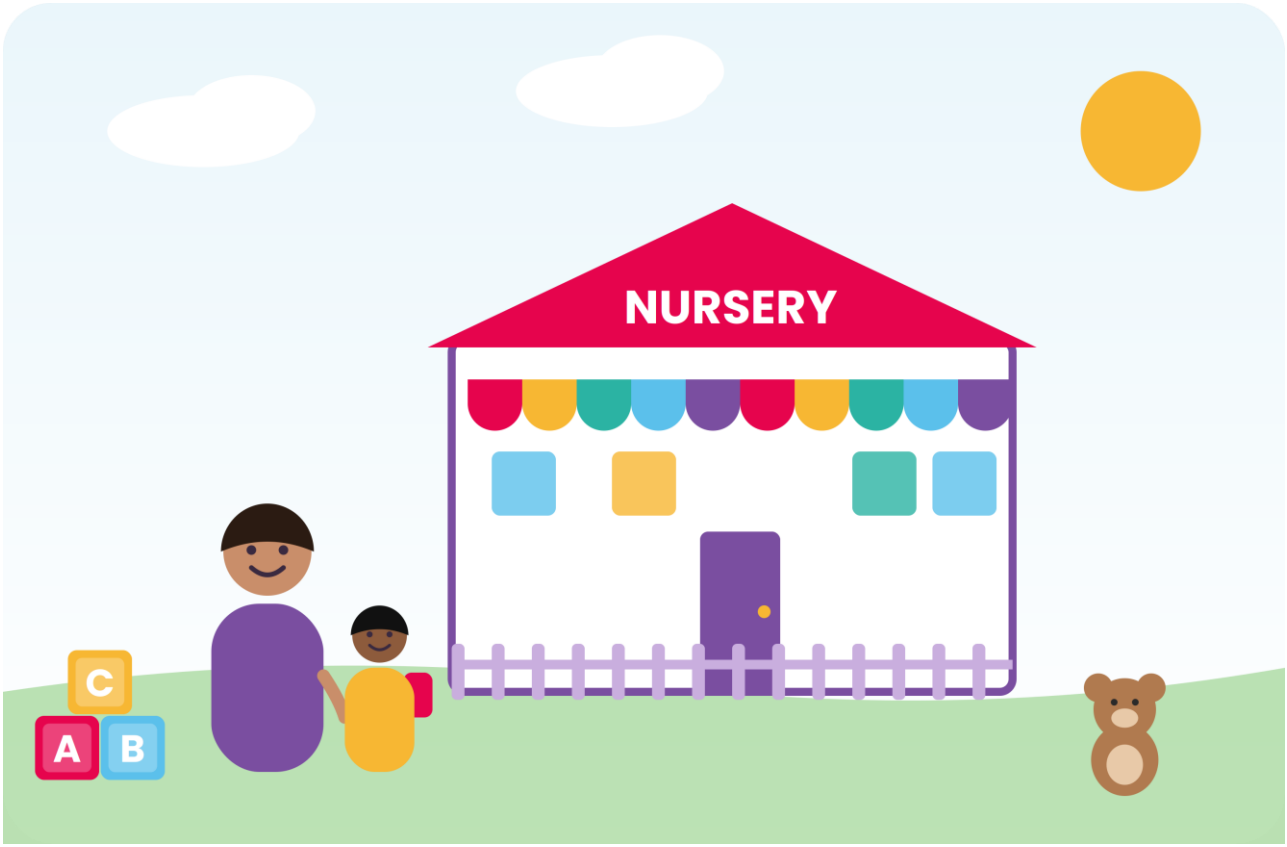
Starting Nursery or Pre-school

A transition guide for families of neurodivergent children

Planning, preparing and settling in — with local support in Barking & Dagenham, Havering and Redbridge



Barking & Dagenham | Havering | Redbridge

Welcome

Getting ready for a big first step

Starting nursery, pre-school or a childminder is a big step for any family. If your child is autistic, has speech and language differences, sensory needs, developmental delay or other additional needs — with or without a diagnosis — a little extra planning can make the move calmer and happier for everyone.

