

## SPAIN – MADRID – children with SEN at schools

Links:

<https://www.stepsintospain.es/special-educational-needs/?cn-reloaded=1>

<https://www.stepsintospain.es/school-options-for-children-with-asd-in-spain/>

Children with SEN (Special Educational Needs) can be described as children whose learning difficulties hinder their ability to benefit from the general education system without support or accommodation to their needs.

SEN can affect a child or young person's ability to learn. For example, someone's SEN might affect their:

- reading and writing, for example because they have dyslexia
- ability to understand things
- behaviour or ability to socialise, for example they struggle to make friends
- concentration levels, for example because they have ADHD
- physical ability to do things such as writing.

Special educational provision is any educational or training provision that is additional to, or different from, that made generally for other children or young people of the same age. This is a wide definition, and could cover a wide range of things, for example:

- having materials provided in a larger font
- needing one-to-one support
- communicating through sign language
- needing small class sizes

In Spain if a pupil has been assessed and been found to be in need of assistance, the child and parent may be sent to a Center for Special Needs ([\*Centro de Valoración y Orientación de Discapacitados\*](#)). At the centre, the child undergoes a variety of tests with a doctor and a social worker to determine the child's level of need. Once the tests are complete, the professionals evaluate the child and discuss results with the parent.

[Educational laws in Spain](#) state that SEN should be fully integrated into mainstream schools where possible. The Spanish government requires public and concertado schools to attempt to educate students with SEN within mainstream schools if the facilities exist and schools are awarded grants if they have integration teachers (PT-Special Needs Teacher), speech therapists (*Logopedia*) and other specialists on the staff. Children with SEN (intellectual, physical or social) are not segregated into special classes, they are part of mainstream classrooms. Depending on the severity of their educational need they might follow a different or adapted curriculum or the mainstream one with support from a dedicated specialised teacher. However, finding a bilingual or international school in Madrid that offers SEN at more demanding levels is much more complex.

If inclusion is managed successfully there are lots of benefits for SEN students:

- Greater access to the mainstream curriculum
- Increased social opportunities
- Increased skill acquisition opportunities
- Improved reading levels

All students grow when schools include students with SEN in a mainstream environment. A mixture of mainstream and students with SEN in a school teaches all pupils to be mindful of the needs and requirements of those around them, and allows for all pupils to make friends with children with a range of abilities and needs and from a variety of backgrounds.

SEN inclusion works well when staff are well-trained in the specific needs of the students they are to teach. This often involves working with parents, who know their children best, as well as outside agencies who can help assess student need and devise plans to help meet this. Where inclusion has not been as successful, it has often been down to a lack of training for teaching staff, who have usually had little in the way of specific SEN input during their teacher training.

There can be a tendency amongst some school staff to view inclusion as meaning that all students should be treated equally. This clearly fails to recognise that students with SEN will need adjustments for their specific needs, in order to have equality of opportunity. The issue is, though, how do you 'get it right' if you have little opportunity for training? Proper training requires more investment.

In Madrid there exists a (very) small number of schools that offer a personalized style of education in smaller classes allowing the teacher to provide the level of support needed for children with SEN or disabilities.

The bad news is there are very few schools who offer this level of support which I know from first hand experience. Whilst in theory almost all international schools describe their school as inclusive, in practice it is not like that.

## CHILD WITH ASD

As a parent of a child with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) known as *Trastornos del Espectro Autista* (TEA) in Spanish, one of the most important decisions you'll make is choosing the right school for your child. Navigating the different school options for children with ASD in Spain can be especially daunting if you are a foreigner in Spain, as the education and support system may be different from what you are used to.

Firstly, it is important to know that the Spanish Constitution of 1978 established that the national government as well as the autonomous communities have a role in decision making in education system in each region. For families moving to Spain this means that education is slightly different depending on the specific area and what applies to one area will not apply to another. '[Confederación Autismo España](#)' is a national federation of autism associations in Spain that aims to promote and defend the rights of people with autism and their families and is a good starting point for families of children with autism moving to Spain.

They reply promptly and will share contact details of the autism support group in your specific region in Spain.

Public schools in Spain are required by law to provide inclusive education for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) including autism. This means that public schools are obligated to provide support services and reasonable accommodations to help students with autism access the curriculum and participate in school activities. Public schools may also have specialized professionals on staff, such as psychologists or special education teachers, who can work with students with autism to help them succeed. Although not always required as it depends on type of education centre / level of support, it is best to have any medical diagnosis translated into Spanish and ready if required. Any paediatrician in Spain should be able to assist with this matter.

For families of children with ASD moving to Madrid and seeking to enrol their child in public schools, there are three main options:

1. *Centro Ordinario con Apoyo* (Mainstream education with support)

This schooling option responds to those students with ASD who can progress in their learning and integration through a normalised model and are offered, like other students with SEN specialized resources specific to each educational centre.

