

THE ELEMENTARY YEARS (K-6)

Choose your child's school with CONFIDENCE



religious? magnet?

home?



Which School?

public?

private?

charter?







Step Two: Chapter 4 How Does Your Child Learn Best?

This downloadable PDF is an excerpt from:

Picky Parent Guide: Choose Your Child's School with CONFIDENCE

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LIGHT'NING LIST

What To Know from Chapter 4

➤ **Fit Factor #2 is How Your Child Learns:** these are things about your child that indicate how a school should teach and interact with your child.

> The six child characteristics for Fit Factor #2 are:

- ✓ Learning Styles = strengths and preferences your child has for using the senses particularly sight, hearing/talking, and touch/movement to absorb new information and act in a learning environment.
- ✓ *Motivation* = your child's internal drive to learn and perform academically.
- ✔ Physical or Mental Health Challenges = special challenges your child may face because of physical barriers or serious or recurrent mental illness.
- ✓ Behavior Challenges = behavior control problems that affect your own child's or other children's learning.
- ✓ Learning Disabilities and Disorders = problems your child may have with important parts of physical or mental functioning. These often reveal themselves through great imbalances: between your child's potential and actual achievement or between seemingly related capabilities (e.g., spoken and written language).
- ✓ *Self-Understanding* = your child's *understanding* of his own strengths, weaknesses, interests, needs and wants and the *self-control* to make decisions accordingly.
- ➤ You can identify Fit Factor # 2 characteristics most important for your child by (1) Observing (2) Comparing (3) Testing and (4) Getting Smart. Start with the tools listed in Snap To It at the end of the chapter.
- ➤ Remember, your goal is to identify the few most important characteristics of your child to match with schools for a Great Fit.
 - ✓ Learning Styles; Motivation; Physical or Mental Health Challenges; Behavior Challenges; and Learning Disabilities and Disorders will be Must Haves for some children.
 - ✓ Self-Understanding will be a Must Have for a limited number of children.

Chapter 4

Child Fit Factor #2:

How Does *Your* Child Learn Best?

Jeff, a chatterbox from an early age, tuned out for academics and was constantly in trouble for disturbing others in his school, which focused almost exclusively on individual work. A switch to a school where much work is done in pairs and small groups, both with and without teachers, turned him into an academic and social star.

Maddy is bright but not interested in things academic unless a caring adult spends quiet time with her each day. Her perceptive parents noticed this about her and jumped through financial hoops to send her to a small school with very small classes and daily one-on-one teacher interaction. Highly motivated by these personal relationships with her teachers, she now writes short stories with astonishing insights about feelings and relationships.

Phillip suffered a spinal injury in a car wreck as a second grader, losing the use of both legs. Working in careful coordination with his school principal and teachers, his parents have ensured that Phillip participates in every aspect of school life, including physical education. His teachers keep a close eye on his mental health, as well, and help Phillip focus on his areas of talent and interest. Through their parent support group, his parents know of several similarly disabled children who have become isolated and depressed at school. Not Phillip!

Early in first grade, Karen's teachers became concerned about her slow reading progress, since she seemed to be fine in other subjects. Testing revealed a form of dyslexia. Her current school had few resources to address the problem, and Karen's parents did not want to take large quantities of Karen's time outside of school. But they were torn about switching schools, since Karen's older and younger siblings attended the same one. They sought and found a school with an intensive program for helping young learners understand, address and in some cases overcome dyslexia. Karen reentered her former school in third grade and now reads slightly above grade level, in line with her performance in other subjects. Karen is proud of her progress and sees herself as an I-can-do-anything kid.

