA)**

Although your LEA may not be very keen on funding a residential school placement, they have a legal duty to provide you with information about schools. Whenever an LEA issues a proposed or a proposed amended Statement of Special Educational Needs to a parent, they must give the parent a list of primary or secondary schools in the area and *also* a list of non-maintained special schools and independent schools which have been approved by the Department for Education and Skills (for England) and the

National Assembly of Wales (for Wales). They have this legal duty under Regulation 14 and Schedule 1 of the Education (Special Educational Needs) (England) (Consolidation) Regulations 2001 (Statutory Instrument 2001 No. 3455). This Statutory Instrument is in Annex A of the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice. The Resources chapter of the booklet tells you where you can get hold of a copy of the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice.

All LEAs have a duty to provide parents with advice and information. They must also provide parent partnership services. Either they will run this service themselves or they will fund a local voluntary organisation. The LEA must inform parents about the service and how they can access it. They have this duty under the Education Act 1996, Section 332A, and also under the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice, paragraph 2.16. The National Parent Partnership Network can also provide information about local parent partnership services and their contact details are given in the Resources chapter of this booklet.

## **Directories and websites**

There are a number of directories and websites which list schools and give some basic information about each school. The Resources chapter of this booklet gives full information about how to get these directories, while brief information is given here. These publications can also often be found in the reference section of local libraries.

### ***Which School? for Special Needs***

This directory lists independent and non-maintained schools and colleges of further education which provide for children with



special needs. It also lists contact details for useful associations and websites and has an appendix of maintained schools and colleges. It is available from bookshops priced £19.95 or from the publishers (details in the Resources list).

### ***Special Needs UK***

This is a website, run by the publishers of the magazine *Special School*. The website contains a search engine for special schools, which enables you to search schools by type and region and then provides information about each school ([www.specialneedsuk.org](http://www.specialneedsuk.org)).

### ***Independent Schools of the British Isles***

This website enables you to search for independent schools and residential special needs schools by type, location and facilities ([www.isbi.com](http://www.isbi.com)). The information is also available on cd.rom (details in the Resources chapter).

### ***Schools for Special Needs: a complete guide***

Written by Gabbitas (educational consultants), this guide lists special schools and mainstream schools with provision for special needs. It can be bought in bookshops or ordered online from Kogan Page (see Resources chapter).

### ***Parents' Guide to Maintained Boarding Schools***

This is published by the DfES on behalf of the Boarding Schools Association. It is available, free, from: Department for Education and Skills, Pupil Well-being & Transport Team, Mowden Hall, Staindrop Road, Darlington DL3 9BG. Tel: 01325 391272; Fax: 01325 392040; e-mail: [pwtt.well-being@dfes.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:pwtt.well-being@dfes.gsi.gov.uk)

The Guide can also be downloaded from the website of the State Boarding Schools Information Service ([www.stabis.org.uk](http://www.stabis.org.uk)).

### ***NATSPEC Directory***

The Association of National Specialist Colleges (NATSPEC) produces a directory of its member organisations. This is available from: 20 Church Lane, Bromley Common, Bromley, Kent BR2 8LB. Tel: 020 8462 1656.

You can also access the directory on their website ([www.natspec.org.uk](http://www.natspec.org.uk)) and this website has a list of questions which they suggest should be asked when approaching a further education specialist college.

## 2 HOW TO GET INFORMATION ABOUT A SCHOOL

Having drawn up a long list of possible schools, you can then use written information to draw up a shorter list of schools about which you will want more information.



### Written information

Most schools publish brochures about what they offer; some also have videos. All residential special schools now have to have a Statement of Purpose which describes what the school aims to do and what type of care is provided. Schools may also have

written policies and procedures that cover issues of particular concern to you, such as behaviour management, or school/home contact, or bullying and so on.

You may want to ask whether the school has been inspected recently and, if so, get hold of a copy of the report. There are two types of inspection: Ofsted inspections and National Care Standards Commission Inspections.

### **Ofsted inspections**

These are inspections carried out by the Office for Standards in Education (in Wales, the equivalent organisation is called Estyn). This is the national organisation which inspects schools to make sure they reach certain standards. They produce Inspection Reports for schools and you can download these from their website. If you want a print copy the school should provide you with one.

Ofsted's website is: [www.ofsted.gov.uk/](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/)

Estyn's website is: [www.estyn.gov.uk/](http://www.estyn.gov.uk/)

Full contact details for these organisations are given in the Resources chapter.

### **National Care Standards Commission Inspections**

The National Care Standards Commission (NCSC – to be replaced in 2004 by the Commission for Social Care Inspection) inspects care standards in residential schools and children's homes. In Wales, the equivalent organisation is called Care Standards Inspectorate for Wales (CSIW). A residential school is classified as a children's home if it provides care for any child for more than

295 days a year (i.e. more than 42 weeks). The NCSC and CSIW can supply print copies of their Inspection Reports. Schools should also provide a copy of an Inspection Report if one has been carried out.

You can get copies of NCSC Inspection Reports by telephoning: 0191 233 3556.

You can get copies of CSIW reports by telephoning: 01443 848450.

Full contact details of both these organisations are in the Resources chapter.

Remember that schools change over time, and also that children may have different experiences of different parts of the school.

