Starting
Primary School

A transition guide for families of neurodivergent children

Applying, preparing and settling into Reception — with local support in Barking & Dagenham, Havering and Redbridge

Barking & Dagenham | Havering | Redbridge

Welcome

Getting ready for a big new chapter

Starting primary school is an exciting milestone, and it can also feel like a big change. If your child is autistic, has ADHD, speech and language needs, sensory differences, developmental delay or other additional needs — with or without a diagnosis — early planning can help them feel safe, understood and ready to learn.

This guide covers choosing a school, applying on time, EHC plans, preparing your child, the first weeks, and the support available in **Barking & Dagenham**, **Havering** and **Redbridge**. Every link can be clicked.

> **You know your child best**
>
> Share what you know with your child's new school early and often. Your child does not need a diagnosis to get support at school, and it is never too early to start planning.

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1 What changes in Reception

A bigger world for your child

Reception is the last year of the **Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)**, so there is still lots of learning through play. But school life brings new routines and bigger spaces that some neurodivergent children find hard.

Bigger class

Classes can have up to 30 children, usually with a teacher and a teaching assistant.

Bigger spaces

Busy playgrounds, a noisy dinner hall and whole-school assemblies.

New routines

Set times for learning, playtime, lunch and home time, and more sitting and listening.

Sensory demands

Bells, echoing halls, new smells, school uniform and food textures.

More independence

Taking off coats, using the toilet, opening lunch boxes and following instructions.

Friendships

Joining in play, taking turns and understanding unwritten social rules.

2 Choosing a school

Finding the right fit

Mainstream primary school

Most autistic and neurodivergent children go to their local mainstream school with support. Every school must have a SENCo.

School with resourced provision

Some mainstream schools have an **additionally resourced provision** (ARP) or unit, for example for autism or speech and language needs. Places are usually through an EHC plan.

Special school

For children with more complex needs. A place at a special school requires an EHC plan.

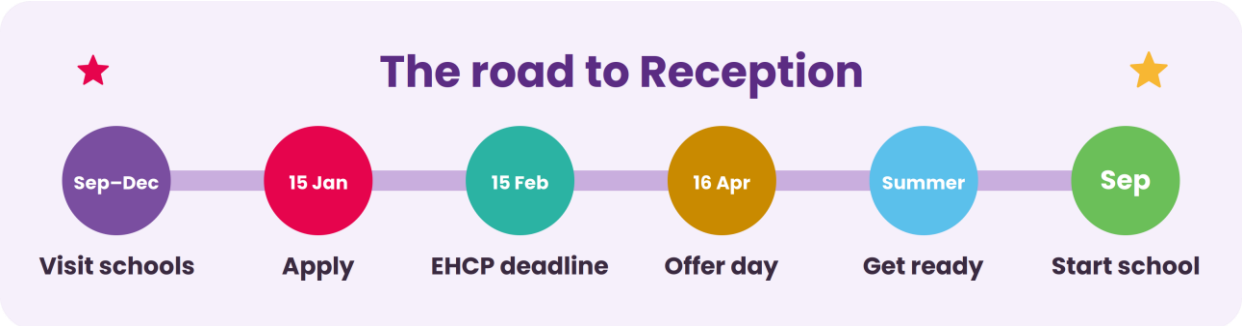
Questions to ask when you visit

- How do you support autistic and neurodivergent children in Reception?
- Who is the SENCo, and how can I contact them?
- Is there a quiet space for children who feel overwhelmed?
- Do you use visual timetables, symbols or signing?
- How do you manage lunchtime and playtime for children who find them hard?
- Can my child have extra visits, a social story or a phased start?
- How will you keep in touch with me day to day?
- Can you be flexible about uniform if my child has sensory needs?

Tip: visit without your child first so you can ask questions. Then visit again together at a quiet time, such as after school.