Kids Learn in Different Ways

Your child's distinct combination of qualities also will factor into *how* she learns. Think of the children who lock onto learning only when they can busily work with their hands: how easily they get into trouble for not paying attention in more traditional "look and listen" schools, and how they flourish in hands-on "touch and do" schools. Think of the bright child who is just not motivated in school – unless he has some one-on-one time with the teacher. Think of the child who is the "model student" – *unless* the classroom is too noisy or disorderly. Think of the child who couldn't read until his dyslexia was diagnosed and his teachers deployed appropriate teaching techniques. Or the many other sometimes "fuzzy" characteristics that make a child learn and perform better and with more enjoyment in some settings than others.

Many parents with whom we have worked initially referred to these "how" learning factors as their "gut" concerns or "intuition" about their children. They knew there was something a little different, extreme, or special about their children, but couldn't always put it into words. Sometimes it only hit them when they went to visit the school they'd assumed their child would attend – a family or neighborhood favorite. They'd come away with their "gut" screaming and head spinning: something about the school didn't fit, but it was "just a feeling."

Quite often this unsettled feeling is born of a parent's mind trying unsuccessfully to see how her child would fit into a school. These things about our children that are hardest to put into words often fall into the How Your Child Learns category. The ones that we specifically address here from your *child's* perspective include:

- ➤ Learning Styles
- ➤ Motivation (to learn and perform in school)
- ➤ Physical or Mental Health Challenges

If you have a gut feeling that a school does not fit your child, listen to your intuition and try to figure out why.

- ➤ Behavior Challenges
- ➤ Learning Disabilities and Disorders
- > Self-Understanding

These things affect how a school ought to teach and interact with your child, both in and out of the classroom. If your child has a strong need in one of these areas, you will be well-served to hunt for a school that fits from the start.

Learning Styles

Annie attended a school where children were encouraged to follow their own interests to engage in hands-on learning activities. A bright child who had been developmentally advanced most of her preschool years, Annie would surely benefit from the self-pacing of this elementary school, her parents thought. But Annie was a very strong "visual" learner, an average "auditory" learner and a very weak "hands-on" learner. She spent most of her school time standing around and watching other students do their work. She was disengaged from school work and became socially detached, as well. Her irritated teachers began to wonder, "What's wrong with Annie?" The answer: a very poor school fit. Annie's parents switched her to a traditional "look and listen" school where the average student was bright – so that the group learning pace was just right for her – and where learning activities were geared to watching and listening. Annie happily engaged in school activities, and her teachers think she's "just great."

Carl's mother still frets that her son attended a fairly traditional elementary school for far too long. Her son was constantly engrossed in planning and building complex structures of various kinds — with blocks, paper clips or whatever materials were available to him. His designs and buildings were feats of wonder. But because he was so exceptionally engaged in his own work, he was constantly in trouble for not listening and following directions. This mother finally realized that her child required a more open setting in which he could learn through individual projects of his own choosing. Fortunately, there was a public magnet school in the city with a self-paced teaching method and plenty of hands-on learning. It was a perfect fit, and her son flourished. Today, she believes that the years of being the one "in trouble" hurt his self-image. His talents and temperament are highly valued in many jobs, including the engineering path he has chosen. But it took a change of schools for him to feel valued at school and to have time at school to learn the way he learned best.

Learning Styles: What They Are, Why They're Important

Children, and adults, learn in many ways. We use different parts of the brain – and the body it controls – to absorb, make sense of and act in the world. We all learn by observing others and the things around us, by listening and discussing, by jumping in and doing something with our hands or bodies. Most of our brains are not equally developed throughout. Some parts of our brains are stronger and more active than others, leading us to find learning and acting in certain ways more engaging and enjoyable than doing so in other ways. Learning styles are simply our preferred ways of learning new things, depending on which of our senses – particularly sight, hearing/speech and touch/movement – we find most natural and engaging to use.

How many of you:

- ➤ Can't remember something you've heard unless you write it down?
- ➤ Can't remember something you've read unless you talk about it?
- ➤ Can't connect with an idea unless you have a model that you can make or touch with your hands, or unless you can dramatize it with your body?
- ➤ Learn and perform your work well unless it is too noisy?
- ➤ Get bored unless you are in a room with lots of color and things on the walls?
- Never could memorize poems, but learned all the words to your favorite songs?

