



WHEN IS IT TIME TO WORRY?

Although most children seem to get on well at school, about one child in five may need extra help at some time because they find learning difficult. Although it is never easy to be told that your child has learning difficulties, it can be a positive thing because it is important to identify problems as soon as possible – the sooner they are recognised, the sooner action can be taken. When the school informs you of concern, it means that a plan will be put in place to improve your child's learning. In the early stages, this plan usually involves the class/subject teacher trying to do things differently in the classroom and parents may well be invited to provide support at home. It is essential that home and school are able to work in partnership and often this works and the child makes progress.

On the other hand you may disagree with what the school is or is not doing or you may not share the school's view of your child. It is important to remember that, although teachers are well qualified and experienced, you, as the parent, know your child best of all. Also your attention is not being divided between a class of children as in school. Furthermore you may have older children who have not experienced any problems and therefore can compare the progress of one child with another. So often it is parents who spot something in their child which gives cause for concern – perhaps an unexpected difficulty in learning to read, write, spell or perhaps with number. Perhaps your child does not always seem to understand what is being said, maybe finds it difficult to follow instructions, is becoming increasingly reluctant to go to school or just seems “different” in comparison to his/her friends. Concerns of this nature should be discussed with your child's school as soon as they develop. It may be that you have nothing to worry about, or it may be that you have noticed something that needs dealing with – either way it is best to share your concerns as soon as possible.

While you are worrying about your child, it is easy to forget that s/he has a part to play in all of this and it is important that children are involved in the decision-making process. Maybe your child would rather do some extra work at home rather than feel “labelled” at school and it is fair to allow this opportunity and to give it time to work. However sometimes parents have to be cruel to be kind and do what is right, even if it is not popular at the time!

“My school has just told me that my child may have special needs. What does this mean?”

The term “special need” usually refers to a child’s ability to learn in comparison to others of the same age. Learning covers a range of activities including learning to read and write, learning to communicate, learning to socialize and relate, learning to behave appropriately, learning to shape letters etc, etc. A child with a special need will need extra help in order to develop skills that most children develop as part of the normal teaching process. So it is essential that, having been told that a child has special needs, the parent is clear about what those needs are and, most importantly, what the school is going to do differently to meet these needs. It is also important to establish what can be done at home to support the school and to work with your child in the same way that s/he is taught in school, to avoid confusion and misunderstanding.

What is the Code of Practice?

The Code of Practice is a set of guidelines for schools to follow when helping children with special educational needs. It is a very important document and it makes it very clear that schools should respond immediately when a child fails to make progress. The first response should be for the class teacher to share concerns with the parents and to teach differently in some way, perhaps using different materials and/or different approaches.

What is School Action?

This is the first stage of the Code of Practice and applies when, despite the provision of different learning opportunities (methods/materials etc, etc) in the classroom, a child is still not making progress. At School Action parents will be invited to a meeting to discuss how the school will give the child some extra provision and/or resources to meet his/her special needs. The school Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) will also draw up an Individual Educational Plan (IEP), which will set 3-4 targets by which to measure progress and a date will be set to review how things are going.

Best advice is for parents to ask for an early review of the IEP, preferably within 4-6 weeks in order to check that the provision is enabling the child to reach the targets. If targets are not being met, it is reasonable to expect the school to re-examine both the targets and the provision and to prepare a new IEP, again to be reviewed sooner rather than later.

What is School Action Plus (SAP)?

If progress is still not being made, the school has an opportunity to apply for extra provision from the LEA. This extra provision may include a specialist teacher coming into the school to work with the child for a set amount of time each week. SAP support has to be moderated at a meeting and not all children who are referred for support will get it. The school is required to produce evidence that it has taken appropriate action both in the classroom and during the School Action phase and that parents have been involved in the process.

An important principle of School Action Plus is that all the support already in place should continue.

WHAT DO I/YOU DO IF/WHEN.....

“The school tells me/you that my child is not making progress?

Or

“I am/You are worried about my/your child’s progress?

Below is a list of questions parents may wish to ask when the school informs them of their concerns. In many cases, changes in the way things are done in the classroom will do the trick and progress is made.

Step 1

Make an appointment to go into school to discuss your child’s needs. Below is a page of questions that you may want to ask. The page is set out with questions and lines for you to take notes. Please do not think that you have to ask all of the questions – they are intended for guidance and for you to choose. You may wish to print the page out and take it with you to the meeting.

Step 2

If your partner cannot go to the meeting, ask a friend to go with you and inform the school that s/he will be coming. Alternatively you can ask CAB for support. Ask your supporter to do three things:

1. Make a note of what the teacher says in response to your questions
2. Remind you of the questions you wanted to ask
3. Ask for clarification when an answer is not clear – sometimes teachers use a lot of jargon, especially when they are nervous!