3 Key dates and applying

Do not miss the deadline



Apply by 15 January

Apply online through **eAdmissions** in the school year before your child starts Reception. You can list up to six schools. Late applications are given lower priority.

Offer day: 16 April

You will get your offer by email on National Offer Day. Accept it by the deadline in the email (usually two weeks).

Children with an EHC plan

The school is named in the EHC plan instead of through normal admissions. The council must finalise the plan naming the school by **15 February** of the year your child starts.

Universal free school meals

All children in Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 at state schools can have a free school lunch. If you get certain benefits, also apply for free school meals so the school gets extra funding.

GOV.UK – Free school meals

Starting later, or part-time

Children must be in education from the term after their fifth birthday. If your child is offered a Reception place, you can usually ask for them to **start later in the school year** or **attend part-time** until they reach compulsory school age.

Parents of **summer-born children** (born 1 April to 31 August) can ask for their child to start Reception at age 5, a year later than usual. The admission authority decides based on your child's needs, so apply at the normal time and ask the council how to make the request.

Find out more: GOV.UK – Summer-born children

4 SEN support and EHC plans

Getting the right help at school

SEN Support

Schools must use their best endeavours to meet children's special educational needs. They work with you using a cycle of **Assess, Plan, Do, Review**. **A diagnosis is not needed.**

Reasonable adjustments

Under the Equality Act 2010, schools must make reasonable adjustments for disabled children, including many autistic children, so they are not at a disadvantage.

EHC needs assessment

If your child needs more help than the school can usually give, parents can ask the council for an **EHC needs assessment**. The council must decide within 6 weeks whether to assess, and the whole process should take no more than 20 weeks.

Tell the school early

Share reports, your child's nursery records and any professionals involved. Ask the nursery and school to talk to each other before your child starts.

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 can come from GPs, health visitors, nurseries and schools.

Visit website ›

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

5 Your transition timeline

What to do and when

1
Sep–Dec

Autumn term (year before)

- Visit schools, go to open days, and talk to the SENCo.
- If your child has an EHC plan, tell the council which schools you would like, and ask for an early annual review.
- Apply online through eAdmissions (applications usually open in the autumn).

2
Jan–Apr

Spring term

- **15 January:** closing date for applications.
- **15 February:** deadline for EHC plans to name the school.
- **16 April:** National Offer Day. Accept your place.
- Contact the new school's SENCo as soon as the place is confirmed.

3
May–Jul

Summer term

- Go to transition meetings with nursery and school staff. Ask for a meeting to plan support.
- Arrange extra visits, and ask for photos of the classroom, toilets, playground and teachers.
- Share your child's 'All about me' (Section 8). Many teachers make home visits in the summer or September.
- Ask for a 'starting school' social story or create one yourself.
- Ask about the school's plan for a phased start.
- Apply for home to school transport if eligible, before 31st July-Check out your councils' **local offer** website for further information.

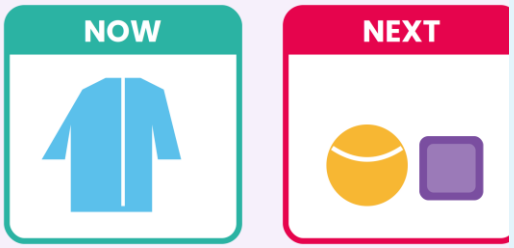
4
Aug–Sep

Summer holidays and September

- Look at the social story together and practise the journey.
- Try on uniform and shoes and practise with the lunch box and water bottle.
- Keep a gentle routine and move bedtime earlier before term starts.
- Arrange a check-in with the teacher after the first few weeks.

6 Preparing your child

Making school feel familiar



Use visuals

A **Now and Next** board, a visual timetable of the school day and a social story of the school help many children understand what will happen and feel less anxious. An example can be found on our website Home - Sycamore Trust

School social story

Photos of the gate, classroom, coat peg, toilets, dinner hall, playground and teacher. Read it often.