Remember too that, although a school may cater for a particular special educational need, that does not mean they will meet your child's particular needs. Within each category of special educational need there are many variations. This is one reason why, having drawn up a short list of schools, it will be important to find out more details before choosing one for your child.

## Finding out for yourself

You can find out some information by talking to the head teacher and head of care on the telephone and this may be the first thing you do. However, the best way to find out what it will be like for your child to go to the school is for you, and ideally your child also, to spend some time there before you make the decision. Many schools have open days when you can visit. Some parents have been able to visit for part of a day or even a day or two, spending time observing what is going on and sometimes children have been able to do this too. Ask if you can:

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- have a meal there, with the children
- visit the care accommodation when the children come back from school
- sit in a lesson
- observe children in the playground
- observe an outdoor activity.

Ask if your child can spend a day and night there to see what it's like.

Talk to both care staff and teachers. If possible, also talk to children. Ask them what they think of the school.

The school may feel that this kind of thing is disruptive for the children at the school, but they may also welcome your interest. Don't be embarrassed about asking questions. You are right to want to know a lot before you decide which school is right for your child.

I had millions of questions. I wrote down a long list and just went through them all.

It may also be possible to speak to parents with children already at the school. Ask if the school can put you in touch with such parents.

You might find it useful to write down a list of questions which you want to cover before you visit.

When you seek information about a school, you will probably want to find out about both the standard of education and the quality of care. You will also probably want to find out whether your child is likely to make friends, learn 'life skills', and enjoy him/herself out of school. You may therefore want to speak not only to the head teacher but also to the care manager. You may also want to speak to the teacher in charge of what would be your child's class, and the senior care staff in charge of the unit where your child would live.

First I went up there with the peripatetic teacher. Then my son had an overnight stay there. Then I took one of my sisters up with me. Then we had the big induction day. Then we started going to things like the summer fete day.

### 3 WHAT TO LOOK FOR AND ASK ABOUT

I wanted to know, would they love my child as I love him?

Each school I went to visit, I thought, 'Can I picture my son here?'

I asked myself, 'Does it feel like a home. Or an institution?'





## Children's feelings

Even children who really enjoy being away at school are homesick at first and some are homesick at the beginning of every term.

- What do the staff do when children are homesick?

For some children, it will not necessarily be obvious what they are feeling. You will want staff to ask you how your child communicates his/her feelings.

- Do the staff ask about my child's ways of communicating feelings?
- How does the school respond in a situation where a child has significant learning disabilities and may not know what has happened to him when he is taken to a new school?

I wanted them to raise it. I wanted them to ask me how I know that he's happy or not.

You will often get a sense of how well the school and its staff will look after your child by the questions that they ask you. For example:

- Does the school ask for a list of my child's likes and dislikes?
- Do they ask about my child's routines? About whether he has any idiosyncracies?

My child won't go to sleep unless he has his socks on. I needed to know that the school could accommodate this kind of thing.

## Contact between you and your child

I asked can I come up any day and visit him if I miss him?  
Yes, they said, just let us know first thing that morning.

Contact between you and your child will often be uppermost in your mind. You will want to know how easy this is going to be and what the school will do to support your contact with your child.

- How will I keep in contact with my child? Can he telephone me whenever he wants to? What about if he needs assistance to use the telephone? Is there always someone around who can help?
- Can I go and visit any time? Do I have to give the school notice? Is there somewhere to stay overnight if I need to? When I visit, is there somewhere private to be with my child? Can I take her out?
- Is the school happy for siblings to visit as well? What about grandparents and other extended family members?

I wanted to know what their attitude was to siblings? How inclusive they are of siblings? They turned out to be very good. The staff know his sisters' names, how old they are, when their birthdays are.

## Flexibility

I wanted to know whether the school would fit in with my child, rather than expect my child to fit in with the school.

All children are different. Most children's needs change over time, and for some children their needs vary from day to day. For example, some children's educational ability varies from day to day and experienced teachers will adjust what they do accordingly.

- How flexible is the school, both in terms of the education and the care they provide?
- How does the school cope with changing needs, whether these are educational, or care or health needs?

The epilepsy means what he can do changes from day to day. Their teaching technique and what they do varies continually – just according to his ability at that particular moment of time.



## Children's choices

My child's individuality is important ... I want to know whether the children can express their individuality through the clothes they wear, their hairstyles, their music and so on.

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How much choice children have is likely to be important to your child. Having choices is also part of a child's development as a person. The day-to-day choices are as important as the bigger ones, especially when children are living together as a group.

- Do children get the opportunity to choose which television programmes they watch, what music they listen to, what they do when school finishes for the day?
- How do care staff deal with conflicts of tastes in music, TV programmes, etc.?
- Are there enough care staff to enable children to choose what to do after school and at weekends? How do they organise things to enable children to choose?
- Can children bring favourite books, games, toys from home? How are these things kept safe? Do children have easy access to these things?
- How are children able to express their individual tastes in clothes, hairstyles, music and so on?
- If religion or culture is important to my child how does the school respond to this?

I can play football any time, and I can listen to the radio.  
I can go to my room any time and just be quiet or put the radio on or the computer.

Activities at weekends and after school are often one of the main advantages of residential special schools.



- Is there a range of things that children do at weekends or after school? How do the children at the school feel about these activities?

On weekends, there's not really a lot to do because, like, we do the same thing every single week.

