

Hello and welcome to this new episode of *The Helpful Podcast for Families with Disabled Children* from the charity Contact. I'm Harriet, head of family support programmes and host of this podcast.

If you're new to Contact, we're a UK-wide charity that supports families with disabled children and those with additional needs. We offer lots of free resources and support, no matter what condition or extra support needs your child has. We're here for you. Visit our website at [contact.org.uk](https://www.contact.org.uk) to see how we can help.

If you're already familiar with us and this podcast, you might have noticed we haven't published an episode in a while. We're trying something a little different in this rebooted series of our podcast. We'll feature more interviews and guest contributions, diving deeper into the issues we know families care about.

Now, on to this episode!

On the 3rd of March, parents in England and Wales were informed which secondary school their child has been offered a place at. This is known as National Offer Day in England. Most parents will have received their first choice of school for their child, which is undoubtedly a huge relief. However, for those who didn't, this can be an extremely stressful and uncertain time. If you're unhappy with the secondary school place your child has been offered, we're here to help. Make sure you listen to the end of this episode, where Bridie from Contact's Helpline team will outline the steps you can take.

But first, we'll be discussing how parents and children can prepare for the transition from primary to secondary school. Starting secondary school is a big step for any child, but if your child has additional needs, it can feel particularly daunting. The good news is that there are plenty of practical strategies you can start implementing now to help your child feel ready for this important milestone in their young life.

Our first guest is very familiar with this process, having navigated it three times with her neurodiverse children. She also brings valuable insights from her work as a brain injury lawyer, supporting seriously injured children and their families for over 25 years.

Hi Caroline, thanks so much for joining us today. Would you like to introduce yourself to our listeners?

Hello, Harriet. I'm Caroline Klage, and I'm the head of the brain injury division at Bolt Burton Kemp. My specialty is working with children who have suffered brain injuries, either as a result of medical negligence or accidents. I'm also a mom to three wonderful neurodiverse children.

Fantastic. What kind of challenges do you think parents and children face when transitioning to secondary school?

Well, I think the transition can be quite tricky. You need to consider the nurturing, small environment of a primary school, where you have one teacher and are often in the same classroom for most of the day. You might leave for music or PE, but generally, you stay with the same peers and the same teacher. They get to know you, and you get to know them.

When you move to secondary school, it's a completely different setup. The school campus is usually much larger, with a bigger footprint—there may even be stairs to navigate. You have to figure out where to go for different lessons, and you'll have multiple teachers instead of just one.

The bell—or the "clack," as I remember it—can be really noisy. It signals the end of one session and the start of another, which can be challenging for some children. The entrances can also be very crowded and bustling, which can be overwhelming from a sensory perspective.

Then there are the organisational challenges. You need to make sure you've got the right equipment, books, and resources for each lesson. During break time, you have to plan ahead to ensure you've got what you need for your next classes, take a bathroom break, and grab a snack. On top of that, you need to fully grasp what's required in each lesson, know what homework has been assigned, and go home with a clear understanding of how to complete it. Then, you return the next day prepared. It's just so much to navigate compared to primary school.

Absolutely. Yeah, and I think there's a huge difference for parents as well, isn't there? In primary school, you're so involved—you take them right to the door, and sometimes you're even helping them hang coats and bags. But when they get to secondary school, it's completely different. It's hands-off, with no involvement whatsoever.

I agree. You've often got children traveling independently for the first time, which is a new challenge. In my experience, space for lockers is often limited, with priority sometimes given to older students. This means younger students might have lockers that are far away, which adds another layer of complexity.

Communication is also not the same. At primary school, you can speak to teachers at the start of the day if needed.

Absolutely.

To your child's teacher: If you have any concerns, it might be a good idea to catch up with them at the end of the day. It's harder to do this in secondary school—it's a totally different environment from primary school.

It really is different. You don't have the same level of support from parents that you might have had in primary school. Of course, your child will make friends, but it depends on who they connect with. You also don't have the same kind of playground support or the daily interactions that come from dropping your child off. In a way, though, this can be a positive, as it means your child is growing older and becoming more independent. But that support does gradually fade.

