

eGuide

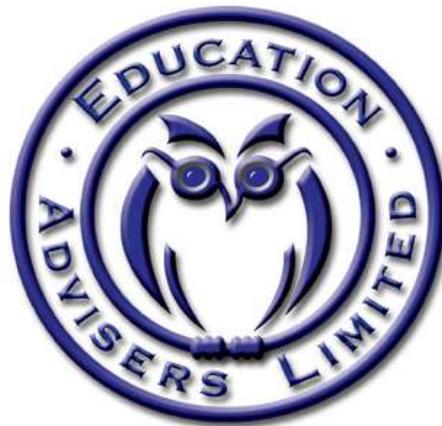
***TOP 10 TIPS ON HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT
DYSLEXIC SCHOOL FOR YOUR CHILD***

(excluding 30 point questionnaire for school visit)

www.dyslexicschools.co.uk

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UK Private Dyslexic Schools

This eGuide is divided into 4 parts

- *An introduction*
- *Brief list of Top 10 Tips*
- *Detailed explanation of Top 10 Tips*
- *30 point checklist to take on school visits*

If you are experienced in private education or have little time, you may wish to just consider only the second and fourth sections

UK Private Dyslexic Schools – An Introduction

Before we get to our top tips, a few words about UK private schools. There are around 2000 UK private schools of which around 700 cater for senior education (11 to 18). A large number of UK private schools say they cater for dyslexic children, but in reality a proportion do not offer significant learning support. Furthermore, among the selective senior schools, many would rather not attract more dyslexic pupils, but just deal with the milder cases, some of which they have inherited without initial knowledge of their dyslexia. Having stated this, there are some superb mainstream schools with dyslexic support and you almost always find what you need to suit your dyslexic child in the private sector.

Schools may be day schools or boarding or both. There are boys only, girls only and co-educational schools, according to your preference. However, boys only schools are often highly academic and selective. Thus, they may not be suitable for a dyslexic child.

The degree of dyslexia obviously will play a major factor in your choice of school. In some cases the degree of learning difficulty is so mild that a mainstream independent school is more than adequate. In other cases the difficulty is so severe that it is obvious that a specialist school is the preferred route. A problem area is all those cases “in the middle”. Many parents tell us that they want a “mainstream school” as if there were some stigma in choosing a special needs school. We invariably advise parents to visit both types and take their decision afterwards. Specialist dyslexic schools are not full of strange children. They are invariably happy places where children thrive because the staff create the right pressure free environment. If there is a problem, it is often that many senior specialist dyslexic schools have no sixth form – usually only going as far as GCSEs. However, this is not an insurmountable problem because there are many private sixth form colleges, very well skilled in taking dyslexic children successfully through A levels.

What’s in a word – Dyslexia or SpLD?

The in phrase has become SpLD which stands for Specific Learning Difficulties. SpLD usually covers dyslexia but also covers a range of other conditions, especially

dyspraxia and dyscalculia, which are often present in combination with dyslexia. This is why some schools describe themselves as SpLD schools. SpLD can also cover other special needs such as Aspergers and ADD. For the time being we stick to the word dyslexia for the main thrust of this website for the simple reason that it is the word which parents most readily understand.

TWO TOP RECOMMENDATIONS BEFORE WE START!

- A. *Get a Chartered Educational Psychologists report before you approach your first school. The reports are very helpful to you as a parent, but more importantly, many schools will not even consider your child until they see the report. We can help you find a CEP.*
- B. *Start early!! Many mainstream schools fill up well before the start of an academic year. The closer they get to their last few spaces, the less likely they are to choose a dyslexic child.*

Cost

There is no escaping the fact that private education is expensive. Even worse, specialist dyslexic schools often cost more than mainstream schools, because of the additional learning support. Typical day school costs for a Greater London mainstream school would be ca £14,000 per annum for a prep and ca £18,000 for a senior. You might be asked to pay possibly another £1500 per annum for supplementary individual support lessons. However we have seen fees as high as £30,000 for London specialist dyslexia schools with significant support from therapists and psychologists. The average cost for a mainstream boarding school is ca £35,000 pa whereas a specialist dyslexic boarding school might be £40,000 pa.