Sometimes children won't want to join in activities after school or at weekends.

- Can children choose to opt out of out-of-school activities?

I have to do something and I don't like having to do activities every day after school – I need a rest.

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Your child may have specific needs which will have to be met if s/he is to join in activities. You will want to know whether the school can meet these needs.

- Will my child have the same opportunities as other children to engage in activities, go on trips, etc.? How will the school meet my child's particular needs?

I found that they had decided not to take my daughter on a trip because she's a poor sleeper. I thought this was discrimination.

## Food

This is something which is likely to be important to your child, and it may also be important for cultural/religious reasons. Ask if you (and your child) can eat with the children when you visit.

- Do children have a choice of food? How much of a choice? How are they given that choice?
- Can the school cater for my child's particular dietary needs? Can the school cater for my child's particular likes and dislikes?
- Will the school respect cultural/religious issues relating to food?
- What happens if a child doesn't want to finish their meal?
- Do children who need help to eat receive one-to-one help?
- Do staff eat the same food as the children?

- Do staff and children eat at the same time? (Whether you think this is a good idea or not will depend on your child's needs – if your child needs help to eat it may not be a good idea for the member of staff to be eating themselves at the same time; on the other hand, eating together can create a more homely atmosphere.)

## Communication and consultation

You will want to know that staff at the school take your child's views seriously. If your child has a communication and/or cognitive impairment, this is a particularly important issue.

- What arrangements are there for children to give feedback about the care they receive?
- What happens if a child has a complaint about a particular member of staff?
- What arrangements are there for children to tell if they are being bullied? What do staff do about it?
- Is the school happy for my child to have an independent advocate?<sup>2</sup> Will they make time to listen to the advocate and respond to any concerns?
- How will the school meet my child's communication needs? Will both teachers and care staff have the necessary skills and time?

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2 An advocate helps a child to make their wishes and feelings known. They are usually employed by independent voluntary organisations. The disability organisations listed in the Resources section of this booklet may be able to help you to find an advocate for your child if you or your child want one.

- What arrangements will there be for re-assessing my child's communication needs and updating any equipment?

She's just got an independent advocate and she came up with about four pages of complaints, most of them little things but important to her. And it was important that the staff listened to that.

## Behaviour

- What is the school's policy on punishments and rewards for bad and good behaviour?
- How does the school deal with tantrums, or when a child 'blows' or 'freaks out'?
- Will my child be safe when other children behave badly or 'blow'?

I wanted to know that when my daughter 'blows', as she does, they would not only keep her safe but also keep her dignity.





## Physical environment

Physical surroundings can be important. You will know what type of environment suits your child's needs and it probably won't be enough to rely on written information which says, for example, that the environment is suitable for wheelchair users.

- Is the physical environment suitable for my child?
- If my child has mobility difficulties, is there level and/or lift access in all parts of the school and living accommodation? Are the surfaces of the paths out of doors suitable?
- If my child has a visual impairment, does the layout and colour scheme make moving about as easy as possible?
- Are the acoustics difficult for a child with a hearing impairment?
- Is the physical environment safe for a child who has epilepsy? Is it safe for a child who has tantrums?

The physical environment is also about what it would feel like to live there.

- Does the care accommodation feel comfortable? Does it feel homely?
- How do staff create a homely and comfortable atmosphere in a situation where children tend to damage things?
- Do children have their own bedding? Do they have their favourite duvet covers?

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- Where are the children's personal possessions? Are they easily accessible to a child? At the same time, how are they kept safe?

Some schools are set in beautiful grounds. This may be impressive but it is more important that children benefit from the school's setting.

- Do the children use these surroundings?
- Is the physical environment suitable for outdoor activities?
- Is it suitable for playing football, for using electric wheelchairs?
- Are children allowed into all parts of the grounds?

I really like just going out in the grounds in my electric wheelchair. It's the first time I've been able to do something like that on my own.



## The other children

Having friends is often the most important thing for children about their school and can make all the difference to whether they are happy or not. When you first look round the school you may want to think about whether your child could make friends here.

- Are these children with whom my child could be friends?
- Are there children here who might pose a threat to my child's safety?

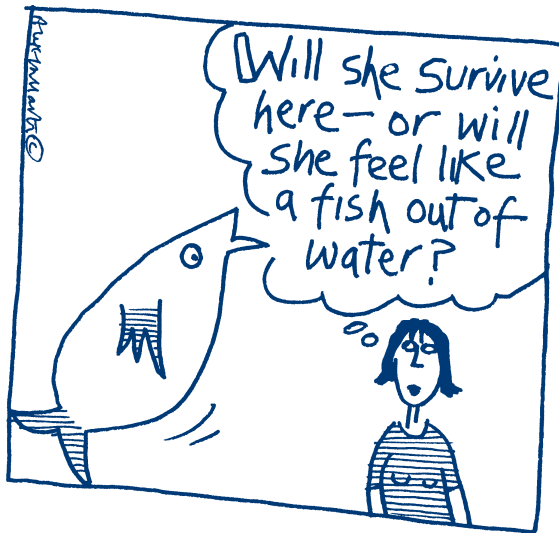
Having friends is the best thing about being here at school.

I think the reason why she's happy at the school is because she's now got a peer group that she gets on with.