It's an adjustment, isn't it—for parents as much as for children?

Absolutely, it is. And this time can be very anxiety-inducing for children. So, how can parents prepare and support their children through this transition? What can you do to guide them along the way?

I think it's really important to prepare children for what's ahead, to help them get used to how things might be. This can be difficult because they won't fully understand until they're actually in that situation. But you can try to familiarise your child with the environment. One of the best ways to do this is to see if the school can provide some video footage or photographs. That way, your child can see what the environment looks like.

There will likely be transition days, and schools are often quite good at arranging these. However, if your child has additional needs, one day is probably not enough. You may want to start the transition process earlier. See if it's possible to visit the school with your child for a tour on a calmer day. Look at the entrance, classrooms, and other key areas together.

If you think your child might struggle with entering the school alongside a large group of students, you could inquire about alternative options. For example, is there a separate or quieter entrance they could use? Could a 'softer start' be arranged to make the school day feel less overwhelming and frenetic?

That's a really good idea.

Well, I think schools understand this because I've had this discussion while applying for transport for some of my children. They've been fortunate enough to have transport, and there is a school bus. But the notion of going on the school bus is almost like shaking a bottle of fizzy drink—it's so chaotic, with so many people and so much going on. On the other hand, traveling in a smaller minibus with an escort is much calmer. The child arrives at school regulated and ready to learn, without having experienced a disruptive start to the day. It's crucial to ensure the start of the day is as calm as possible.

Absolutely.

Yes, and it's important to prepare thoroughly and ahead of time. You need to make sure everything your child needs is organised to support them. While a neurotypical child might be able to organise themselves well, you can't always expect the same from a neurodiverse child. The night before, ensure everything is ready. Remove any potential triggers for anxiety in the morning. If you know you have limited time to leave the house, you don't want to create a last-minute panic trying to find things.

For example, if it's cookery, make sure the apron is ready. If it's science, have the lab coat set aside. For P.E., the kit should be packed, along with the lunch. All of this should be done the night before to make the morning routine as seamless as possible.

Yes, absolutely.

This will give your child the best start to the day. You can build these habits early on, especially once your child has been in primary school for a while. It's really difficult to manage when someone is under pressure, as even the smallest thing can derail them. While we all want to build resilience—and I completely understand that—we also know that routine is incredibly important for neurodiverse children.

Yes, absolutely. You can gradually build up their independence over time, but the first few weeks at a new school need to be well-supported. My son is also neurodiverse, and when he moved to secondary school, we arranged for him to walk around the school after hours. This allowed him to see where his classes were, where the toilets were, and other important areas without the pressure of other people being around. It seemed to help quite a bit. It's those little steps that can make a big difference.

I think that's a really good idea. You can create a plan, have a map, and work through it step by step.

Yes.

List the positives as well. You're talking about encouraging independence. A little checklist can help—have you done this, done that? If you don't want to do it alone, you can involve your child and then leave everything in a visible spot near the front door. And don't do what I sometimes do—put things in such a safe place that I can't remember where that place is.

Yes, absolutely. We had a checklist on the back of the front door. Before we left, we'd go through it: Do we have PE kits, lunch boxes, coats, etc.?

That's a great idea! Even having a designated box or trug to place everything in can help. I know it's not the most aesthetically pleasing thing for your hallway, but at least everything is in one place. We used to put the PE kit there first because that way, you'd always know where to find it.

Absolutely, I think that's a brilliant idea.

And don't forget things like charging the phone. While some smartphones are being phased out, lots of kids still have basic "brick" phones. Make sure it's charged the night before—you really don't want the panic of realising it's dead just when you're about to leave. Lists can be very helpful, and you can create them in advance. If your child will be using a brick phone in secondary school, get one for the last term of primary school so they can start getting used to it. Just inform their primary school about what you're doing.

Absolutely, yes.

That way, it's not something new on day one. They can practice habits like charging it at night and packing it the next morning.

That's the key, isn't it? Building habits and making things routine. I remember when my son started secondary school, they had lanyards. If I'd had a box where we kept everything, life would have been so much easier. He'd take off his lanyard after school, and it would inevitably get lost somewhere. We'd spend every morning frantically searching for it. So yes, having one place to put everything is a great idea—it avoids those last-minute panics.