Whilst bursaries and scholarships are available at many private schools, these are unlikely to apply to dyslexic children.

There are huge variations in school fees. Do not be afraid to discuss your budgetary limitations with us, if you need bespoke advice.(Tel: 01622 813870)

Abbreviated Top 10 Tips on Choosing a School

There are numerous factors by which you can judge a private school – not just academic success, but let's start by outlining our top 10 Tips before going into detail and then ending up with a 30 point questionnaire you can take on the visits to your short list schools.

- 1. Does the school fit the basic requirements of you and your child?**
 - Age range, gender, religious denomination, type of qualifications to be achieved, subjects offered
 - Day/boarding pupil mix – if you want a day basis, don't pick a school with too many boarders. If you want boarding make sure at least 25% of the pupils board. Make sure at least 25 boarders stay at weekends.
 - Are you seeking a mainstream school with dyslexic support or a specialist dyslexic school?
- 2. What specialist dyslexic teaching skills are offered?**

- How many fully dyslexic trained teachers – how many full time or part time? Visiting consultants? Experience and qualifications?
 - What teaching skills are utilised (eg Jolly Phonics, PAT, Alpha to Omega)?
 - How are dyslexics' progress measured?
 - Is the school CReSTeD registered?
- 3. What type of specialist support unit exists?**
- Do they have a SENCO you can meet
 - Ask to see an Individual Education Plan
 - Are lessons individual or group?
 - How do children in Unit join other children for main timetable?
 - Does SEN support feel real or a token gesture?
- 4. What curriculum is utilised?**
- Are languages compulsory (dyslexics who have trouble with English usually have bigger problems with foreign languages)
 - How many humanities subjects available?
 - Do pupils have access to computers and tape recorders? Other resources?
 - What sports and PE activities followed? How do school encourage dyslexics with poor limb coordination?
- 5. The Sixth Form**
- Does the school offer vocational and practical qualifications like BTECs?
 - What subjects are offered?
 - Exam success?
 - Careers and HE Guidance
 - Leavers' destination?
- 6. Class sizes**
- How many children per class?
 - Are children streamed and how?
 - What proportion of school are dyslexics?
 - How many one to one lessons available?
 - Are children happy and enthusiastic?
- 7. What are the school ethos and policies like?**
- What is admissions policy as regards dyslexic children – what concessions given? Are children tested?
 - Can you see the inspection report?
 - What is the school approach to discipline?
 - How often are reports sent and how does school encourage interaction with parents?
- 8. Does the school have the facilities your child needs?**
- Swimming pool, theatre, music etc
 - Range of extra curricular activities – costs?
 - What is the school approach to diet for dyslexics?
- 9. Is the location optimum for you?**
- How important is area?
- 10. Does it give YOU value for money for what you want?**
- Value for service delivered, fit with your budget
 - Extras for specialist support?

1. Your basic requirements

1.1 Starting Age

The main part of the www.dyslexicschools.co.uk website concentrates on schools, which take entry from age 5 through to 16. Most dyslexics are not diagnosed until they are at least 6, often much later.

The majority of senior schools state that their admissions procedure requires the successful passing of the Common Entrance Exam, typically taken in January for admission the following September at age 11, 12 or 13. Find out what concessions are given to dyslexics. Be sure they are well prepared for it and find out what the pass mark will be – it can vary from 45% to 75%.

Very few specialist dyslexic schools have sixth forms. However we can usually find private sixth form colleges for 16 to 18 which often get excellent results with dyslexics. Talk to us on 0845 226 28 20 if you have a problem.