This guide explains your childcare options and funding, how to choose and prepare, how to help your child settle, and what support is available in the early years. It finishes with local contacts for **Barking & Dagenham**, **Havering** and **Redbridge**. Every link can be clicked.

> **You know your child best**
>
> Every child is different. Take the ideas that feel right for your child and family, and share what you know with the people who will care for them. Your child does not need a diagnosis to get support at nursery.

What's inside

1	Types of early years settings	7	All about me
2	Funding and help with costs	8	SEN support in the early years
3	Choosing the right setting	9	Common worries
4	Your transition timeline	10	Looking after you
5	Preparing your child	11	Local support
6	Settling in	12	National links and checklist

1 Types of early years settings

Finding the right fit for your child

All registered early years settings in England follow the **Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)**, which sets standards for children's learning, development and care from birth to 5.

Day nursery

Open all year, often from early morning to evening. Children are usually grouped by age. Good for families who need longer hours.

Pre-school or playgroup

Usually open in term time for morning or afternoon sessions. Often smaller and quieter, which can suit some children.

School nursery class

A nursery class for 3- and 4-year-olds attached to a primary school. Can help with the later move into Reception.

Childminder

Cares for a small group of children in their own home. A calm, home-like setting with one familiar adult can suit children who find groups overwhelming.

Nursery school

A school just for under-5s, with qualified teachers. Some have specialist experience of SEND.

Children's Centre groups

Stay and play sessions where you stay with your child. A gentle way to get used to groups before starting nursery.

Every group setting has a SENCo

Nurseries, pre-schools and school nurseries must have a **Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo)**, and every child has a **key person** who gets to know them and their family well. Childminders must also support children with SEND (Special Educational Needs & Disabilities) and can get advice from the local authority.

2 Funding and help with costs

Free childcare and extra support

15 hours for 2-year-olds

Some 2-year-olds can get 15 free hours a week, including children who get **Disability Living Allowance (DLA)** or have an **EHC plan**, and families on some benefits Help paying for childcare: 15 hours free childcare (Early Learning for 2 year olds) - GOV.UK

15 hours for all 3- and 4-year-olds

Every 3- and 4-year-old can get 15 free hours a week from the term after their third birthday, whatever your income Help paying for childcare: 15 hours free childcare for 3 and 4-year-olds - GOV.UK

30 hours for working families

Eligible working families can get up to 30 hours a week from when their child is **9 months old** until they start school. You apply for a code and renew it every 3 months

Free Childcare for Working Parents: Overview - GOV.UK

Disability Access Fund

If your child gets **DLA** and uses funded hours, the setting can claim at least **£975 a year** (2026–27) to help make it more accessible. Tell your setting if your child gets DLA.

SEN Inclusion Fund

Councils give extra funding to settings to support children with emerging or lower-level SEN, such as extra staff time or resources. The setting applies for the funding.

Tax-Free Childcare

Working families can get help with childcare costs. The limit is higher for disabled children.

GOV.UK – Tax-Free Childcare

Check what you can get: Best Start in Life – childcare support

Funded hours are usually based on 38 weeks a year. Some settings let you spread them across the whole year. Ask your council's Family Information Service or the setting how funding works locally.

3 Choosing the right setting

Visit, ask questions, trust your instincts

Visit more than one setting if you can. Go without your child first so you can ask questions, then visit again together at a quiet time.

Questions to ask

- What experience do you have of supporting autistic children or children with additional needs?
- Who is the SENCo, and who would be my child's key person?
- Is there a quiet or calm space my child can use if they feel overwhelmed?
- How do you support children who communicate without words (for example Makaton, signing, PECS or visuals)?
- Can settling in be flexible and go at my child's pace?
- How will you help with toileting, eating and sleep if my child needs extra support?
- Will you work with my child's speech and language therapist, health visitor or Portage worker?
- How will you share how my child's day has gone?