Uniform and shoes

Wash new uniform several times to soften it. Practise dressing and ask about sensory-friendly options.

Lunchtime

Practise opening boxes and packets. Ask if your child can eat somewhere quieter or have a familiar packed lunch.

Toilet

Practise using different toilets, flushing and washing hands. Agree a plan with school if your child needs help.

Stories and play

Read books about starting school and play schools at home with toys.

Comfort from home

A small comfort item or family photo in the book bag can help at first.

7 The first weeks

Settling in at your child's pace

Phased start

Many schools start Reception children gradually, with short days at first. Ask if your child can have a longer phased start if they need it.

Saying goodbye

- Keep goodbyes short, calm and the same each day
- Never sneak away
- Say who will collect them and when

Keep talking

- Agree how the teacher will share news: a home-school book, app or quick chat
- Share how your child is at home too

After school

Many children hold it together at school and let their feelings out at home. Offer a snack, quiet time and a favourite activity before asking questions.

Signs your child may be struggling

- Changes in sleep, eating or toileting
- More meltdowns, shutdowns or clinginess
- Tummy aches or not wanting to go to school

Tell the teacher or SENDCo what you notice. Raise concerns early and ask for a meeting after the first half term. If your child is becoming very anxious about going to school, ask for support straight away.

8 All about me and adjustments

Help school get to know your child

My name is… and I love…

How I communicate

Things I find hard

What helps me feel calm

Signs I am worried or overwhelmed

Toileting, eating and medical needs

Adjustments you could ask for

- A visual timetable and warning before changes
- A named adult your child can go to
- A quiet space or calm corner, and movement breaks
- Arriving a little earlier or later to avoid busy crowds
- A quieter place to eat lunch, or support at playtime
- Flexibility with uniform for sensory needs
- Ear defenders or fidget tools

9 Common worries

You are not the only one

"My child is not toilet trained"

Schools should not refuse a place for this reason. Agree a plan with the school and see ERIC's advice Potty training children with additional needs - ERIC.

"My child won't eat school food"

Ask about packed lunches, a quieter space and time to eat. Share safe foods with staff.

"Playtime will be too much"

Ask about lunchtime clubs, quiet areas or a buddy system.

"My child masks at school"

Share what you see at home. School may not see the struggle, so written examples help.

"My child can't sit still"

Ask for movement breaks, wobble cushions, jobs to do and short tasks.

"I worry they will be excluded"

Ask for support to be put in place early. Contact SENDIASS for free advice if things go wrong.

10 Looking after you

Big changes for parents too

Watching your child start school can bring pride, worry and sadness all at once. These feelings are normal. Connect with other parents, take breaks where you can, and be kind to yourself.

Keep a folder of reports, letters and emails. It will make meetings easier and help you feel more in control.

Sycamore Trust UK can help

Our Family Services team supports families of autistic children with parent support groups, workshops, visual supports and social stories, and help with EHC plans and school meetings.

020 8517 9317 | Home - Sycamore Trust

11 Local support

Organisation	How they can help	Website and contact
School admissions: starting school	How to apply for a Reception place.	lbbd.gov.uk – Starting school 020 8215 3004
Schools and ARPs (Local Offer)	Primary schools with resourced provision, and special schools.	B&D Local Offer – Schools
EHC team	EHC plans, assessments and school placements.	B&D Local Offer – EHC plans 020 8227 2400 | ehcenquiries@lbbd.gov.uk
Early Years Inclusion Team / Portage	Support for children with SEND aged 0–5, including the move into school.	B&D Local Offer – Early Years Inclusion
B&D SENDIASS	Free, impartial SEND advice for parents.	carerscentre.org.uk/iassinfo 020 8593 4422
JUST SAY Parent Carer Forum	Meet other parents and have your say.	justsayforum.online