1.2 Gender

There are of course girls only and boys only school, but there is a definite trend to go co-ed. Most specialist dyslexic schools are co-ed. The arguments rage about the merits of single sex education with many Heads claiming there is no difference in academic achievement in single sex schools. However, this is a difficult premise to support, when there is very strong evidence that girls only schools do produce the best A level performance.

A significant number of single sex schools have been converting to co-ed in their sixth forms on the basis that it is time to prepare students for the reality of the outside world. However, a politically incorrect view is that some single sex schools have been losing so many pupils at age 16 (because the pupils themselves harass their parents to transfer to co-ed schools) that they have had no option but to go co-ed because of the commercial pressures. Of course, almost all single sex schools arrange social functions and also sometimes mixed lessons with neighbouring schools of the opposite gender.

At the end of the day, this is very much down to parent's preferences. Do not be afraid to discuss the subject with the school on your visit.

1.3 Religious Denomination

Most schools will originally start from one faith – you will find Church of England, Roman Catholic, Quaker, Methodist, Jewish and Muslim etc. You will also find that most schools will accept pupils of any faith. If your views are particularly strong, then discuss them with the school. For example if you are CoE sending your child to a Catholic School, they will likely insist all pupils attend Mass.

There are an increasing number of Muslim schools, but still relatively few at the senior school life stages.

In this day and age, most schools are becoming non denominational and respecting all faiths.

1.4 Subjects taught

At the younger life stages, this is not much of an issue.

By the age of 14 or 15, strengths or preferences are beginning to emerge, particularly with a view to A level choices, university and career aspirations.

A mainstream school might offer between 20 to 28 different A level subjects – the larger the school, generally the larger the options.

We know of no specialist dyslexic schools offering the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program and indeed it is so stretching and requires such personal organisation, we would not normally recommend it for a dyslexic child.

1.5 Proportion of day and boarding pupils

If you are looking to put a child on a day basis into a school which also offers boarding we would recommend caution if more than 50% are boarding, because your child may miss out on lessons and activities for the boarders. If you want a boarding school, then make sure at least 25% are boarders with a minimum of 30

1.6 Specialist or Mainstream

Most parents like to think of each of their children as perfect and want them with other “perfect children” i.e in a mainstream school. Of course there is no ideal answer, but plainly it depends on how severe the dyslexia is. A mild dyslexic can thrive in many mainstream schools, as long as it truly supports dyslexics and it is not an academic hothouse (which a lot are – more so the day schools than boarding schools). Do not write off specialist dyslexic schools because most are wonderfully happy places with highly skilled teaching staff. Take the trouble to visit both types before you decide. Ask what proportion of children are dyslexic or other special needs.

2. What specialist teaching skills are offered?

2.1 How many trained dyslexic teachers?

Find out how many of the teachers are fully trained to teach dyslexic children? What are their qualifications and experience? Are they full time? Are there visiting consultants (eg psychologists)? Some mainstream schools may just have a trained SENCO whereas specialist schools will be mostly fully trained teachers for pupils with learning difficulties. How sympathetic do the teachers seem to dyslexic children?

What is the preferred teaching approach – informal, formal, practical, topic based, multi sensory?

2.2 What teaching techniques are utilised?

Expect the school to be enthusiastic about their particular techniques eg Jolly Phonics, PAT, Alpha to Omega. How is homework supported?

2.3 How are dyslexics' progress measured?

Does each child get an education plan and how are they measured against it? If it is a mainstream school, how are dyslexics measured against the other children? What plans are made for the next stage of progression in their education e.g transfer to a senior school or taking A levels or going to university.

2.4 Is the school CReSTeD registered?

It would be unusual for a school to be acceptable which was not CReSTeD registered. CReSTeD is a charity organisation whose initials stand for Council for the Registration of Schools Teaching Dyslexic pupils. Established in 1989 it acts as a resource of schools, both state and independent, that has provision for dyslexic pupils.