Things to look out for

- Calm, patient staff who get down to children's level
- Visual timetables and picture labels
- Noise levels and space to move
- Outdoor space

Check the basics

- The latest Ofsted report
- Session times and funded hours
- What food is provided
- How easy the journey is

4 Your transition timeline

What to do and when

1 Planning

6–12 months before

- Think about what kind of setting would suit your child, and how many hours you need.
- Check which funded hours you can get and apply for a code if needed.
- Visit settings and put your child's name down, as some have waiting lists.
- Talk to your health visitor or other professionals about any support your child may need.

2 Preparing

2–3 months before

- Meet the SENCo and key person, and share information about your child (see Section 7).
- Ask for reports from professionals to be shared with the setting, with your permission.
- Agree a settling-in plan, and any support or equipment your child will need.
- Take photos of the setting and staff to make a picture book for your child.

3 Getting ready

The last few weeks

- Visit together a few times. Look at the photo book or social story at home.
- Practise the journey, and short times apart with a trusted adult.
- Start moving towards the nursery routine at home, such as wake-up and lunch times.
- Label everything and pack a familiar comfort item.

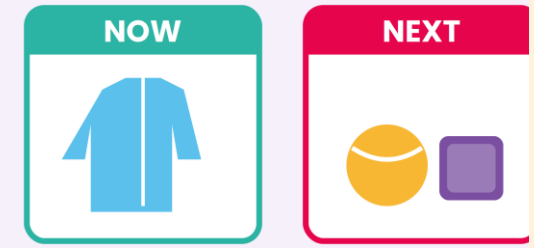
4 Settling in

The first weeks

- Follow the settling-in plan and go at your child's pace.
- Keep in close touch with the key person.
- Expect tiredness and big feelings at home. This is normal.
- Meet with keyperson after a few weeks to review how things are going.

5 Preparing your child

Making the new place feel familiar



Use visuals

Pictures help many children understand what is happening and what comes next. A simple **Now and Next** board, a visual timetable or a photo book of the nursery can make a big difference.

Make a photo book

Include the entrance, rooms, toilets, garden, key person and a coat peg. Read it together often.

Tell a simple story

Use a short social story: “Mummy takes me to nursery. I play. Mummy comes back after lunch.”

Bring comfort from home

A favourite toy, blanket or photo of family can help your child feel safe.

Practise small steps

Short times apart with a trusted adult, playing near other children, and trying new foods or cups.

Sensory tips

- Tell staff about sounds, textures, lights or smells that your child finds hard to cope with, and what helps.
- Ear defenders, a chewy toy or a favourite fidget can help your child stay calm.
- Practise wearing new clothes, shoes or a coat before the first day.

6 Settling in

Step by step, at your child's pace

Saying goodbye

- Keep a short, calm, predictable goodbye routine
- Always say goodbye — do not sneak away
- Tell your child when you will be back, using routines ("after lunch")

Signs your child may be struggling

- Changes in sleep, eating or toileting
- More meltdowns, clinginess or withdrawal
- Not wanting to go in
- Share what you notice with the key person

After nursery

Many neurodivergent children hold in their feelings at nursery and let them out at home. After a session, offer quiet time, a snack and a familiar activity before asking questions. This is sometimes called 'restraint collapse' and is a sign your child feels safe with you.

7 All about me

Help staff get to know your child

Fill this in and share it with your child's key person and SENCo. Add a photo of your child, and update it as they grow.

My name is… and I like to be called…

I love… (toys, songs, games)

How I communicate

Things I find hard

What helps me feel calm

Eating, sleeping and toileting

Also useful to share

- Any diagnosis, medical needs, allergies and medication
- Professionals involved, such as a speech and language therapist, Portage worker or paediatrician
- Words or signs your child uses for important things, like toilet, drink and help

8 SEN support in the early years

Getting the right help

SEN Support

If your child needs extra help, the setting should work with you using a cycle of **Assess, Plan, Do, Review**. You should be involved in setting and reviewing targets. **A diagnosis is not needed.**

Progress check at 2

Settings write a short progress check for children aged 2–3. Where possible it is combined with the **health visitor's 2-year review**, so everyone gets a full picture.