I agree. It's tough because there will always inevitably be something that gets forgotten.

Oh yes.

And when it happens, it's really frustrating. But you just try to stay calm. We all go through it, even as adults.

Yes, exactly.

Do it. The way we're feeling often plays out in our behaviour, and sometimes it's just a way of communicating. If a child is feeling really overwhelmed or super anxious, and they lash out or say things that aren't very nice, it's simply their way of expressing their stress. Don't take it personally. Try to stay calm, and I know that's not always easy, but losing your temper will only make things worse. If you have a conversation with the school and hopefully with the SENCO, you can explain the situation. For example, if your child is a little late or if there's an issue, they will understand. Maintaining open lines of communication is really important.

Absolutely. I think it's so important to note this because nowadays, there are penalties for everything—being late, not having your lanyard, or forgetting your homework diary. Letting the school know about these potential struggles your child might face is key.

Another thing to remember, as you know Harriet, is that every child is different. No child fits neatly into a particular diagnosis, and that can sometimes be a challenge for schools. We need to work with them to educate and support them. Don't lose patience with the school—even if they're not as helpful as you'd like, losing the relationship means you can't work with them anymore.

For example, your child might be one who always interrupts, and explaining this can prevent them from being unfairly punished. On the other hand, your child might be mortified if they're picked on in class and could freeze up. Either way, it's important to explain how your child reacts and ask for accommodations. You don't necessarily need a formal diagnosis or an EHCP, but having a supportive

SENCO can make a world of difference. Some SENCOs prepare a “passport” for students, which allows you to provide input. If your child struggles, for example, and is likely to freeze when called on in class, that can be noted in the passport. The teacher can then approach them differently, perhaps checking in with them after the lesson or encouraging them to contribute in another way. The goal is to avoid creating a negative experience in these early weeks, as this can make it even harder for your child to return to school.

Schools understand this—they don’t want your child to become a school refuser. That’s why so many secondary schools now have excellent transition programs. I must say, it’s so different from back when I was at school all those years ago!

A passport is a really good idea, and that’s something you can develop, perhaps with your SENCO in primary school, with whom you might have a really strong relationship because you’ve known them for so many years and they know your child well. You can ask your SENCO to liaise with the new SENCO and to devise a suitable path forward for secondary school.

I think that’s such an important point because secondary school teachers are only going to see your child for 1-2, maybe 3 hours a week, whereas their current primary school teacher knows them inside and out because they’re with them all day. When they’re only seeing your child for brief snippets, secondary school teachers may not pick up on all the subtleties or remember the needs of each child with so many students coming through their doors. That passport can really be such an important tool, can’t it?

I think so. And I also think if you’ve got a good relationship with your SENCO, you should use it to compellingly demonstrate to the SENCO at your child’s new school that your child has specific needs. I know this can be challenging, but secondary schools are incredibly busy, and teachers are under huge pressures. You can, of course, advocate for your child, but it will sound far more compelling if you also have a professional from the primary school—someone viewed as more objective—making that case as well. So, ask them for help.

Often, during the transition process, you’ll be asked to provide some information about your child’s background. If there’s anything of concern, most secondary schools ask for that, and you can provide your summary of information. However, if you can ask your SENCO to support you—either by having a conversation or putting something in writing for the SENCO at the secondary school—it will really help your child. Use that resource. It’s incredibly valuable, and I think many parents don’t realise it’s an option. Likewise, at primary schools, SENCOs may not volunteer this support because they’re also incredibly busy, but if you ask for it, I’m sure most would be happy to help.

Yes, absolutely! I completely agree with you, and that continuity—as well as having a professional advocate—will be so helpful.

Absolutely!

Our final topic—do you have some top tips to share with us for children transitioning?

Yes, absolutely. I believe I’ve covered some of these in our conversation already, and apologies for rambling on, Harriet, but I’ll go through them again briefly.

The first thing is the importance of a diagnosis. Having a diagnosis really helps because there are so many children with competing needs. Schools are required to pay attention if there’s a diagnosis, as it means that certain actions must be taken and accommodations put in place.