CReSTeD registers schools that meet its criteria, both in their staffing, admissions policy, school and timetable organisation and specific arrangements for dyslexics, as well as records of the examination results of dyslexic pupils at its registered schools. The schools on the register are inspected regularly, (at least every three years by CReSTeD consultants and it requires, among other things, such schools to meet the requirements of having high quality IT facilities, approved Joint Council for Qualifications training for teachers and special provision for examinations.

The CReSTeD Council has a wide range of relevant representation including, Dyslexia Action, the British Dyslexia Association and member schools. It also has a solicitor who is a specialist in the legal aspects of dyslexia.

3. What type of specialist support unit?

3.1 Does the school have a SENCO you can meet?

All schools with dyslexic support should have a Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO) and you must meet the SENCO. Most schools will insist on their SENCO assessing your child in the initial school application to ensure they can cope with your child's needs. So you are looking for an experienced insightful SENCO sympathetic to your child.

3.2 Ask to see an Individual Education Plan

A good school will map out a plan for each SEN child. It may be too soon to see yours but ask to see one for a child of similar abilities to your own.

3.3 Are lessons individual or group?

In a mainstream school it is quite possible your child might receive say 30 minutes of specialist tuition per week, with the rest done in the normal classroom. Is the specialist tuition one to one or in a group? This may or may not be adequate depending on the severity of the dyslexia. Some SENCOs sit in class with the children to provide support from there. In specialist dyslexic schools they may well have a Specialist Learning Unit with a lot of one to one tuition for severe cases. This is where the recommendations of your Education Psychologist are vital in deciding your child's needs.

3.4 How do children in the Unit join other children for the main timetable?

Children needing the SLU also need the company of other children and to feel normal. Many dyslexics are very bright and they need to preserve their self esteem. How does the school cope with this? What do pupils miss in order to obtain the extra help?

3.5 Does the SEN support seem real or a token gesture?

It's very likely that you will be impressed with the support in a specialist dyslexic school. However, what if you would really prefer a mainstream school? This is a bigger issue – does the school really welcome mild dyslexics and go out of their way to meet their needs or does it feel as if they are just offering a facility to appear politically correct?

4. What curriculum is utilised?

4.1 Basic curriculum?

At the prep school ages the actual curriculum may not be crucial, but as children move to senior school, it becomes much more important. If you are considering a mainstream school, then it is most likely they will have a broad based curriculum where all children will be expected to tackle all subjects at the general pace of the school (but see streaming in section 6) Flexibility is more important than breadth. Then you have the chosen sixth form curriculums (see section 5) In a specialist dyslexic school, they may have adjusted their curriculum – so find out how? Not many specialist schools have sixth forms – so find out what they do with pupils after 16.

4.2 Are languages compulsory?

Given that a dyslexic has difficulty with words, English is a challenge, but of course foreign languages can create huge problems. How does the school cope with this?

4.3 How many subjects available?

Dyslexics often excel at practical things including sciences, art and drama. How does the school encourage them?

4.4 Do pupils have access to computers and tape recorders?

You usually expect dyslexics to be given extra time for tests and exams plus help to record using technology. Does this extend to the classroom and homework? What extra visual aids are used?

4.5 What sports and PE activities are followed?

Some dyslexics suffer from poor limb coordination. This is not a valid reason to exclude them from physical activities. The type of school which focuses all of its PE on competitive sport is not going to be suitable. What does the school do to encourage dyslexics? Can you see evidence of dyslexic children thoroughly enjoying activities?

5. The Sixth Form

5.1 Curriculum and subjects

A mainstream school will have a sixth form but what are the choices? Is the A Level range wide enough? How are dyslexics helped? How many subjects does the average dyslexic take? Note that there is a trend to make certain curriculums more stretching, notably the International Baccalaureate and the Pre-U. As a generalisation the IB DP is unsuitable for a dyslexic and the jury is out on the Pre-U. If a school is offering a choice of A Levels or the IB, find out the likelihood of abandoning A Levels in favour of the IB.