If any of these fit you, then you most likely have one or more very strong learning styles (and perhaps weaker other ones). You can imagine, then, how powerful a good school match can be for a child with extreme learning style strengths and weaknesses. While there is little evidence yet that a learning style match will improve your child's long-term academic achievement, we all know that life is not just about the destination, but also the joy of the journey. Your child will love the learning more when teaching matches your child's learning style strengths. Those of you who faced extreme mismatches – or perfect fits – as children know exactly what we are talking about.

So we ask all of you to step into your children's shoes for a moment and see school through their eyes. If your child has big strengths or weaknesses in learning styles, a good match with your child's styles is a powerful tool for creating a love affair between your child and school.

Life is not just about the destination, but also the joy of the journey. A learning style match can greatly influence whether your child loves

school or not.

Categories

The three long-recognized learning styles include these:

1. *Visual:* Child learns best by seeing things written or in pictures and may use written or drawn "props" to reinforce own learning. Child is stimulated and engaged when surroundings are visually interesting. Child may be easily bothered by disorder, clutter, lack of neatness, and changes in location.

- 2. *Auditory:* Child learns best by listening, talking, and discussing. Child is stimulated by sounds, including voices, and will usually talk or make noise to fill a silence. Child may be easily bothered by loud or disorganized noises.
- 3. *Kinesthetic/Tactile:* Child learns best by moving body ("large motor skills" or "kinesthetic" learning) and/or working with hands ("fine motor skills" or "tactile" learning). Child is stimulated by physical activity, moving while working (kinesthetic) and hands-on projects (tactile). Child likes, and is able, to do detailed work with hands (tactile), such as handwriting, drawing and building with small parts. Child may be bothered by sitting still for long periods without using body or hands.

Your tasks are first to identify your child's preferred learning styles and then to note if your child has either:

- ✓ extreme strengths or
- ✓ extreme weaknesses.

When is This a Priority for Your School Hunt?

Your child's learning style(s) may be a Must Have – you really must meet your child's need at school or elsewhere – if:

1. Your child is very strong in one style only (and weak in other two) or Your child is very weak in one style

And

Your child has trouble learning, is not interested in school, or is easily upset when the teaching method and classroom environment do not match her style strengths.

Take note: most children won't meet this fairly stringent test. For one or more learning styles to be a Must Have, your child must have *extreme* strengths or weaknesses *and* face big learning challenges as a result. If your child falls in the more typical range of learning styles, you can set this aside in your school hunt.

Many great quality schools (and great quality teachers in other schools) will recognize each child's learning style strengths and weaknesses and will encourage three paths: building the strengths, developing the weaknesses, and learning to use the strengths to help the weaknesses. Some schools even make it part of their mission and curriculum to do just this (an effort that may be unnecessary for a child who already has balanced learning styles).

But more often, individual schools are geared toward one or two styles. If this is the case, then you'll want to make sure your child's extreme strengths (if any)

are valued in your child's school. Building on your child's strength can help your child feel more confident and successful in school. Moreover, you will want to avoid a school that uses a teaching method geared solely toward your child's extreme weakness (if any). Your child *may* learn as much content, but probably won't enjoy the learning.

You may want a school both to build on your child's style strengths and improve his weaker learning styles. If so, look for one that uses a variety of approaches to teaching and learning – looking, listening, hands-on activity and body movement. You'll want to take into account what materials and activities you can offer your child outside of school, both for building and enjoying strengths and developing weaknesses. The more you offer outside of school, the less important a perfect learning style match becomes.

Identifying Your Child's Need

Many parents will be able to pinpoint extreme strengths and weaknesses just from their children's behavior. But if you are not sure, or you're about to bank your entire school pick on this matter, consider having your child tested.