That doesn't necessarily mean everything has to be in the EHCP plan, but a diagnosis gives you access to support from the SENCO (Special Educational Needs Coordinator). Even if you're in the process of getting a diagnosis, you can inform your SENCO about this and summarise the current situation. However, if you can secure a diagnosis beforehand, it will make a significant difference.

Try to meet with the SENCO as early as possible. As we've discussed, it's a good idea to get your current SENCO to have a conversation with the SENCO at the secondary school and work on creating a passport for your child ahead of time. Another excellent idea, as you mentioned, is to take your child around the school after hours, well before they officially start. This can be more effective than relying solely on the transition day.

Also, you know your child best, including the areas they struggle with. It's important to have open conversations with the SENCO about what adjustments or accommodations might help. For example, does your child need to use a different entrance to avoid the crowded main doors? Could they arrive a bit earlier to sit quietly in their form room before the day begins? What time does the school open, and is it possible for them to avoid the last-minute rush?

In secondary schools, SENCOs often deploy form teachers to check in with students, which can be helpful. This can be done discreetly to avoid singling out a child, as many children don't want to be seen as different and simply want to fit in. For example, could the form teacher have a quiet check-in with your child when they arrive a little earlier than others, or at the end of the school day to address any issues?

Another thing to consider is rest breaks. If your child struggles with stairs or needs more time to navigate the school, you might need to request that they leave lessons a bit earlier to get to their next class on time. Secondary schools are often much larger than primary schools, so this can make a big difference.

These are just a few tips, but I hope they help with the transition process.

The other issue I've come across through my work is access to disabled toilets. These facilities must be accessible. Children who need to use a disabled toilet cannot afford to wait, and they need to be able to access them even if others are using them. This can be really problematic. If your child is in this situation, I'd recommend seeking reassurance from the SENCO that these toilets will be accessible whenever your child needs them. Children requiring these facilities cannot be expected to queue. Disabled toilets exist for a reason.

Often, children are encouraged to use the toilet only during breaks and lunchtime, and at no other times. In some cases, the school may issue a pass if a child needs to use the toilet at other times. It's important to be aware of this and to get these passes in place from day one to avoid potential issues. If your child needs the flexibility to access the toilet whenever necessary, make sure these arrangements are sorted early on.

I completely agree. This is something that could even be added to the child's school passport. The difficulty is that if a problematic situation arises, it can be extremely awkward and distressing for the child. Unfortunately, some schools might resist, arguing that if one child is allowed to do something, others will want to do the same. But this is not the case. These arrangements are about accommodating specific needs, and the implications of not doing so can make school an incredibly unpleasant place for the child. Securing a pass is a great idea.

On the social side of things, it's also worth considering ways to help your child connect with others. For example, when one of my children was in a smaller provision class, one of the other parents organised

a meet-up in the park. This was easier because the class was small, with just 6 or 7 students, and it allowed the children to bond. That group connection has lasted for years. In a mainstream class, this might be harder to organise, but if there are children from the same primary school moving to your child's secondary school, you could try arranging a meet-up with those they might get along with. Even having just one friendly face at school can make a huge difference.

Practical tools can also help your child stay organised. For example, a checklist on the back of the door is a great idea. Consider using color-coded timetables or labelled folders for each subject. Create a designated storage space where they can keep their books and supplies to avoid losing things. At my workplace, my support team is fantastic—they're always laminating everything to make it durable. Laminating the timetable, for instance, can prevent it from getting damaged or lost. If you don't have access to a laminator, it's worth investing in one—they're incredibly useful. Keep an extra copy of the timetable, as children are bound to lose it. Sometimes, schools can email you a copy, which is also helpful.

Establishing routines is another key aspect. My experience with my three children, including my youngest, now at secondary school, has shown that they often mature significantly in their final year of primary school. You can get a lot done in that last term after the stress of SATs is behind them.

But, you know, then you have the school trip, which is a challenge. And it's far, I know. However, it's a good opportunity to focus on developing independence because their peers will be doing the same. You might want to start introducing some independent travel at this time if you feel it's safe. Consider using a basic phone, like a brick phone, especially if smartphones aren't allowed at school, so they can get used to using it and remembering to charge it.