2. *Centros ordinarios de [Atención Preferente](#)* (Mainstream Education with specialized support)

This option allows for the possibility of providing extensive and specialised support to certain students with ASD within a regular ambit. This option requires the involvement of all personnel at the centre:

- The centre's management team in aspects such as the provision of necessary space or the organization of coordination times.
- The group of teachers in aspects such as adequate training on this topic and the organization and programming of the general activity of the centre.
- The tutors of the different levels in which the students with ASD are enrolled.

Additional specialised resources are assigned to each *centro preferente*:

- *Pedagogía Terapéutica (PT) y Audición y Lenguaje (AL)* – Special Education teacher and/or Speech and Language therapist.
- *Integrador Social* – Specialized Technician or a Social Integrator.
- *Equipo de Orientación Educativa y Psicopedagógica (EOEP)* – Educational and Psychopedagogical Guidance Team of the neighbourhood.
- Specific EOEP for Severe Developmental Disorders, especially in the implementation of this programme in each centre and its subsequent monitoring.

These students split their day between the support classroom (known as *aula TEA*) and a regular reference classroom or group. The distribution of the time spent in both spaces is

defined for each student based on their needs, with the objective always being to achieve maximum participation in the reference classroom.

The '*aula TEA*' has a maximum of five students in the classroom making it quite hard for families to access this option and waiting lists tend to be long. Some schools have two or three aulas TEA but unfortunately most have just one.

Families wishing to enrol their child in either of these school options should apply in the regular application process which usually takes place in April. For families who miss these dates the late application process (*el proceso extraordinario*) opens in July and then again in September. Your child will have priority in a '*centro de preferente*' but if only if there are places available.

### 3. *Escolarización en Educación Especial* (Special Education Schooling)

This option is for students with ASD who are schooled in Special Education Centers who require generalized support in all areas of their development throughout the school day. Like other students with SEN who are schooled in these centres, they receive very individualised attention from the different professionals on staff. Although these centres admit students with different types of SEN, it is common for students with ASD to be grouped into one or more units based on their needs and age, in order to provide them with more specific attention. In the Community of Madrid, there are currently public Special Education schools as well as Special Education centers that are privately funded (Concertado) but have a specialized focus on the education of students with ASD. You can find more information about special educational schooling in Madrid on the [Comunidad de Madrid website](#).

Private schools in Spain, on the other hand, may offer smaller class sizes and more individualised attention compared to public schools. Private schools may also have more resources available to provide specialized services and programmes for students with autism. However, private schools are not subject to the same legal requirements as public schools when it comes to providing inclusive education for children with SEN. Some private schools may be more selective in their admissions process and may not have the resources or expertise to support students with autism. And many others unfortunately cannot be bothered.

From my own professional experience with families, it can be a real struggle to find the right school for a child with ASD. There simply are not enough resources available. Public schools have long waiting lists and many private schools, especially international schools are not willing to support students with SEN. There is still huge room for improvement in terms of accessibility and availability of services, particularly in certain regions or communities within Spain.

Some statistics from '[Autismo España](#)' clearly show how much work still needs to be done in education. In Spain students with ASD currently represent 25% of the students with specific needs for educational support in compulsory education. The lack of specific support has consequences that negatively affect the emotional well-being and quality of life of students with ASD:

- They are highly vulnerable to being victims of bullying (with figures ranging from 46.3% to 82% of students with ASD suffering from bullying at school).
- They are one of the groups with the highest rates of academic failure and dropout.
- They have fewer opportunities to pursue post-compulsory studies compared to other students with developmental conditions such as language disorders or learning difficulties.
- They often obtain academic qualifications that are below their potential and abilities, both in vocational training and higher education.
- They drop out of university studies at a higher proportion than the rest of the student body.

However there has been an increase in awareness of autism in Spain in recent years, and as a result, there has been a greater emphasis on providing support and services for individuals with autism and their families. There are several groups for families with kids with autism in Spain. These groups provide support, information, and resources for families and caregivers of individuals with autism. Some of these groups include:

- [Confederación Autismo España](#) (previously mentioned).
- [Federación Autismo Madrid](#): This is a federation of associations in Madrid that provides support and resources to families with children with autism. They have prepared a helpful and comprehensive guide (in Spanish) for families of children with ASD which is available [here](#).
- [Asociación Asperger Madrid](#): This is a Madrid-based association that provides support and resources for individuals with Asperger syndrome and their families.
- [Asociación de Padres de Personas con Autismo](#) (APNA): This is an association of parents of individuals with autism in Madrid that works to promote awareness, understanding, and support for families with children with autism.
- [Fundación Autismo Diario](#): This is a non-profit organization that provides information, resources, and support to families and caregivers of individuals with autism.

In conclusion, choosing the right school for a child with autism in Spain requires careful consideration of several important factors, including support services, teaching methodologies, accessibility, location, and inclusion. Take your time, do your research, and trust your instincts when making this important decision. With the right school and support, your child can thrive and succeed in their education in Spain.