Having a peer group with whom they share experiences is important to all children. If your child will be in a minority, in terms of his/her experience of impairment/disability or religion, culture or background, you will want to think about how this might affect their experience at the school.

- Will my child fit in here, or will s/he feel like a fish out of water?

It never occurred to us but it wasn't until our son went to this school that he realised he wasn't the only child in the world with severe epilepsy.



There is some level of bullying in most schools. The national minimum standards for residential special schools, and for children's homes (see Resources chapter), say that schools must have anti-bullying policies, that all staff and children know about the policy, and that the policy must be effective.

- How do the teachers and care staff protect children from bullying?
- How do teachers and care staff give guidance to children who bully?

## Education

When I went there I just realised that they were much more experienced in my child's educational needs than the school he was previously at. It was going around, seeing everything they had in place, talking to other parents, there was just no comparison with his other school.

My son is bright, I wanted to know whether they follow the national curriculum.

He's losing sight rapidly so I wanted to know whether they teach life skills.

Most parents are looking at residential special schools because they feel this is the only way for their child to get the education they need. Ofsted Inspection Reports (see Chapter 2) will give you some information about educational standards. You may also want some written information about the curriculum and about things like homework. There are also other important questions to ask.

- Do the staff have experience and expertise in teaching children with my child's particular needs? What recent training courses have they been on?
- What is the turnover of staff like? How long have most of the staff been at the school?
- How many supply teachers does the school usually have? How many are there the day you visit?
- Does the school follow the national curriculum? If necessary, how do they adapt it for particular children?
- Will my child get experience of life skills? For example, using money, using public transport, organising laundry, shopping for food.

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Visiting classrooms can be an important way of finding out what your child's experience of education will be.

- Do the children seem to be enjoying their lessons? Do staff seem to be enjoying what they are doing?

The school should be able to tell you that they have clear guidelines for how to deal with any concerns, from informal through to formal procedures.

- What procedures would the school follow if my child had problems at school, or if I'm not happy with something to do with her education?

## Care

Most parents worry about whether their child will be properly looked after while they are away at school. There are probably lots of questions you will want to ask about standards of care.

- Do the staff have experience and expertise in caring for children with my child's particular needs? What recent training courses have they been on?
- How will my child's particular care needs be met?
- If my child requires a particular piece of equipment (e.g. a particular type of hoist), is this available?

- What arrangements are there for re-assessing my child's equipment needs and for updating any equipment?
- Does the school have particular policies concerning lifting? How will these affect my child?
- What is the turnover of staff like? How long have most of the staff been at the school?
- How many agency staff are usually employed? How many are on duty on the day I visit?

A child's relationship with their keyworker (and the keyworker's relationship with parents) can be a particularly important factor in how a child experiences the school.

- How are keyworkers chosen? If a child doesn't like their keyworker can they change?

Me, the reason I chose a man was 'cos all the time I've boarded here I had girls, or a lady, so I thought I'd make a change.

The reason I chose my keyworker – I thought she looked nice. She's head of house and talks a lot.

If a child is not happy with the way care staff treat them it will be important that they can do something about it.

## The right place?

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- How does the care manager know what children think about the care staff?
- How does the care manager know if a child doesn't like a particular worker? What does the manager do about such a situation?

She was horrible to me, she tried to hurry me up all the time.

Laura had told her keyworker about a particular member of staff whom she didn't like helping her. The keyworker spoke to her line manager and the member of staff was due to have more training but was still working with Laura – who communicated that she was not happy about this.

The care manager should be able to tell you that the school has clear guidelines for how to deal with any concerns, from informal through to formal procedures.

- What happens if I'm not happy with something to do with my child's care?

There are aspects of day-to-day care which you may want to ask about.

- How do care staff ensure that children brush their teeth every morning and evening?
- How would care staff respond to a change in a child's weight? Do they monitor weight loss or gain?





There are also more general questions that indicate the type of care the school provides.

- How does the school celebrate children's birthdays?
- If some events are particularly important for a child, or difficult for them, how does the school deal with these?

## Safety

Safety is a particularly important part of knowing that your child is well cared for. This is an issue which is covered in inspections and there are national minimum standards laid down. Some questions will indicate how seriously schools take safety.

- Does the school have regular fire practices, both in the school and the accommodation part of the building?
- What is the staff/children ratio when they go out?
- How does the school ensure that children are supervised enough to keep them safe?

Many parents are very worried that their child might be abused if they are living away from home. Schools have to have child protection procedures and you can ask to see a copy. They also have to ensure that all staff, including temporary staff, have training in child protection. Any incident which results in a child suffering serious harm has to be reported to the NCSC and other authorities. All these requirements are laid down in the national minimum standards for children's homes and residential special schools (see Resources chapter).

- Are parents offered a copy of the school's child protection procedures?
- What training is provided for staff in child protection and does this cover all staff?
- Has the school had any serious incidents recently?

Children are less vulnerable to abuse of any kind if they are taught about their rights to be safe and have a trusted adult to confide in.

- Does the school teach children about their rights to be safe?
- How does the school know that each child feels they have someone they can trust to confide in?

## Health

The school will be responsible for your child's general health on a day-to-day basis while they are there and you may want reassurance that this is taken seriously.

- How do children get to see a GP if they need to? Will my child have regular check-ups of any kind while at the school? What are the arrangements for informing me of any contact my child has with local health services?
- What about seeing a dentist? Do children have regular dental check-ups? What happens if my child has toothache?