I know the book situation is different, but you might want to start introducing packed lunches now—it's summer, after all. Getting into the habit of bringing lunches, water bottles, and other essentials can be helpful. Start incorporating these routines early.

Another important thing to consider is maintaining a calming evening routine, especially on Sundays and weeknights. I've noticed that if my kids' evening wind-down time is disrupted, it impacts them the next day. For example, if they go to a party that runs late, even if it's just a late afternoon bowling party, it can really affect the next morning. It's tricky because your child wants to go, but it can disrupt their routine. Try to plan things earlier where possible, or ensure there's enough time for them to wind down properly on Sunday nights and during the week.

Also, check in with them regularly to see how they're doing. I know that asking, "How was your day?" might not get much of a response, but you can observe other signs—like whether they're eating well or seem less energetic than usual. Monitoring these things can be really helpful.

I hope the transition goes well for everyone. If you feel your child is struggling with the curriculum and they don't already have an EHC (Education, Health, and Care) plan, it might be worth considering whether one would be beneficial.

It's a huge transition—for both children and parents. However, if you can establish preparations, plans, and routines before they start, it'll make the change in September much smoother.

I also recommend trying on the uniform in advance. It might feel a bit odd, but if your child is a little sensory-sensitive, this can help them adjust. Honestly, I sometimes wish schools would just allow tracksuits—considering how informal workplaces are these days, it would make so much sense!

All the time now, I think about stiff collars and ties. Blazers too. If you have to wear these things, buttons and all, start trying them on early. It's just one less thing to worry about, especially if you're feeling a bit dysregulated on your first day of school. That would only make things feel worse. So, try things on ahead of time and buy them early.

I know it's hard because you might think, "I don't want to buy it early; it's expensive, and my child is going to grow, so I'll leave it until later." Don't do that. Buy it a bit early. You might also want to consider second-hand options because they tend to be softer and more comfortable than brand new items. Most schools have an outlet or system for second-hand uniforms, so it's worth contacting them to see what's available.

Another thing to consider, and this always surprises me even though it shouldn't, is how a coat feels on top of a blazer. It's worth trying this out too because the fit and feel can be uncomfortable. For example, I wouldn't be keen to wear a blazer with a puffer jacket on top. But if you try these combinations ahead of time, you'll have a chance to adjust or find alternatives.

The key to all this is to start preparing well before September. It's really important. It's an exciting time – a chance for new opportunities for kids and families – but the more prepared you are, the less stressful it will be, and hopefully, it will feel like a positive experience.

I have to say, schools are really good at helping with this transition. They understand how important it is and often make the first few weeks feel a bit like primary school to help settle kids into a routine. Mainstream secondary schools are getting better at this too. My experience has been really positive, and many schools run activities in the first year to help encourage kids to feel comfortable and engaged.

Some schools also work closely with primary schools, so children are placed in classes with at least one of their friends. This can make it easier to meet new friends because they start off with someone familiar, which boosts their confidence. Meeting friends in pairs often leads to forming connections with others, which can really help.

If this isn't happening at your chosen school, it's worth asking about their transition process. What do they do to help children feel at home? If these systems aren't in place, it can be a red flag that the school might not be the right fit. Transition support is hugely reassuring for both parents and children.

For children who struggle socially, there are also good social skills courses available. One of my kids attended the PEERS course, which was co-run by the late Dr. Lucy Brown, a truly inspiring figure, and Leonie Kenny, a fantastic speech and language therapist. The course handpicks small groups of around seven or eight young people, and it's designed for those who genuinely want to participate. It works best when participants complete the course since any dropouts can disrupt the group.

The course provides targeted social coaching for the kids, while also holding a separate session for parents. The parents' session is fascinating because it teaches strategies to support social skills development. We often take for granted how we learn the art of conversation – it's something we pick up naturally. But for neurodiverse individuals, this process can be much harder. Conversations, for example, typically involve asking a question, responding, and following up with another question to keep the flow. These small, seemingly natural steps are things that neurodiverse kids might not pick up intuitively, making courses like this incredibly valuable.