Specialist advice

The setting can ask for help from the council's early years SEND team, area SENCos, educational psychologists, and health professionals such as speech and language therapists.

Home learning support

Portage and similar home visiting services support young children with significant needs and help families prepare for nursery. See Section 11.

EHC needs assessment in the early years

If your child has complex needs that need more support than the setting can usually provide, an **Education, Health and Care (EHC) needs assessment** can be requested. Parents can request this themselves by writing to the council. The council must decide within 6 weeks whether to assess, and the whole process should take no more than 20 weeks. EHC plans | Contact

Your local SENDIASS can help for free.

NHS • all 3 boroughs

BHR Children's Autism Service (NELFT)

The NHS autism pathway for children with a GP in Barking & Dagenham, Havering or Redbridge, including support before and after diagnosis. Referrals come from GPs, health visitors, nurseries and other professionals.

Visit website ›

nelft.nhs.uk/bhr-childrens-autism-service

9 Common worries

You are not the only one

“My child is not toilet trained”

Settings should not refuse a place just because a child is not toilet trained. Agree a plan together. ERIC has advice for children with additional needs [Children with additional needs - ERIC]

“My child eats very few foods”

Tell staff about safe foods and sensory needs. Ask if you can send familiar food at first.

“My child does not talk yet”

Share how your child communicates. Staff can use pictures, signing and simple words. Ask a health professional to be referred to a speech and language therapist for advice.

“My child might have meltdowns”

Share triggers and what helps. Ask for a calm space and a consistent key person.

“My child won't sleep there”

Share your child's sleep routine and comforters. Rest can be flexible.

“I'm worried they won't cope”

Start small, review often, and ask for help early. It is fine to change plans if something is not working.

10 Looking after you

Big changes for parents too

Leaving your child for the first time can bring worry, guilt and relief all at once. These feelings are normal. Give yourself time to adjust and be kind to yourself.

Use the time your child is at nursery for rest, appointments or something for you, if you can.

Sycamore Trust UK can help

Our Family Services team supports families of autistic children with parent support groups, workshops, practical resources such as visual supports and social stories, and help with forms and EHC plans.

020 8517 9317 | Services & Support - Sycamore Trust

11 Local support

Organisation	How they can help	Website and contact
Childcare and Education (Local Offer)	Finding childcare and early education for under 5s with SEND.	B&D Local Offer – Childcare and education
Early Years Inclusion Team	Advice for nurseries and families of children with SEND aged 0–5, including help with EHC assessments and a SEND toy library.	B&D Local Offer – Early Years Inclusion Team
Portage and Inclusion Education Service	Home-based learning for children aged 0–4 with significant developmental delay, and help moving into nursery.	B&D Local Offer – Portage 020 8724 8550 | PortageOffice@lbbd.gov.uk
Family Hubs	Parenting advice, activities and support for families.	lbbd.gov.uk – Family Hubs
NELFT 0–5 services	Health visiting, speech and language therapy and other children's health services.	nelft.nhs.uk/services-barking-0-5 0300 555 1200
B&D SENDIASS	Free, impartial SEND advice for parents.	carerscentre.org.uk/iassinfo 020 8593 4422

Havering

Local support for families

Organisation	How they can help	Website and contact
Early Years, Childcare and Funding (Local Offer 0–5)	Finding childcare and information about funded hours.	Havering Local Offer – Early years and childcare
SEN Inclusion Funding and Disability Access Funding	How settings get extra funding to support children with SEND.	Havering Directory – SENIF and DAF
SEND Early Years Support Service	Specialist support for children aged 0–5 in nurseries, plus a parent advice clinic (Mondays and Fridays, 1pm–4pm).	Havering Directory – SEND EYSS 01708 434080
Havering Children's Centres	Free stay and play sessions and support for families with under 5s.	livewellhavering.org.uk – Children's Centres
NELFT 0–5 services	Health visiting and children's health services in Havering.	nelft.nhs.uk – Havering 0–5 0300 555 1200
Havering SENDIASS	Free, impartial SEND advice, including an early years guide.	haveringsendiass.co.uk – Early Years 01708 433885