Primary provision	Examples (check the Local Offer for the latest list)
Primary ARPs for autism or social communication	George Carey, Manor, Monteagle, John Perry, Becontree, Rose Lane, Eastbrook, Grafton, Valence, Thomas Arnold, Parsloes
Other primary ARPs	Speech and language: Hunters Hall. Complex learning needs: Richard Alibon, Ripple, St Peter's RC, Dorothy Barley Junior. SEMH: Ripple (Acorns), James Cambell. Deaf: Five Elms, Eastbury
Special schools taking Reception-age children	Riverside Bridge (4–19) Trinity (3–19) Oxlow Bridge (3–19)

Havering

Local support for families

Organisation	How they can help	Website and contact
School admissions: primary	Apply for a Reception place.	havering.gov.uk – Apply for a primary place
Schools with SEND units or ARPs	Havering's list of schools with resourced provision.	Havering Directory – SEND units and ARPs
EHCP information	Education, health and care plans in Havering.	Havering Directory – EHCPs
SEND Early Years Support Service	Support for children aged 0–5, including the move into school, and a parent advice clinic.	Havering Directory – SEND EYSS 01708 434080
Havering SENDIASS	Free, impartial SEND advice for parents.	haveringsendiass.co.uk 01708 433885
Havering SEND Family Voice	Havering's parent carer forum.	Havering SEND Family Voice

Primary provision	Examples (check the directory for the latest list)
Primary SEND units (autism / speech and language)	Clockhouse, Mead, Nelmes, R J Mitchell, St Edward's C of E. Hearing support: Hacton
Special schools taking Reception-age children	Corbets Tey (4–19) Lime Academy Forest Approach (2–19) Lime Academy Ravensbourne (2–19)

Redbridge

Local support for families

Organisation	How they can help	Website and contact
School admissions: primary	Apply to start primary school.	redbridge.gov.uk – Apply to start primary school
School places for children with SEND	Special schools and ARPs in Redbridge, and a link to contact the SEN team.	redbridge.gov.uk – SEND school places
Early years SEND services	SEND Early Years Panel, Pre-school Home Visiting and Early Years Advisory Service.	RIASS – Early Years and SEND
RIASS (Redbridge SENDIASS)	Free, impartial SEND advice for parents.	redbridgeiass.org.uk 020 8708 8922
Empowering Parents Together (EPT)	Redbridge's parent carer forum.	EPT on Redbridge FiND

Primary provision	Examples (check the council's list for the latest)
Primary ARPs	Cranbrook, Mayespark, Redbridge Primary, Roding
Special schools taking Reception-age children	Hatton (3–11) Hatchside (2–11), Newbridge (2–19), New Rush Hall (5–16, SEMH)

12 National links and checklist

Trusted information and your to-do list

Organisation	How they can help	Website and contact
National Autistic Society	Information about starting school and education rights.	autism.org.uk
IPSEA	Free legal advice on SEN support and EHC plans.	ipsea.org.uk
Contact	Advice for families with disabled children.	contact.org.uk 0808 808 3555
Speech and Language UK	Help with children's talking and understanding.	speechandlanguage.org.uk
ERIC	Toileting advice for children with additional needs.	eric.org.uk

My starting school checklist

- ☐ Visited schools and met the SENCo
- ☐ Applied by 15 January (or asked for the school to be named in the EHC plan)
- ☐ Accepted the offer after 16 April
- ☐ Shared reports and my child's 'All about me' with the school
- ☐ Arranged extra visits and a photo book
- ☐ Agreed support and a phased start plan
- ☐ Practised uniform, lunch box and toilets
- ☐ Booked a check-in after the first few weeks
- ☐ Applied for home to school transport if eligible

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 or legal advice from a SENDIASS adviser, school, health professional, solicitor or other qualified adviser, and should not be used to diagnose any condition.

Admission dates, rules and local services can change from year to year. Information was checked in **September 2026**, so please check the latest details with your local council, the school and each service directly.

Schools and organisations are included to help families explore their options and do not mean that Sycamore Trust UK recommends any particular school or 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.