Teach this, and they're really in a lovely, supportive environment, which I think is invaluable for building confidence and having that toolkit. So that's something you might want to consider. That's helpful.

Absolutely. And there are all sorts of after-school clubs and activities that can really help with learning these skills. Because you're right, we don't just magically know how to do it—it's something you have to learn.

And I think you have to be careful because sometimes, I encourage—I mean, what taught me is to encourage your child to have conversations and sustain interactions with people. To do this, they need to have a wide range of interests. They can't just stay too niche. As Lucy used to say, "Don't go niche!"

Yes.

We all have our niche, but if you only talk about your specialist subject, it might not be the other person's interest. So, it's helpful to have a few topics that are more universal.

Yes.

For example, things like, "What did you do over the weekend?" or "What are you doing this weekend?" Or even, "I've just been to see Captain America—it was brilliant! Have you seen it?" Those kinds of questions can really help. As a parent, you can encourage your child to explore topics that could serve as enjoyable conversation starters when they meet new people.

Yes, that's such a good point.

Asking, "What have you been watching on TV?" is another good one. There might be something popular at the moment—like I've never watched it, but for slightly older children, things like "Stranger Things" were hugely popular.

Yes, that was huge.

And food is always a great topic. Everyone can relate on some level. Asking, "What do you like to eat?" can be a fun and easy conversation starter.

Yeah, absolutely.

Music is another great topic. If you can help your child develop some of these interests, it gives them a wider range of things to talk about and makes it easier to have conversations. As parents, we also have to model this behaviour at home.

Absolutely.

Sometimes my kids don't want to, but I make them share something about their day and encourage them to ask me something in return.

Yes, it's all about modelling, isn't it? When you're sitting at the dinner table or on a car journey, those are great opportunities to try a few questions and encourage them to engage by asking things back.

That's it.

And as a parent, you're already doing amazing work just by tuning into this and wanting to learn more about how to support your child. That's so admirable and should be applauded.

Absolutely.

And just remember, any behaviour is communication. That's the top tip. I remember years ago, one of my children had sensory needs, which I didn't understand at the time. I still feel really guilty about this, but I was trying to force on these scratchy school trousers because we were so late for school. I was so focused on getting them dressed, ignoring their discomfort, and trying to push through. In the process, they accidentally kicked me in the mouth—not on purpose, of course.

At the time, I was so frustrated and thought, "What's wrong with this child?" But from their perspective, the trousers were causing extreme discomfort. In the end, they went to school in jeans, and I was lucky because the teacher said, "You've just got to pick your battles." That advice has really stayed with me.

Later, we had an occupational therapy (OT) sensory assessment, and the OT explained everything. I finally understood that my child had been trying to communicate: "This is really uncomfortable. I can't handle it." You just don't know until you know. It's about staying open to learning all the time.

That's why I think diagnoses can be so helpful. They allow you to accept the situation and access tips and tools to help. I understand why some people are hesitant about diagnoses, thinking they label or limit children, but they also create a framework. When I was in school, there were people who probably should have been diagnosed, but we weren't open about neurodiversity back then. Life would have been so much easier for them if we had understood, instead of them feeling confused and overwhelmed all the time.

I see diagnosis as a positive thing because it allows children to get the help they need. For slightly older children struggling to make sense of their experiences, it can be empowering. They can begin to understand themselves, which helps them navigate the world better.

The conversation now has shifted—it's not about labeling something as a "disorder." We talk about autism spectrum conditions, for example, and focus on neurodiversity. That language is so important. It's about giving children the skills and tools to understand themselves and their place in the world.

We're fortunate that things are moving in the right direction. While there's still a need for more resources, at least awareness is growing. My kids are lucky to live in a time where neurodiversity is better understood, and I hope things continue to improve.

They are 13 through to 20.

But when getting a diagnosis, the way it's labelled has changed so much. I've seen it myself, and I actually wish that when my 20-year-old had been diagnosed, the language had been different. It would have been easier to explain to him because it is positive—they're wonderful.