Identification strategies include:

- ➤ Have a straightforward learning style assessment conducted by a professional tester. The expected results vary by age, but a qualified tester will be able to explain the specifics of your child's test to you.
- ➤ Ask your child's school, preschool or day care teachers how your child compares to other children of same age whom they have observed. You may want to ask specific questions about your child's behavior from the lists below.
- ➤ Observe and compare your child's activity to that of similar-age children. In what kinds of activities does your child choose to engage, and what does your child resist doing? How does your child's skill level appear compared to same age children?
- ➤ Use the behavior indicators below. These describe learning style strengths. Weaknesses are opposites of these. For more, see the Learning Style section of our *Know Your Child's Needs* table, which starts on page 368.

Visual Learners:

- Like to see things written down or in a picture:
 - ✓ Remember what they see well
 - ✓ Want to see and show others timelines, illustrations, charts, diagrams
 - Learning aided by copying and organizing notes for own visual reinforcement

- ➤ Very attuned to physical environment desk or table arrangement, things on walls, how things look:
 - ✓ Bored by lack of things on walls
 - ✓ Excited by stimulating, but neatly organized, physical environment
 - Overstimulated and bothered (may become upset) if materials and equipment are disorganized
 - ✓ Have trouble focusing without own workspace that child can organize neatly own desk or assigned place at table
 - ✓ May have difficulty with changes involving new physical surroundings

Auditory Learners:

- Like to talk:
 - ✓ Remember what they say well
 - ✓ Want to discuss and talk through what they have heard, what they are thinking
 - ✓ Thrive on discussion
 - ✓ Like to read out loud
 - ✓ Will repeat ideas and words aloud when they are trying to remember
 - ✓ Will assume you remember what they've told you (because they will)
 - ✓ Silence rare they are bored by silence and will interrupt it with talk
 - Difficulty working quietly at desk for a long time need to talk to selves or others
- > Stimulated by sound:
 - Remember what they hear without visual or physical cues, without writing it down
 - ✓ Like teachers to explain things orally
 - ✓ Like and ask for storytelling without books
 - ✓ Overstimulated and bothered by extreme or poorly organized noises crowds, loud music, very noisy classrooms

Viewpoint Learning Styles

Learning styles are a widely accepted way to categorize children. Different children will have different learning style strengths and weaknesses. Some children may be strong in only one or two, some will have great weaknesses in one or two, others will be balanced in their learning approach. Recently, the idea of learning styles has been expanded and made more complex in an effort to weave in more child characteristics. The commonly accepted learning styles understood and used by educators are Visual, Auditory and Kinesthetic/Tactile – the ones we use here to help you choose a school.

Kinesthetic/Tactile Learners (your child may be one and not the other)

- ➤ Like to move their bodies ("kinesthetic"):
 - ✓ Like to act out a situation or do simulations
 - ✓ Like to be busily moving while working
 - ✓ Like to do hands-on projects to represent their ideas
 - ✓ Express enthusiasm with large physical movements (jumping, running in circles)
 - ✓ May wiggle body constantly; may be labeled hyperactive
 - ✓ Difficulty sitting still for long periods
- ➤ And/or like to touch ("tactile"):
 - ✓ Like to build, do detailed work by hand, and handle materials constantly
 - ✓ Handwriting and other detailed handwork a strength
 - ✓ Understand ideas best when they can touch a physical object
 - ✓ Take notes or doodle to keep hands busy, even though may not look at notes later
 - ✓ Like to make a physical product by hand
 - ✓ May fidget constantly; may be labeled hyperactive
 - ✓ May have trouble focusing and completing tasks unless holding something in hands

Motivation (to learn and perform in school)