A curriculum which is often more suitable for dyslexics is the BTEC which covers more practical and vocational subjects e.g hospitality & leisure, land management (farming). Unfortunately, only a few private schools offer such courses – talk to us for help.

5.2 Exam successes?

Our company, Education Advisers, is famous for publishing exam league tables, because so many parents want to choose a top school. There is no reason to dispute that parents of a dyslexic want the same thing. However, there needs to be a balance because you need to avoid academic hothouses more interested in their track records than student needs. We would be inclined to avoid top 10 schools. It's a bit of a generalisation, but we recommend you seriously consider private sixth form colleges, some of which have more than 20% dyslexics but equally good exam records as schools. Phone us on 01622 813870 as we know all UK private sixth form colleges.

5.3 Careers and HE guidance

Many dyslexics are perfectly capable of progressing to good universities – so how does the school or college help? Some dyslexics may struggle with A levels – so does the school have alternatives? A few specialist schools offer BTECS. Alternatively the student could be transferred to a sixth form college at 16 to undertake a Foundation Program which might be the route to either university or another form of HE like Art College

5.4 Leavers Destinations

It does not matter if it's a senior school or a prep school, you can get a real feel for their success with pupils by studying leaver destinations. At the younger ages are

pupils getting to their senior school of choice? At senior level are they going to good universities?

6. Class sizes?

6.1 How many per class?

All parents choose private education because of small classes meaning extra individual attention. It's even more important for dyslexics. Ideally you want to be less than 16 at prep school and less than 12 at senior school. In a specialist dyslexic school it should be smaller than 8

6.2 Are children streamed and how?

It's common practice in larger private schools to stream children - maybe from age 7 onwards in Maths and English. Dyslexics usually need help in certain subjects – like English. So how does a school stream and help dyslexics at the same time?

6.3 What proportion of the school are dyslexics?

A specialist school is likely to be 80% to 90% dyslexics. It's possible to find mainstream schools which are 20% + dyslexics. Very few schools will advertise these ratios for fear of being labelled – you need to ask. Be wary if you are refused an answer.

6.4 How many one to one lessons available?

On the one hand your child may need this. On the other hand it will cost you more.

6.5 Are children happy and enthusiastic?

We are always impressed by how happy specialist schools are. You can tell how the children have blossomed after being freed from their frustrations. However, it's more difficult to judge in mainstream schools. Ask the SENCO. Ask if you can speak to the parents of some other dyslexic children.

7. What are School ethos and policies like?

7.1 Ethos

Every independent school establishes its own ethos, which can best be evaluated by observing the behaviour of pupils both in and out of class. Are they well behaved in class? Were they working hard? Did they greet you in a polite way? Do they look happy? Are they neat and tidy?

If a school follows a particular religious denomination, that will heavily influence the school ethos. However, the most important factor is the Head, because he or she sets

the entire tone for the school. You will only find out by meeting the Head and asking lots of questions, after which you will know if you like the ethos or not! It's important to find out the Head's attitude to SEN children. A head who is not enthusiastic will inevitably pass that attitude to staff.

7.2 Admissions policies for dyslexics

Do you have to produce an Ed Psych report first? Are there admissions tests? What format – what concessions given to a dyslexic?

7.2 Inspection reports

It is of course important to have confidence in the standards being set by any school that you are considering for your child. In the independent sector all schools are regularly inspected by the Independent Schools Inspectorate, which carries out the policies laid down by OFSTED and the DfES. If you want to check on a school you can go to the ISI website at <http://www.isinspect.org.uk> where you are able to obtain reports. This will tell you a great deal about a school, its teaching and academic standards as well as its educational philosophy and its extra-curricular provision.