Oh, absolutely. Yeah, I think it's moving in the right direction. We just have to keep banging the drum and shouting from the rooftops about the amazing things these kids can do.

I think that's right, and it's about creating the right environment and having the understanding, yes, so they can function optimally and play a role in it. We're talking about school life, and in secondary school life, there's no reason why not. It just requires a little bit of understanding.

Well, hopefully, this podcast will have shed some light and given some understanding on this huge topic. A huge thank you to Caroline for talking to us today. So many useful tips for parents to get started with, which I'm sure will be a tremendous help to families.

Up next, we'll be discussing National Offer Day, but just a few caveats to cover before we dive into the topic. National Offer Day applies in England, but the same date applies in Wales. In Northern Ireland, post-primary school places will be sent out on the 10th of May, and in Scotland, no offers are made as

councils decide where pupils are placed. National Offer Day also only applies to children without an Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHC plan) or an Independent Development Plan in Wales. So this advice is only relevant if you're based in England or Wales and your child does not have an EHC or Independent Development Plan. If your child does have an EHC or Independent Development Plan, we have information on our website about the application process. Visit www.contactorg.uk/education.

OK, so what is National Offer Day? When parents apply for a secondary school place for their child, they fill out a single form and state the schools they'd like in order of preference. On the 3rd of March, thousands of parents in England and Wales were offered a place for their child at one of their preferred secondary schools for Year 7. For many parents, this will be their first preference of school, but for some, it might be one of their other preferences. Unfortunately, some families will be disappointed that their child has not been offered the school they wanted.

So today, we're going to discuss what you can do if your child hasn't received a school place you're happy with.

We have Bridie here from the helpline. Would you like to introduce yourself?

Hi, Harriet. Nice to be here today. Yes, I work on the helpline every day and take lots of calls from parents on a variety of subjects, including National Offer Day.

So, can you tell me what happens on secondary school National Offer Day?

Yes, of course, no problem. Today is the day that secondary school offers are made by local authorities in England and Wales. Parents and carers will receive the offer by email or can log on to the local authority website to view their school place offer. They will receive a single offer of a school place. The admissions arrangements and criteria used to allocate places can vary depending on the type of school. For community schools and some church or state-funded schools, these criteria are set by the local authority. For academies, they are set by the Academy Trust, and for other schools, they may be determined by the school governors. Check your local authority and school website for detailed information.

Do parents have to accept the school place they've been offered? It's totally understandable to feel upset if your child didn't get into your first-choice school. This can be stressful when thinking about their next steps. However, the advice I'd give is this:

In England, it's important to accept the place you've been offered by the deadline provided in your offer letter to secure a school place. In Wales, you may also be required to do this—check your letter carefully. Even if the offer isn't ideal, accepting the place is crucial. Why? Because accepting it guarantees your child a place, and you don't want to risk losing that opportunity altogether. If you don't accept, there will be no placement for your child.

Once you've accepted the offered place, even if it's not your first choice, you can exercise your right to lodge an appeal. Appealing is a formal way of requesting a review and explaining why your child should be placed in your preferred school and why it's a better fit. If your appeal is successful, you can later withdraw the acceptance of the original offer, but it's essential to secure the place first.

If your child didn't get into your preferred school, they will automatically be added to the waiting lists of schools that you ranked higher than the school you've been offered. Many parents don't realise this, so it's always a good idea to double-check this has happened. You will also be contacted in writing if offers become available from these schools. Additionally, you can add your child to as many waiting lists as you wish.

Typically, these waiting lists remain open until the end of August in England, but check with your local admissions team to confirm. In Wales, it's required that waiting lists are maintained until the 30th of September. If schools are oversubscribed, make sure your child is on the waiting lists you prefer.

OK, so there's still plenty of time for things to change. Nothing is going to be signed, sealed, and delivered immediately. There are opportunities for adjustments.

Absolutely. You can also apply to other schools that weren't on your original list, so check with admissions to see if they have any spaces available. It's all about exploring the options that are open to you.

Do you have any advice for parents who haven't been offered any of the schools they wanted?

