

AN IMP GOES TO SCHOOL

Many parents of Imps are naturally anxious about the situation their child will face when the time comes to go to school. Playgroup is a good start but how will he or she manage in the more formal environment? Can and will the local schools co-operate or will it be necessary for the child to go to a special school? We can only speak from our own experience with our own local authority but a few thoughts and details may perhaps be of assistance to those approaching this decision.

The first and most important thing is that there is no reason why an Imp should not go to the ordinary local school in the usual way. The Education Act 1981 is the over-riding legislation and it obliges the local education authority to make arrangements so that children with 'special educational needs' can be educated in ordinary schools. So our children are entitled to go to school in the ordinary way and it is not necessary to feel inhibited about it. Of course, the extent of the individual handicap varies and in the case of each child may or may not be accompanied by other difficulties which may make special schooling more appropriate but if you want your child to attend an ordinary school and think that were it not for being an Imp he or she could cope with it then don't be put off.

The way it worked out for us was that the local education authority allocated a special welfare assistant to the school which Toby (now 6) now attends. She is there to help him change the pad he wears and his underwear when necessary. The staff know about his difficulty and he just goes out as necessary thus reducing any possible embarrassment and comments from other children about smells, etc. Much will depend on the extent of the child's problem and on how the child is equipped and organised before reaching school age but one imagines that various arrangements could be made by the authority as necessary.

What exactly is necessary for the local education authority to provide will be decided by the authority and yourselves going through the various steps laid down by the Act. This brings me to some other points. I would recommend a parent going into this procedure to get a copy of the Act or at least access to it - maybe at the library. It helps to know what the official letters you receive are referring to and can prevent misunderstandings. Sometimes there is a tendency for local government officers just to quote chunks of the Act without acknowledging

this and in one letter we had there was reference to liability for a fine if a notice was not complied with under the Act. It was not something that really applied to our situation but it was in the Act so it was quoted to us - it was a relief to us to know that it was just a formality which, without the Act to hand, we would not have realised.

The next thing is that the procedure can be complicated, although not necessarily so, and, like all matters to do with local government, takes a long time. From start to finish ourstook about 15 months and we had no real complications although, to be fair, ours was the first case the authority had dealt with under the Act so they were as new to it as we were. Our advice, therefore, is to start things in motion well in advance of the time you want your child to start school.

What we did was to approach the Head of the school we selected. His position was that he was happy to have Toby in the school but not without a special welfare assistant - note here, most primary schools have welfare assistants but their duties would not cover Toby's situation and what was required was a special welfare assistant. We then approached the education officer and it was in that way that the 1981 Education Act procedure began.

That procedure is by way of 'assessment' of the child and for this purpose interviews with various experts may be held. Even though we had all the necessary information from Queen Elizabeth Hospital and the Donald Minnicott Centre and provided it to the authority they still insisted on doing their own assessment as well but it was quite simple and straightforward, although time-consuming attending interviews and receiving visits, etc. It is also worth noting, and it will be pointed out, that at each stage the parents are consulted and given the opportunity to comment and, if necessary, appeal against the conclusions or decisions, etc.

At the end of the procedure the authority issues a statement setting out the conclusions and, if there are special needs, what it is going to do to enable those needs to be met. In our case that Toby did need help with toileting, that he should go to an ordinary school and therefore a special welfare assistant would be provided and some special equipment to dispose of the soiled pads, etc. That statement

may be reviewed annually but we have had no further enquiries.
Also the statement is maintained by the authority and is transferable
from one area to another if you move.

That is our experience and we are delighted with the way everything
has worked out. We found the officials very helpful but very cautious
and slow but, naturally, much will depend on the personalities
involved. Once again, don't forget that our children don't have to
be segregated and, with patience and determination, the difficulties
can be overcome.

Jean & Tony Fagg
Nov 85