## The right place?

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- Do children have regular eye tests?
- If my child has regular medication, what are the arrangements for ensuring this is taken correctly? What records are kept?
- If my child requires occasional medication, what procedures will be followed for deciding when this happens and will I be informed?
- Is medication ever administered without my agreement? If so, what medication and in what circumstances?
- What happens when children are ill?

You may keep the responsibility for some appointments and treatments, and you may want to know how this will fit in with the school.

## Social inclusion

Children have the right to be part of their local community and, since a child at a residential school will be spending a lot of time there, you may want to know what contact the school has with the local community.

- Do children at the school use local leisure facilities, such as swimming pools and cinemas?
- Can children join local community groups such as Guides or Cubs?

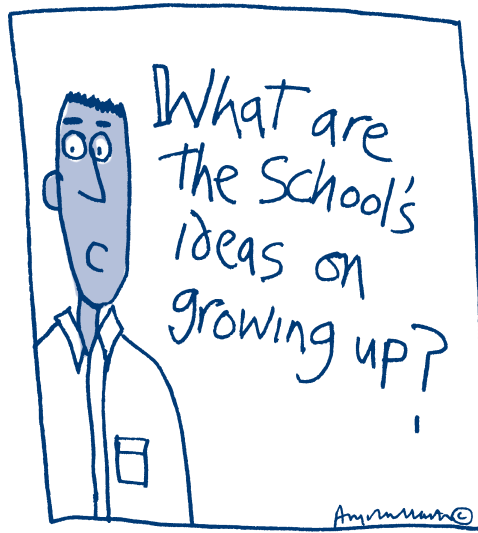


- What contact is there with the local community? Do children at the school get to meet non-disabled children in the local community?
- If religion or culture is important to my child, how does the school respond to this?

My son wanted to fast for Ramadan. The school were very good about that. They helped him sort out the times and made sure he could eat when the sun went down.

You may also want to know whether the teachers and care staff recognise your child's right to do the same kinds of things that non-disabled children of their age may be doing. This may be a particular concern as your child becomes a teenager.

I wanted to know what the school thought about 'normal' teenage experiences and how does he get the help he needs, to do what other boys his age are doing ... Who's going to be the page-turner for his lad's magazines?



- How does the school enable children and young people to have experiences that are similar to those of non-disabled children and young people of the same age?
- What is the school's attitude towards sexuality and sexual relationships?

Social inclusion is also about disabled children having the same human and civil rights as non-disabled children. You could find out to what extent the school promotes these rights for the children in their care.

- Does the school have expectations for these children similar to expectations for non-disabled children in terms of their rights to participation in the community, and their rights to be listened to?
- Does the school encourage children to stand up for their rights?

## **4 WHAT SHOULD RING ALARM BELLS FOR YOU WHEN LOOKING AT A SCHOOL?**

The last thing that the group of parents discussed was what would ring alarm bells for them when visiting a school.

- If a school claims that children aren't homesick.
- If, when you visit, you aren't shown into any rooms where children are present.
- If the school is reluctant to let you visit when children are around.
- If the school is reluctant to let you look around where the children sleep and spend their time out of school. It is appropriate to respect the privacy of children's bedrooms but there are ways to do this and at the same time enable you to assess the quality of the accommodation and care.
- If the school won't show you the toilets, bathrooms, showers, the equipment they use.

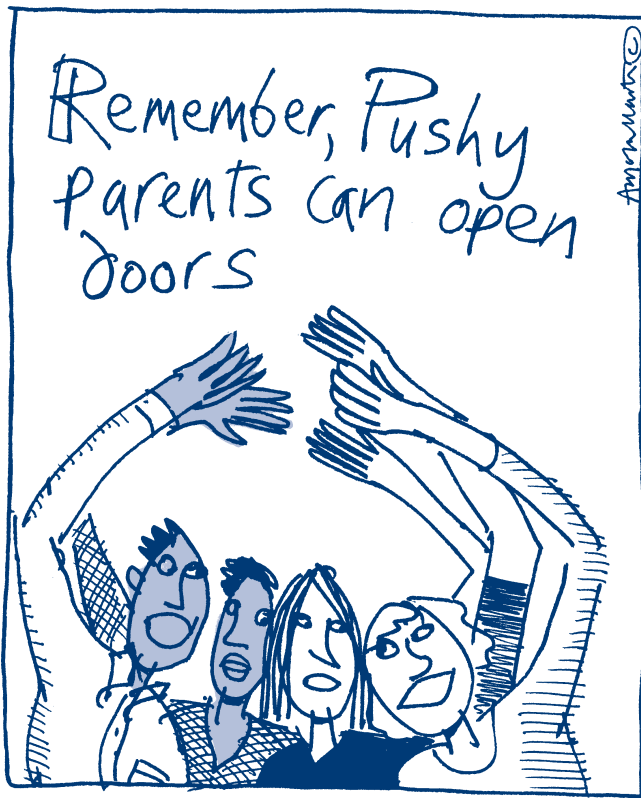
Any restriction they placed on what I could see would bother me. You should be able to go anywhere.

## The right place?

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- If the physical environment feels scruffy and uncared for. Children may damage furniture and equipment but this shouldn't mean that the surroundings have to feel unkempt and neglected.
- If there are no ways of distinguishing children's personal possessions.

