

# The same but different

*Sarah Ziegel charts the divergent paths her four sons with autism are taking through school*

Having four boys all with the same diagnosis of classic autism doesn't necessarily mean that they all have the same needs educationally or socially. If autism were to be broken down into sub categories, my four would perhaps fit into the same category. They were all diagnosed by the age of three with classic, non-verbal autism. I have to admit, I understand very little about the needs of a child with Asperger's at the opposite end of the spectrum. No wonder it is so hard to find the right education that each child requires when they all have such varying needs and are all under the umbrella diagnosis of autism. When you read the label "autism", applied to a child, the image you think of will be different for every person who reads it and for every child they meet.

In our family, all our boys have had full statements of SEN from the age of three. Hopefully, these will be converted to education, health and care (EHC) plans in the near future, but the principles of the education they need and deserve remains the same.

Our eldest boys are non-identical twins and I chose for them to attend different preschool nurseries, as their needs were different even at that young age. One son went to a Montessori nursery with his one-to-one support and his brother went to a nursery which was more free play and free choice. One coped better in a more structured environment while the other was unable to follow rules at the time. My two younger sons also attended different nurseries, one at a slightly more creative Montessori and the other at a church group which was very nurturing, so we used four preschool nurseries for four very different children.



Ensuring each boy reaches his own potential is the family's key aim.

## Into the mainstream

I made a decision early on to try to send the boys to mainstream settings despite their almost nonexistent language and their social and behavioural problems. This was for a few reasons. Our situation is fairly atypical and I felt that if the boys went to autism specific nurseries, they would never experience "normal" life. They were also outgoing and social.

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despite their difficulties. I think that this needs to be a very individual choice. A child may have no language but be sociable and not overly affected in a sensory way and so be able to attend a mainstream school. Conversely, a child may be relatively high functioning and verbal but be easily distressed by the noise and chaos of mainstream school. So the choice cannot be made on where on the autistic spectrum a child may be placed but rather on their social adaptive behaviour. It may be that a mainstream school is useful

for Key Stage 1, so that a child is socialised at a young age, but if they are really unable to access any of the curriculum, it might be more suitable to place them in a more specialist school by Key Stage 2. I think it is easier to move from mainstream into a special needs environment than to make this transition the other way round, but it all depends on the child's needs and abilities.

We also want to avoid school becoming a place where a child does not wish to go; this is perhaps one of the most important considerations. However suitable the school may seem, if the child finds it to be a hostile environment, no learning will take place. It may not be the school's fault; it may be that serious sensory issues are to blame.

Alongside nursery, the boys all had a full programme of one-to-one applied behaviour analysis (ABA) support for 35 hours a week, which we managed to get on their statements after three successful tribunals against our local authority. I managed the programmes and recruited the tutors, who accompanied the boys to nursery and then on to mainstream primary school. The system works best within

mainstream when possible. Children learn from other children and their behaviour on the playground. This doesn't work for everyone. Problems with the first primary the boys attended were difficult for both sides. We are managing the one-to-one support at the school. We are not the school. We are very supportive locally. We have had an excellent experience since. All four boys went to primary and my youngest is full-time with his ABA.

## Special solutions

Our twins still had a particularly in-lane 8. They needed a secondary age. They are hard for any children at primary. Very supportive and with SEN, this is not with other teenagers. Social difficulties, of language means such as GCSEs. So mainstream support was one support was need to provide offer alternative. I decided against

mainstream when possible, as the children learn from others and model their behaviour on their peers. Again, this doesn't work for everyone. We had problems with the first mainstream primary the boys attended as it can be difficult for both sides when the parents are managing the one-to-one staff and not the school. We moved to another very supportive local mainstream and have had an excellent relationship ever since. All four boys went to the same primary and my youngest is still there full-time with his ABA tutors.

### Special solutions

Our twins still had severe deficits, particularly in language, by Year 6. They needed a special school at secondary age. The teenage years are hard for any child and while other children at primary school tend to be very supportive and inclusive of those with SEN, this is not always the case with other teenagers. Along with the social difficulties, having a low level of language means that taking exams such as GCSEs may not be possible, so mainstream secondary with one-to-one support wasn't suitable. Schools need to provide differentiation and also offer alternative exam routes. Again I decided against an autism specific

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provision. They attend an independent school out of borough as there is not a lot of choice within our borough. The school is small and supportive and offers speech therapy and small classes alongside a choice of qualifications. One of the benefits of being within a mixed cohort has been the continuing development in language skills, as they have had to work hard to be able to converse with their peers.

Our middle son attends a large independent school for specific learning difficulties. They take a high number of more able boys with high functioning autism but require the boys to be capable of mainstream exams. Having smaller classes of a maximum of ten boys and offering a high level of support to the pupils ensures that they each reach their own potential. He is more able academically than his brothers and has higher levels of language and general ability, despite having the same deficits as his brothers

at the time of his diagnosis. For some reason, he progressed more despite the same family circumstances, the same primary school and indeed the same ABA tutors.

He proves that a child's abilities are not just subject to the teaching or environment provided but also due perhaps to his intrinsic level of autism. It also shows that we don't know how each individual child may progress so they must all be given an equal chance. Our boys were all non-verbal at diagnosis but now have useable language abilities; some children with autism may never acquire verbal language and will need schools appropriate for their needs. It is important to ensure that each child reaches their own potential, whatever that may be.

Careful consideration in terms of the choice of schools is paramount. Unfortunately, there is not enough choice available to parents, which often means, as in my sons' case, that pupils have to travel a long distance to school, making their day very long. For some children, Monday to Friday boarding or residential schools may be the only option to provide the teaching environment that they need.

Our youngest is still at local mainstream school and we don't know yet whether he will follow any of his brothers to their current schools or whether we will find a different path for him. It will depend on his abilities and needs at the time. **SEN**



### Further information

Sarah Ziegel is the mother of four boys diagnosed with autism. She is the author of *A Parents Guide to Coping with Autism* (Crowood Press, a Hale imprint). Sarah blogs about autism at: [sarahziegel.wordpress.com](http://sarahziegel.wordpress.com)