

(16) Parents: Primary and secondary school

Mainstream or special needs school?

Most children with epilepsy will be able to attend mainstream school and will usually do as well as any of their classmates. If a child's epilepsy is not associated with any other problems, they are unlikely to need additional support.

A child with frequent or uncontrolled seizures and / or a learning difficulty, may need some additional support. This tends to be in a mainstream school with the assistance of additional support teachers, or in a special unit attached to a mainstream school. If a child's support needs are very complex the local authority may fund a place in a school for children with special needs.

Research your local school and find out what they can offer before you consider other schools. Make a shortlist of schools and arrange to visit them to ask questions. Read the school's handbook which often gives you a good idea of the school's ethos and values. Look at class sizes and how much help teachers have in the classroom. Find out if there are other children in school who have epilepsy and / or additional support needs and how the school approaches this. Enquire, the Scottish advice service for additional support for learning, www.enquire.org.uk 0345 123 2303, have more information on this.

Talking to your child's teachers

Arrange to see your child's teachers as soon as possible and explain how epilepsy may affect your child. Often, your epilepsy specialist nurse will be able to help with this and talk to school staff. If necessary, your child's epilepsy nurse can provide a seizure management plan.

Teachers will need to know what effect epilepsy or treatment may have on learning. They may not be aware of side effects from anti-epileptic drugs, which may affect a child's level of concentration and short-term memory. They may not realise that frequent absence seizures can stop a child from taking in all that is taught during the day.

You may want to stress that there is no need to call an ambulance unless the seizure is different from usual or your child is injured. A child does not need to be sent home after every seizure and will usually recover quickly if given a private and quiet space to rest after a seizure. School staff may also need a reminder that with some seizures it is common for a child to be incontinent.

As a minimum your child's school needs to know:

- * the type of epilepsy your child has
- * what the seizures are like
- * what to do if your child has a seizure at school

Epilepsy Scotland's 'Epilepsy – a guide for teachers'

Hand your child's teacher(s) a copy of our publication 'Epilepsy – a guide for teachers'. This will help them understand epilepsy in addition to the information you are providing to them. You can download this guide from our website www.epilepsyscotland.org.uk or request a free copy by phoning our helpline 0808 800 2200.

The better teachers are informed, the more sensitively they will be able to react to a child having a seizure. This will help normalise the condition for the child and other pupils.

Assessing a child's support needs

As a child moves into primary education, more people may become involved in the child's continuous assessment. These could be class or subject teachers, support for learning teachers, educational psychologists, and health professionals, such as occupational therapists or speech and language therapists. Some of these professionals may already have been involved at the child's nursery.

Individualised Educational Programme (IEP)

A school may put in place an Individualised Educational Programme (IEP) for a child whose education may need more detailed planning. This is called different names in different local authorities, such as additional support plan or individual support plan. It is based on short and long-term learning goals. There is no legal requirement for a school to do this, but it is good practice for certain children who have additional support needs. You can ask the school to consider preparing such a plan for your child if necessary, and you can be involved in its development.

Co-ordinated Support Plan (CSP)

If your child is being helped by many different professionals, a Co-ordinated Support Plan (CSP) can be put in place. This is a legal document and aims to make sure that all the professionals supporting your child are working together. Your own views and your child's views should always be taken into account, especially when setting up and reviewing the plan.

A CSP is usually not necessary if all of these additional support services are provided by one source (ie a residential specialist school).

Perception of epilepsy at school

Children, particularly teenagers, may be reluctant to talk about having epilepsy. They may want to keep their seizures and epilepsy a secret because they feel embarrassed. Most children are, however, very accepting and will support a

classmate with epilepsy. Teachers also play a big part in raising awareness of epilepsy. A sensitive and supportive approach can encourage better understanding and acceptance of epilepsy in the school and the wider community.

Your child's epilepsy specialist nurse can usually help if there are issues at school which need to be addressed. Epilepsy awareness talks can also help teachers and children understand the condition better. Epilepsy Scotland offers these free informal talks to schools.

Support from teachers

A child with frequent absence seizures during the day may miss out on what is being taught in class. A teacher can support a child by writing down important information or instructions for homework, or by repeating instructions several times.

Seizures during the night can make a child feel tired in the morning. Agreeing a later start in the morning can sometimes help. Time off school should, however, be kept to a minimum, as a child will miss out on important socialising, creative and physical activities.

An additional learning support assistant can provide further help to a child during class or with homework. Schools are experienced in additional support measures. There are no hard and fast rules about what is possible, though flexibility and sensitivity are crucial to successful support.

Special assessment arrangements for exams

Too much time off school can affect a child's learning. Teachers will need to take this into account when assessing a child's progress. Special assessment arrangements for exams can be put in place by making a request to the Scottish Qualification Authority (SQA) www.sqa.org.uk.

Dignity and privacy at school

Some children, usually only those with more complex needs, wear a pad or nappy because of incontinence connected with certain types of seizures. Teachers will need to be sensitive to this situation. If incontinence is a problem, ask teachers to cover your child during a seizure.

It is common for some children to experience a feeling of unease, fear or panic before a seizure. These feelings do not always lead to a seizure but can be distressing as children often feel anxious about having a seizure in front of the class.

Schools often overcome this by agreeing a discrete signal given by the child to the teacher when these feelings occur. An adult can then take the child to a quiet area and stay until the feelings have passed, or until the seizure has run its course. The child will be less anxious if given some privacy and support from an adult. If these episodes are frequent, get advice from your child's doctor or epilepsy specialist nurse.

Help from an educational psychologist

An educational psychologist plays a key role in accessing help for a child with more complex support needs. They will work with parents, school staff and teachers and will also listen to a child's views. Educational psychologists may also observe a child at school or at home. Apart from assessing a child's learning, an educational psychologist will advise teachers on different approaches which may improve the way a child learns.

All local authorities have a legal duty to provide psychological services. Often these are part of the local authority's education department, but this may differ from authority to authority.

You can make a referral to psychological services yourself. This can also be done by your child's epilepsy team, health visitor, school or nursery with your consent.

Educational annual review

Everyone who has some input into a child's education, including parents, will get together once a year to look at the child's progress. These reviews can be stressful and difficult for parents. Prepare yourself as much as possible for these meetings and write down in advance what you want to say and questions you may want to ask. You can also take someone with you to these meetings for moral support and who will act as an extra pair of eyes and ears. Take your time to say what you want to say.