John was a typical kindergartener in many ways – right on target in his development when he started school. But what he cared about most was hanging out with his friends. Recess and lunchtime were the highlights of his school days, hands down. He wasn't really bothered when he didn't master letter sounds or counting. He didn't feel loved by his lead teacher, and that bothered him much more than not telling letter "b" from "d." In January, his frustrated teacher, with the help of the assistant teacher, reorganized her time to ensure that the she spent 20 minutes each in math and reading one-on-one with John each week. She tutored him, gave him specific weekly goals: a simple set of exercises for his parents to complete with him at home, and a very simple set of activities he could do on his own (next week when we meet I want you to name all the things you can think of that start with the "m" sound for me). John, very motivated by these personal, one-on-one interactions, leapt forward in his learning and was at grade level by the year's end. His parents were grateful to John's teacher, but knew that what she did was not the norm. They did not want to "fight" for the same special attention every year at this school. The next year, John's parents switched him to a small school with small

classes where every teacher spends one-on—one time with each student in reading, writing and math every week. John consistently performs at grade level or higher, and he feels great about that. He's also learned how to set goals for himself.

Jane was a supercharged toddler, a supercharged preschooler and a supercharged elementary school student – constantly trying to do the next harder thing. Having had her tested, her parents knew that she was just a little above average in basic "intelligence." Yet her never-stop approach to life led her to work hard constantly on whatever task was put before her, and she excelled academically as a result. In second grade, she was not chosen for the Gifted and Talented program at her school; admissions were based solely on I.Q. testing, and she didn't pass muster. Her riled parents asked for a special exception and were denied. They quickly began to seek an alternative school for the following year. They chose for Jane a school where children could work at their own pace using a "contract" they made with the lead teacher each week. Jane excelled, regularly performing 15 percentile points higher on end of grade tests than her I.Q. would predict.

Motivation: What It Is, Why It's Important

Your child's abilities (what she can do) and motives (what she likes and wants to do) may not always be the same. Even the brightest intellects vary tremendously in motivation to learn and perform academically, which is simply how self-motivated they feel to:

- > Set challenging goals for themselves in school work,
- ➤ Plan in advance to do what needs to be done to meet the goals, and
- ➤ Overcome barriers along the way to completing the work.

The motivation to learn and perform academically can be a crucial fit need for children at either extreme – highly motivated or not much at all. Different motivation levels are one major reason why children's (and adults') performance in the real world often differs from "raw" capability. Mediocre students can excel in the work world, largely fueled by extremely high motivation to learn and perform (and the work habits to back it up). Bright stars sometimes fizzle when the going gets tough. We won't speculate about what magic formula sparks that drive and determination some seem to have and others lack. But what we do know is this: when a school fails to fit a child at either extreme, the child's learning in school will almost certainly fall short of what it would be in a better-fit school.

Categories

Your child's motivation will fall into one of these three categories:

- ➤ A strength high levels of self-driven motivation to learn and perform academically
- > Typical solid self-driven motivation
- > A weakness low levels of self-driven motivation to learn and perform academically

When is This a Priority for Your School Hunt?

If your child's motivation is either:

- a strength or
- ✓ a weakness

then this most likely is a Must Have, and your child will benefit from a school with a teaching approach that fits her motivation level.

But even a child who is typical may need a more-than-common motivational boost from school in some circumstances. If your child is:

- ✓ typical in motivation and
- ✓ either your *time* with your child or your *confidence* overseeing your child's academic progress is limited,

then you may want to seek the same qualities in a school that a child with weaker motivation would need. If you are raising your child as a single parent, if both parents are working full time, or if you do not feel confident with school work yourself, consider seeking a school with the kind of structured oversight of your child's progress that a child with lower motivation would need. You'll also want to let your child's teachers know that you want them to hold your child to high standards even when you can't.

You will almost certainly want to make motivation fit a top-priority Must Have if your child is both:

- ✓ low in motivation and
- ✓ either *challenged* or *gifted* in Basic Learning Capability.