I went into a communal bathroom in one school where there were no named toothbrushes, or towels. And the children were obviously not wearing their own clothes. And the bed clothes were just all jumbled up with none matching.





## What should ring alarm bells for you when looking at a school?

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- If the care staff seem not to care what the children look like.

When I raised with the school why she came home every time with her hair like a bird's nest they gave me the impression that it wasn't important what she looks like.

- If the school can't show you evidence of children's educational achievements.

However disabled a child is I think it should be possible to talk about their potential and what the school can do to help them achieve the best they can.

### **And finally ...**

It can be difficult to find a school which you feel will meet your child's needs. You are right to want to know a lot of information about the place where your child will be spending a lot of time. Having this information will help you to make a good choice. Don't be afraid of being seen as a 'pushy parent'. You are doing it for your child.

You're not on your own. We've all been there.

Trust your instincts, ask the right questions and DON'T beat yourself up.

## 5 RESOURCES

This section of the booklet lists the main publications and organisations that may be of use in finding a suitable residential special school for your child. Many of them have lists of further publications and organisations. The intention here is to provide a starting point rather than a comprehensive list.

### Rights and entitlements

*Taking Action! Every child's right to an appropriate education*, by J. Wright and D. Ruebain. Published by IPSEA/Questions Publishing Co. Ltd. £16.95. Can be ordered from bookshops.

*SENT Ahead: The IPSEA Guide to the Special Educational Needs Tribunal*, by S. Capper. £9.99 including postage and packaging. Available from: IPSEA, 6 Carlow Mews, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 1EA.

*Special Educational Needs Code of Practice*. This sets out the guidelines that local education authorities and schools should follow when assessing children's special educational needs. Published by the Department for Education and Skills. Available from:

DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottinghamshire NG15 0DJ. Tel: 0845 6022260; Fax: 0845 6033360; email: [dfes@prolog.uk.com](mailto:dfes@prolog.uk.com)

Also on the internet at: [www.dfes.gov.uk/sen/](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/sen/)

*National Minimum Standards for Residential Special Schools*  
*National Minimum Standards for Children's Homes* (Some residential special schools will be registered as children's homes because they accommodate children for more than the usual school terms.) Available from:

The Stationery Office, PO Box 29, Norwich NR3 1GN. Tel: 0870 6005522; Fax: 0870 6005533; e-mail: [book.orders@tso.co.uk](mailto:book.orders@tso.co.uk); Textphone: 0870 240 3701.

The national minimum standards are also on the internet at: [www.doh.gov.uk/ncsc](http://www.doh.gov.uk/ncsc)

The *National Children's Bureau* has published guides to the children's homes standards for parents and for children (and hopes, in the future, to publish guides to the residential special school standards):

*Parents' guide to children's homes standards and regulations*, by J. Stanley and P. Gabbidon.

*Children's guide to children's homes standards*, by R. Morgan.

Available from the National Children's Bureau, 8 Wakley Street, London EC1V 7QE. Tel: 020 7843 6000; Fax: 020 7278 9512; website: [www.ncb.org.uk](http://www.ncb.org.uk)

## **Finding a school**

*Which School? for Special Needs*. Can be ordered from bookshops, priced £19.95. Also available from: John Catt Educational Publishers, John Catt Educational Ltd, Great Glemham, Saxmundham, Suffolk IP17 2DH. Tel: 01728 663666; website: [www.johncatt.com](http://www.johncatt.com)

*Schools for Special Needs: a complete guide.* Written by Gabbitas (educational consultants), this guide lists special schools and mainstream schools with provision for special needs. It can be bought in bookshops for £16.99 or ordered online from Kogan Page ([www.kogan-page.co.uk/home.htm](http://www.kogan-page.co.uk/home.htm)).

*Special Needs UK* is a website, run by the publishers of the magazine *Special School*. The website contains a search engine for special schools, which enables you to search schools by type and region and then provides information about each school ([www.specialneedsuk.org](http://www.specialneedsuk.org)).

*Independent Schools of the British Isles: isbi.com* This website enables you to search for schools by type, location and facilities. It includes all the 3,200 independent and fee-paying schools and residential special needs schools in the British Isles, including state boarding schools ([www.isbi.com](http://www.isbi.com)). The information is also available on cd.rom from:

Which School Ltd, Tilshead House, Tilshead, Salisbury, Wiltshire SP3 4RX. Tel: 01980 620575; Fax: 01980 621090; e-mail: [cdrom@isbi.com](mailto:cdrom@isbi.com)

*Parents' Guide to Maintained Boarding Schools.* This is published by the DfES on behalf of the Boarding Schools Association. It is available, free, from:

Department for Education and Skills, Pupil Well-being & Transport Team, Mowden Hall, Staindrop Road, Darlington DL3 9BG, UK. Tel: 01325 391272; Fax: 01325 392040; e-mail: [pwtt.well-being@dfes.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:pwtt.well-being@dfes.gsi.gov.uk)

It can also be downloaded from the website of the State Boarding Schools Information Service ([www.stabis.org.uk](http://www.stabis.org.uk)). This website also contains a list of state boarding schools.

## Organisations

*Advisory Centre for Education.* This is an independent advice centre for parents, offering information about state education in England and Wales for 5–16 year olds. They offer free advice on topics like exclusion from school, bullying, special educational needs and school admission appeals.