Redbridge

Local support for families

Organisation	How they can help	Website and contact
Childcare and Early Years 0–4 (FiND)	Finding childcare and SEND support for young children.	Redbridge FiND – Childcare and Early Years
Funded hours for 2 year olds	Redbridge guidance on the 2-year-old entitlement.	Redbridge FiND – 2 year old guidance
SEND Early Years Inclusion Funding	Extra funding for settings to support children with SEND.	Redbridge FSD & Local Offer | Supporting children with SEND in early years settings
Pre-school Home Visiting Team	Home-based learning for young children with SEND, and help moving into nursery.	Redbridge FiND – PSHV Team
Children's Centres and SEN Hubs	Groups and support for families, with SEN Hubs at Cranbrook, Loxford and Orchard.	Redbridge FiND – Children's Centres
RIASS (Redbridge SENDIASS)	Free, impartial SEND advice, including early years.	RIASS – Early Years and SEND 020 8708 8922

12 National links and checklist

Trusted information and your to-do list

Organisation	How they can help	Website and contact
Best Start in Life	Official information on funded childcare and help with costs.	beststartinlife.gov.uk
National Autistic Society	Information about autism in young children, and starting nursery.	autism.org.uk
Speech and Language UK	Help with children's talking and understanding.	speechandlanguage.org.uk
ERIC	Advice on potty training children with additional needs.	eric.org.uk
Contact	Advice for families with disabled children, including DLA.	contact.org.uk 0808 808 3555
IPSEA	Free legal advice on SEND and EHC plans.	ipsea.org.uk

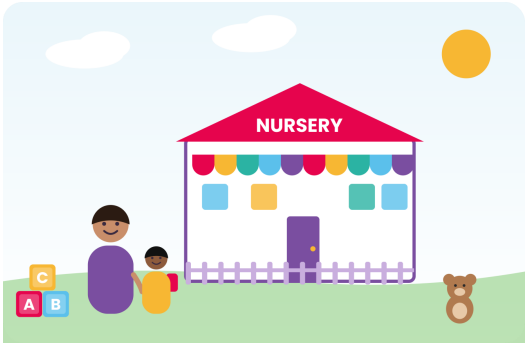
My nursery checklist

- ☐ Checked which funded hours I can get, and applied for a code if needed
- ☐ Visited settings and asked about SEND support
- ☐ Met the SENCo and key person
- ☐ Shared my child's 'All about me' and any reports
- ☐ Told the setting if my child gets DLA (for the Disability Access Fund)
- ☐ Made a photo book or social story
- ☐ Agreed a settling-in plan
- ☐ Packed a comfort item and labelled everything
- ☐ Booked a review meeting after the first few weeks

Thank you for reading

Sycamore Trust UK is a registered charity supporting autistic children, young people, adults and their families across Barking & Dagenham, Havering and Redbridge.

Call us	Visit us	Find us online
020 8517 9317	27–29 Woodward Road, Dagenham RM9 4SJ	Home - Sycamore Trust



Disclaimer

This guide gives **general information only**. It does not replace professional advice from a health visitor, doctor, early years professional, SENDIASS adviser or other qualified adviser, and should not be used to diagnose any condition.

Childcare funding rules, amounts and local services can change. Information was checked in **September 2026**, so please check the latest details with GOV.UK, your local council and each service directly.

Settings and organisations are included to help families find support and do not mean that Sycamore Trust UK recommends any particular provider. Links to external websites are provided for information. Sycamore Trust UK is not responsible for their content or availability and cannot accept responsibility for any loss or harm arising from the use of this guide.