Most importantly, as I said, accept the offer you've been given. Try to stay calm and lodge an appeal. I'll explain how to go about doing that now. To appeal, follow the instructions on your offer letter. If you can't locate your offer letter, check with the local authority admissions department for guidance on how to appeal in your area.

Use the offer letter and the eligibility criteria outlined in the admissions code, which can be found on your local authority or school website, to understand why your child wasn't offered a place at your preferred school. Then, use this information to help you write your appeal. Be sure to provide evidence to support your case—the more detail, the better. If there were any errors in the admissions process or if you think the process wasn't followed correctly, check the admissions information at your school or local authority, as you can use these points in your appeal as well.

OK, that's good to know.

In your appeal, it's important to focus on why your preferred school is the best fit for your child, rather than why the school you've been offered is not suitable.

Right, that makes sense.

Yes, exactly. Focus on the positives. After the first round of places is offered, admissions teams must follow their oversubscription criteria to allocate any remaining spaces. These allocations are based on the children who best meet the oversubscription criteria. You should review these criteria, which are outlined in the admissions information, to understand how likely your child is to get a place. This can also help you add more points to your appeal.

It's important to carefully follow the appeals advice in your offer letter to give yourself the best chance. If the appeals process feels overwhelming, adjustments can be made to support you. For example, you can request translated documents or assistance with writing your appeal by reaching out to the local authority admissions department.

And they'll be very experienced in doing that, right? They'll be keen to help and support?

Yes, absolutely, and they should be. It's about making adjustments to ensure everyone has access to the same process, making it fair for everyone.

OK, thank you!

In England, you typically have 20 days after receiving your offer to submit an appeal, but in some cases, deadlines can be up to 40 school days later. Be sure to check your offer letter or the admissions website, as deadlines can vary. For appeals, you must be given at least 10 working days from the notification of your unsuccessful application to submit your appeal. Once you've sent your appeal,

you'll receive an acknowledgment, a hearing date, and a deadline to submit your evidence. After the hearing, decisions are usually made within five working days.

It sounds like you won't be kept waiting too long. Five days is fairly manageable, isn't it? However, please note that if your appeal is late—beyond the 40 or 20 days specified for your area—it will only be considered after all the other on-time appeals have been processed. So, it's important to stick to those deadlines.

If your appeal is unsuccessful, it can be a difficult and emotional experience, and many people feel helpless. It's important to reach out for support. There are always people and resources available to help you process and accept the situation. If you don't win your appeal, you can still contact the school you have been offered and request a meeting to discuss any concerns with them. But remember, the key thing is to accept the place you've been offered first, so that your child has a school placement.

Could some families end up without a school place at all?

Local authorities are legally required to provide a school place for every child, but this doesn't guarantee it will be at your first-choice school. They will, however, offer a place at another school. In the rare event that you don't receive an offer letter on March 3rd, it's important to immediately contact the local authority or school admissions team, as they can guide you on the next steps.

To summarise, you need to accept the place you've been offered and, if you wish to appeal, make sure to do so within the specified timeframes. Be clear about the deadlines that apply to your particular school.

That's correct. Always check the information provided, access details online, or contact the admissions team directly for clarification.

Thank you very much, Bridie. Finally, where can parents go if they want to learn more about this topic?

It can be a real roller coaster, but there's plenty of advice available. Our key takeaways are: stay calm, accept the place you've been offered, consider joining waiting lists, and lodge an appeal if you wish. Just a reminder that all the advice is included in your offer letter. Admissions information can be found on either your local authority's website or the school's website. We also have all this information on our website at contact.org.uk/education. Additionally, we posted a news story in our News and Views section on March 3rd about this topic.

You can always call our helpline to speak to one of our advisors. The number is 0808 808 3555, and they can provide you with more personalised advice if needed.

Thank you so much, Bridie. That was really informative. I know this is a stressful time for parents, so having things explained clearly is incredibly helpful.

Always happy to help.

That's it for this episode. We hope you found it useful. You can find more information about National Offer Day, applying for schools, and other education topics for all UK families on our website, www.contact.org.uk/education.

Thanks again to our parent advisor Bridie from our helpline team and Caroline from Bolt Burden Kemp for joining us. Until next time, goodbye!