Advisory Centre for Education (ACE) Ltd, 1c Aberdeen Studios, 22 Highbury Grove, London N5 2DQ. Exclusion line: 020 7704 9822. General advice line: 0808 800 5793; website: [www.ace-ed.org.uk](http://www.ace-ed.org.uk)

*Department for Education and Skills.* This is the government department which is responsible for education. They have a website for parents which includes a section 'Choosing a school: Finding out about a school' where you can download information about a particular school and also search for schools by postcode. There are also sections on parents' rights and children's needs ([www.dfes.gov.uk/parents](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/parents)).

*Independent Panel for Special Education Advice (IPSEA)* offers free and independent advice on LEAs' legal duties to assess and provide for children with special educational needs. IPSEA can provide:

- free independent advice
- free advice on appealing to the Special Educational Needs Tribunal, including representation when needed
- free second professional opinions.

IPSEA, 6 Carlow Mews, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 1EA. Advice line: 0800 0184016 (freephone); Tribunal appeals only: 01394 384711; General enquiries: 01394 380518; website: [www.ipsea.org.uk/](http://www.ipsea.org.uk/)

*National Association of Independent Schools and Non-Maintained Special Schools (NASS)*. This organisation represents special schools run by charities and also in the private independent sector. Together with the government and the Association of Directors of Social Services it has developed a national contract for the placement of children in independent and non-maintained special schools.

NASS, 41 Durant Street, London E2 7BP. Tel/Fax: 020 7739 1065; e-mail: [rowieshaw@nassschools.u-net.com](mailto:rowieshaw@nassschools.u-net.com); website: [www.nassschools.org.uk/contact](http://www.nassschools.org.uk/contact)

*National Association for Special Educational Needs (NASEN)*. NASEN is a UK-wide organisation, with over 60 local branches, which aims 'to promote the education, training, advancement and development of all those with special educational needs'. They publish a number of journals.

NASEN, NASEN House, 4/5 Amber Business Village, Amber Close, Amington, Tamworth, B77 4RP. Tel: 01827 311500; Fax: 01827 313005; e-mail: [welcome@nasen.org.uk](mailto:welcome@nasen.org.uk); website: [www.nasen.org.uk](http://www.nasen.org.uk)

*NATSPEC (Association of National Specialist Colleges)*. This is the association of specialist further education colleges. Full members are those who have received grade 3 or above following inspection by the Further Education Funding Council. They provide information about their member colleges and publish a directory, which is also available on their website.

NATSPEC, 20 Church Lane, Bromley Common, Bromley, Kent BR2 8LB. Tel: 020 8462 1656; e-mail: Raphael.Wilkins@btinternet.com; website: [www.natspec.org.uk](http://www.natspec.org.uk)

*National Care Standards Commission (NCSC – from 2004 Commission for Social Care Inspection)*. This is the national organisation which inspects care standards in statutory and voluntary sector organisations. The government has issued regulations and national minimum standards for children’s homes and national minimum standards for residential special schools (residential special schools are classed as children’s homes if they offer accommodation for any child for more than 295 days per year). Both sets of national minimum standards set out general requirements concerning children’s welfare and also specific requirements on issues relating to, for example, staff training, protection from abuse, anti-bullying policies, quality of care. You can purchase a copy of the national minimum standards (see Rights and entitlements section).

The NCSC has a Customer Service Unit which runs a national helpline; you can order copies of Inspection Reports from them: 0191 233 3556.

National Care Standards Commission, St Nicholas Building, St Nicholas Street, Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 1NB. Tel: 0191 233 3600; Fax: 0191 233 3569; e-mail: [enquiries@ncsc.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@ncsc.gsi.gov.uk); website: [www.carestandards.org.uk](http://www.carestandards.org.uk)

The equivalent organisation in Wales is called the Care Standards Inspectorate for Wales (CSIW) and their contact details are:

CSIW, Heol Billingsley, Parc Nantgarw, Nantgarw, Nr Cardiff CF15 7QZ. Tel: 01443 848450; website: [www.wales.gov.uk/subisocialpolicycarestandards](http://www.wales.gov.uk/subisocialpolicycarestandards)

*National Parent Partnership Network (NPPN)*. This Network is supported by the Council for Disabled Children and provides contact information for all parent partnerships. Parent partnerships provide information, advice and support for parents of children and young people with special educational needs, particularly during assessment and the statementing process. Each LEA has to have such a service.

NPPN, 8 Wakley Street, London EC1V 7QE. Tel: 0207 843 6058; Fax: 0207 278 9512; e-mail: [jsimon@ncb.org.uk](mailto:jsimon@ncb.org.uk); website: [www.parentpartnership.org.uk](http://www.parentpartnership.org.uk)

*Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted)*. This is the national organisation which inspects schools to make sure they reach certain standards. They produce Inspection Reports for schools and you can download these from their website (if you want a print copy the school should provide you with one). Each online Inspection Report also includes a link to the Department for Education and Skills' information about that particular school's performance. Their website also has a section for parents, which includes information about making a complaint about a school.