Low in motivation, challenged in BLC. A child with this combination will need significant academic and personal support, both at home and at school, to develop into a successfully independent adult. School work will be hard for this child from the start, and the low-motivation tendency to give up easily will be reinforced if the child faces failure after failure. In most cases, this child will need not only academic tutoring, but also intensive help learning to set step-by-step goals, persevere through disappointment, and feel good about other positive qualities (e.g., social skills, non-academic strengths).

You will want to find a school offering either a highly structured curriculum and a "no excuses" policy for meeting grade level *or* high levels of teacher/child contact (in very small groups or one-on-one). Ideally, you would seek both of these qualities in a school. Your child almost certainly will need some one-on-one time with a supportive adult, not just for academics but for personal support and to learn life skills such as goal-setting and tenacity.

Low in motivation, academically gifted. A child with this mix is probably the most at risk for underperforming compared to her potential (even more so for the highly gifted child). This child may meet even high academic standards without actually learning new material. She will not complain or demand more challenging work as will her more motivated academic peers. This child will need the school to set more challenging goals for her – and help her learn to face challenges and overcome barriers – if she is to reach the level of learning of which she is capable. If the school does not play this role, it falls to the parent. What an uncomfortable dynamic it is for a parent to push her child who is already making A's and B's to "do better"! And yet, the ability to face and master challenging work is one best learned young. If your child has this twin combination of academic gifts and low motivation, you may want to make finding a school that will challenge your child with individual learning goals and nurture her with individual attention a very top-priority Must Have.

As with many fit items, Great *quality* Schools will meet the needs of children with all motivation levels. In general, highly motivated students need to be allowed to set their own goals beyond other students and have their work *formally* recognized (through an activity log, work portfolio or other record-keeping, and possibly in report cards). A child with little motivation needs clear, challenging expectations imposed by others and regular monitoring of progress. A Great School will set high minimum standards for all (higher still for advanced students), assess students' "starting points" at the year's beginning, track individual progress and push and prod students to meet goals. But given that most schools have quality strengths and weaknesses, you'll want to ensure that your child's school has the right strengths for your own child if motivation is a Must Have need.

Identifying Your Child's Need

In many cases, your child's motivation level may not be as obvious as some other characteristics until your child grows older. But some children show signs of one extreme or the other early on, and most parents have the close-up view needed to see the signs. Consider your child's motivation about things schoolish and academic, for sure, but also her general tendency to set and overcome challenging barriers to accomplish what she wants to do. Of course, any child (or adult, for that matter) may choose to "turn it off" if an insurmountable, or even just

A significant motivation problem at school can indicate a severe misfit between child and school. Address the underlying cause, and you may solve the "motivation problem."

unsavory, barrier gets in the way. (Don't think your teacher – or boss – likes you, respects you, or admires your work? Convinced there's no way you'll succeed on that test or work project? Turn down that motivation dial!) Consider your child's general tendencies, and if you aren't certain, then assume your child is *Typical* in motivation for the purpose of choosing a school.

Identification strategies include:

- Ask your child's school, preschool or day care teachers how "self-directed" and "willing to overcome challenges" your child is compared to other children of same age whom they have observed. Ask especially about academic tasks, but also other individual achievement activities.
- ➤ Look for behavioral indicators. The motivation section of our *Know Your Child's Needs* table (starting on page 368) provides some help. But here's a start. Your child's motivation is:

A strength if your child frequently

- ✓ sets challenging learning or achievement goals for self,
- ✓ initiates trying hard things on own,
- ✓ plans ahead to meet goals, and
- ✓ usually works to *overcome barriers* and problems without giving up.

Asking for adult help is not a sign of a less-motivated child if your child asks for help to complete a specific task in pursuit of her larger goal (e.g., your kindergartener asks, "Mommy, will you please show me how to make a sign that says 'Cold Drinks' for my lemonade stand?") In general, the goals these children pursue for themselves will exceed any reasonable expectations of grownups around them.

Typical if your child usually

- ✓ works to meet goals set by parents or teachers, or
- ✓ sets and meets clearly *achievable* learning goals for self, and
- ✓ stops or lowers goals when problems arise (as they almost always do!)