7.3 Discipline

Areas such as the school policy on discipline can be an important consideration when you are trying to choose between schools. There can be very big differences between schools with a highly traditional approach and those that put the emphasis on self-development and learning by experience. What you will find is that there is generally a more structured environment in independent schools than in the state sector, but nevertheless quite big differences exist. With a dyslexic child you don't want a school that disciplines a child for being perceived as lazy when it is actually their dyslexia causing the problem.

Only you can be the judge of what you prefer for your children. You should have that discussion with the Head of the schools you approach.

7.4 Interaction with parents

How does the school communicate with parents? How frequent are reports and parent meetings? What happens on disciplinary matters?

8. Does the school have the facilities your child needs?

8.1 Facilities

Dyslexic children are often very creative. It's important that the school has art and drama facilities. Although some suffer from limb coordination, most actually thrive on participation in swimming and sport – as long as it is not 100% focussed on competitive team sport.

Today most schools in the independent sector spend a great deal of their budgets on the fabric of their buildings and in providing outstanding facilities for their pupils. Parents should ask to see the school library and enquire about the sports area and whether or not the school has a sports hall. Most schools today have well-equipped IT centres but parents should also ask about the provision of computers in boarding houses, as well as in teaching departments. If your child is interested in the creative

arts you should ask to see the Art School and find out whether computers are used in graphic design and what different types of materials can pupils use in their studies.

Many schools offer enrichment programmes, which is sometimes called General Studies. This can be a mixture of examined and non-examined study, but its common feature is that it offers a range of life skill subjects, such as motorbike maintenance, debating, yoga, musical appreciation and the like. Some schools will have an extensive programme for Duke of Edinburgh awards while others will have a Combined Cadet Force. These can be very important to a pupil when applying for university as it enables them to say quite a lot about themselves on the UCAS form outside the confines of A-Level subjects.

8.2 Range of extra curricular activities

It's important for the dyslexic child to have self esteem and enjoy school. So extra curricular activities can be important especially where due allowance is made for their difficulties.

- Swimming pool, theatre, music etc
- Range of extra curricular activities – costs?

8.3 Food and diet

What type of healthy food does the school provide? Certain foods, drinks and additives can create severe concentration problems in dyslexics as well as other children e.g. E numbers, apple juice, tomato puree, nuts. Choose a school which takes diet seriously.

9. Location

Most parents want a school near to their home. The problem is that there are very few specialist dyslexic schools, which is why many of them offer boarding facilities. At the senior end this can push up fees to as much as £40,000 per annum. It is not for us to suggest that you can afford such sums, but these specialist boarding schools are amazing places and well worth a look.

At the prep school end, most parents will look for a school within 5 miles of their home. Although there are prep boarding schools, most do not accept boarders under the age of 8. Beyond age 11 parents will often be prepared to send a child as far as 20 miles away. Many senior schools have extensive minibuss services – so don't be put off looking a little further afield.

10. Does it give value for money for what you want?

10.1 Value for service delivered, fit with your budget

All private education is expensive and intensive SEN support is often a lot more expensive if there is a lot of 1 to 1 support. Mainstream day schools can cost from £10,000 to £20,000 per annum. Boarding can cost from £25,000 to £40,000 per annum. Girls only schools are sometimes 10% to 15% cheaper. Sending a child on a day basis to a boarding school will often cost more than a day only school – because

there are more facilities and usually Saturday lessons. Be sure what you can afford and don't overstretch yourself. Talk to us if you want to find the least expensive options.

10.2 What are the extras for specialist support?

For a mild dyslexic in a mainstream school, there may be no extras at all. However if there is a need for more than one session per week in the Specialist Learning Support Unit you will probably be charged extras. In a specialist dyslexic school, the extras will likely be incorporated into the standard fees.

So, how do you decide? What next?

The rest of this dyslexic schools eguide including the 30 point school visit questionnaire is only available to bespoke advice clients. To find out about our bespoke advice consultancy, phone us on +44 (0) 1622 813870

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