Ofsted, Alexandra House, 33 Kingsway, London, WC2B 6SE. Tel: 020 7421 6811; e-mail: [schoolinspection@ofsted.gov.uk](mailto:schoolinspection@ofsted.gov.uk); website: [www.ofsted.gov.uk/](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/)

The equivalent organisation in Wales is called Estyn and their contact details are:

Estyn, Anchor Court, Keen Road, Cardiff CF24 5JW. Tel: 029 2044 6446; Fax: 029 2044 6448; e-mail: [enquiries@estyn.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:enquiries@estyn.gsi.gov.uk) (for general enquiries) [publications@estyn.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:publications@estyn.gsi.gov.uk) (for enquiries about publications); website: [www.estyn.gov.uk](http://www.estyn.gov.uk)



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## Disability organisations

There are many national and local disability organisations and it would be impossible to list them all here. We have listed some of the main ones which provide information and advice about schools. You can find out about national and local organisations and support groups for specific disabilities/impairments from:

Contact a Family, 209–211 City Road, London EC1V 1JN. Helpline 0808 808 3555 or Textphone 0808 808 3556 (freephone); e-mail: [info@cafamily.org.uk](mailto:info@cafamily.org.uk); website: [www.cafamily.org.uk](http://www.cafamily.org.uk)

*British Deaf Association.* This is a UK-wide organisation run by deaf people for deaf people. It provides an information and advice service.

Textphone: 0800 6522 965 (freephone); Tel: 0870 770 3300 (calls are charged at national rate); Videophone: 020 7496 9539; Fax: 020 7588 3527; e-mail: [helpline@bda.org.uk](mailto:helpline@bda.org.uk); website: [www.bda.org.uk](http://www.bda.org.uk)

*National Autistic Society.* The NAS is a UK-wide organisation with six regional offices and many local branches.

NAS, 393 City Road, London, EC1V 1NG. Tel: 020 7833 2299; Fax: 020 7833 9666; e-mail: [nas@nas.org.uk](mailto:nas@nas.org.uk); website: [www.nas.org.uk/nas/](http://www.nas.org.uk/nas/)

The NAS provides a number of services, including an Autism Helpline Tel: 0870 600 85 85; Minicom: 020 7903 3597; e-mail: [autismhelpline@nas.org.uk](mailto:autismhelpline@nas.org.uk)

The NAS also provides a list of vacancies at schools which the organisation has accredited and a list of schools who are active participants in their accreditation programme. They also publish a list of colleges for students with autism or Asperger syndrome. Contact NAS or see the website: [www.action4autism.org.uk/nas/accreditation/](http://www.action4autism.org.uk/nas/accreditation/)

*National Deaf Children's Society.* A UK-wide organisation, with regional offices, which can provide information and advice about finding a school for a deaf child (among other things). They publish Factsheets which contain suggestions of information to find out about a school.

Freephone helpline: 0808 800 8880 (voice or text); Fax: 020 7251 5020; e-mail: [helpline@ndcs.org.uk](mailto:helpline@ndcs.org.uk).

15 Dufferin Street, London EC1Y 8UR. Tel: 020 7490 8656; Minicom: 020 7490 8656; Fax: 020 7251 5020; e-mail: [ndcs@ndcs.org.uk](mailto:ndcs@ndcs.org.uk); website: [www.ndcs.org.uk](http://www.ndcs.org.uk)

*Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB).* A UK-wide organisation which can provide advice and information concerning sight problems. The RNIB also runs four schools and provides advice about education of children with visual impairments. Their website contains a section for parents ([www.rnib.org.uk/parents](http://www.rnib.org.uk/parents)) and one on education: ([www.rnib.org.uk/education](http://www.rnib.org.uk/education)).

For information and advice: Tel: 0845 766 99 99 (for the price of a local call, UK callers only); Tel: 020 7388 1266 (switchboard/overseas callers); Fax: 020 7388 2034; Textphone users dial 18001 before one of the numbers above; e-mail: [helpline@rnib.org.uk](mailto:helpline@rnib.org.uk)

RNIB, 105 Judd Street, London WC1H 9NE. Tel: 020 7388 1266; Fax: 020 7388 2034

*Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID).* A UK-wide organisation concerned with people who are deaf or hearing impaired. They provide an information and advice service.

RNID, 19–23 Featherstone Street, London EC1Y 8SL. Tel: 0808 808 0123 (freephone); Textphone: 0808 808 9000 (freephone); Fax: 020 7296 8199; e-mail: [informationline@rnid.org.uk](mailto:informationline@rnid.org.uk); website: [www.rnid.org.uk](http://www.rnid.org.uk)

*Scope*. A UK-wide organisation representing the interests of people with cerebral palsy. They provide information and advice and also run six schools.

Scope, Library and Information Unit, 6 Market Road, London N7 9PW. Cerebral Palsy Helpline: 0808 800 3333 (freephone); email: [cphelpline@scope.org.uk](mailto:cphelpline@scope.org.uk); website: [www.scope.org.uk](http://www.scope.org.uk)

*SKILL*. The National Bureau for Students with Disabilities promotes opportunities for people with any kind of disability in learning and employment. Among other things it provides a free advice and information service.

SKILL, Chapter House, 18–20 Crucifix Lane, London SE1 3JW. Information Service Tel: 0800 328 5050 (freephone) and 020 7657 2337; Minicom: 0800 068 2422; e-mail: [info@skill.org.uk](mailto:info@skill.org.uk); website: [www.skill.org.uk](http://www.skill.org.uk)