Step 3

Use the questions below, or make up your own, to ensure that you will cover all the issues relating to your child. Take careful notes throughout the meeting to ensure that you have a full understanding of what is being said and/or offered.

Step 4

At the end of the meeting ask the school to go over exactly what has been decided.

1. If extra provision is agreed, you need to know when it will start and who will be doing it
2. You also need to know when progress will be reviewed and what will happen if things are not working
3. If it is agreed that a teacher should monitor progress for a while, you need to know for how long and when you will be meeting again

You may wish to support your child at home. If this is the case, ask the school what you can do to help. They will guide you with advice and materials.

Most schools will try to respond to a lack of progress by asking the class teacher to do things differently in the classroom. This is a perfectly acceptable response but it is important to get answers to the following questions:

1. How will the teacher do things differently?
2. How long will it be before we know if it is working?
3. How will we know if it is working?
4. What will you do if it is not working?
5. Can a date be set (within 4 weeks maximum) to review progress?

If “doings things differently in the classroom” does not work the school should consider taking School Action.

Important questions to ask include:

1. What extra support will my child get?
2. Where will it take place?
3. Who will be doing it?
4. When can we discuss targets for the IEP – when will I get my copy of the IEP?
5. Has my child been involved in setting these targets?
6. Does my child understand these targets?
7. Has my child’s class teacher been involved in setting these targets?
8. How is my child’s teacher/how are my child’s teachers going to meet these targets in all subjects/in every lesson?
9. How long will it be before these targets are met?
10. What will happen if my child cannot meet these targets?

Sometimes a child still fails to make progress, despite good teaching, extra input from the school via School Action, an IEP and support at home. At this point the school should consider making a case to the LEA for additional support - that is support over and above that already in place at School Action. This additional support is School Action Plus.

Questions to ask at this stage include:

1. Will my child be assessed?
2. If so, who will do it and when will it be done?
3. When will I be invited to a meeting to discuss the results of the assessment?
4. What will happen next?
5. Who will be coming in to do the “extra” teaching?
6. What targets will be set for School Action Plus?
7. When will they be reviewed?
8. When will I get a copy of the IEP?
9. What will happen if there is still no progress?

QUESTIONS TO ASK IF PARENTS MAKE THE FIRST CONTACT

- I am worried about my child's progress. Other children in the class are much better at.....

Why is this?

.....
.....
.....

- Do you think there is a problem?

.....
.....
.....

- If you do not think there is a problem, why is it that other children of the same age canmuch better than my child?

.....
.....
.....

QUESTIONS TO ASK IF THE SCHOOL MAKES THE FIRST CONTACT or following on from the questions above

- What do you think the problem is?

.....
.....
.....

- Why has this happened?

.....
.....
.....

- Can this be dealt with in school, or do we need to involve someone from outside?

.....
.....
.....

- If we can deal with this in school, what will the school do differently to help my child to improve?

.....
.....
.....

- Please can you write down for me what extra things the class teacher will do to help my child.

.....
.....
.....

- How long will it take for my child to make progress?

.....
.....
.....

- At the end of this time, what should my child be able to do that s/he cannot do now?

.....
.....
.....

- What can I do to help at home?

.....
.....
.....

- Do you have any books or handouts that I can borrow to help me do the right things?

.....
.....
.....

- Please can we arrange to meet again in 4 weeks to see how things are going?

.....
.....
.....

- What will happen if my child has not made progress – what is the next step?

.....
.....
.....

- If we need help from outside the school:

1. Who should be contacted?

.....
.....
.....

2. When will this be done and who will do it?

.....
.....
.....

3. How long will it be before I hear about an appointment?

.....
.....
.....

4. What will happen then?

.....
.....
.....

5. What will you do for my child while we are waiting for the appointment to come through?

.....
.....
.....

WHAT TO DO IF/WHEN :

You think that there is a problem but the school does not share your concern.

This is likely to arise in one of two main situation:

1. There is a problem which the school has missed
2. Despite your concerns, everything is actually all right

Either way, parents should expect to have an opportunity to express their concerns in a formal meeting in school. In order to determine which situation applies it is reasonable to expect the school to produce some evidence to support it's view. This evidence is likely to include SATs scores, a child's work and, ideally, the results of some testing done by the school SENCO.

Important questions to ask include:

1. What is my child's work like compared to others in the class?
2. I am worried about her/his.....
What should children of the same age be able to do?
3. You tell me that there is nothing wrong but s/he still can't.....
How long will it take for these skills to develop?
4. Please can we set a date for another meeting to check progress?.

If you still feel that the school is ignoring your concerns, CAB is able to offer advice and support.