A typically motivated child will express frustration, anger or sadness when he fails to meet a reasonable goal set by someone else (teacher, parent), and will *feel* the need to do better next time without being told, "try harder." But when it comes to taking action, this child may need encouragement to overcome challenging barriers. In general, this is the child most teachers expect: one who will do the assigned work, but who might need a push or nudge when the going gets tough. Most children will fall into the "Typical" category.

A weakness if your child

✓ rarely sets goals for herself in work or play.

And one of these:

- is not bothered when she does not perform as well as she is able on self-initiated tasks or ones others (teachers, parents) ask child to complete, or
- ✓ is bothered when she does not do as well as she or others expect on tasks, but takes no steps at all on her own to improve.

Physical or Mental Health Challenges

Physical Health Challenges

What They Are, Why They're Important

A physical health challenge should be a factor in choosing a school if it is one that would make it difficult, if not impossible, for a child to participate fully in routine, daily school life without assistance or some accommodation. This includes not just physical handicaps, but also ongoing illnesses requiring physical restrictions or treatment during the school day.

It is important to find the right fit not only for your child's physical well-being, but also for his social, emotional, and academic benefit. If any of these areas may be affected in addition to physical health, then it is no doubt worth the effort to seek a Great Fit school. If your child has a long-term physical challenge – whether caused by birth, accident or illness – then you will certainly want to make sure that your child's school has the *facilities* needed for your child to participate fully in school life and the *staff* to administer needed medications or other care. Your child may be eligible for special education services in public schools.

Categorizing, Prioritizing, and Identifying Your Child's Need

Unlike some other How Your Child Learns items, this is one where most parents do not need help identifying the issue. You certainly know that your child has needs differing from most other students, though you may not be certain how much help you should expect from school.

Use this as a guideline: a physical health challenge is a Must Have if your child needs *special facilities or care* at school to *participate fully in academic classes* and any *other aspects of learning that you consider vital* for school (e.g., social, emotional, physical). If your child's physical health challenge is manageable without help from school, then you might use this as a tiebreaking Nice to Have to choose among schools – in case the condition worsens or you need occasional assistance and flexibility.

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The more specific you are about your child's physical health challenge, the better you can understand what your child needs and communicate with schools about how to interact with your child.

- ➤ Start by summarizing your child's general condition, noting the cause, if known.
- ➤ Next, make a list of the specific activities for which your child may need accommodation in order to participate fully. Common possibilities include physical education and sports; drama, music, and visual arts; field trips; school projects that involve lots of physical activity; and class or school-wide social events.
- ➤ For each activity note any accommodations that you have found to be helpful for allowing your child to live and learn as fully as possible. Get ideas from your child's previous teachers or day care providers about what did and did not work.
- ➤ Add to the bottom of your list any specific care that your child needs during the day medications, regular medical or therapy appointments for which he'll require on-site care or need to be excused from school.
- ➤ Use this list as your guide for:
 - ✓ Deciding which very *specific* needs your child must have met at school and which needs you may be able to meet elsewhere.
 - ✓ Asking specific questions about what each school will and won't provide your child.
 - ✓ Sharing helpful information about your child with the school you choose.

If your child needs medication during the school day, then certainly you will want an on-site school nurse to administer medications and to help you watch for problem side effects or loss of drug effectiveness. If your child needs frequent therapy, then certainly you will want to ensure that appointments may be coordinated with the school schedule. Nearly all schools allow children some time off for medical appointments. If your child has a certain routine, check that the schools you are considering have policies allowing you to continue necessary treatments. In higher elementary grades, some school schedules are packed full with academic and expected extracurricular activities; you will want to enquire about flexibility to meet your child's treatment needs.

Even if your child's condition does not require accommodation or assistance from school, if it is a noticeable physical handicap then you also will need to explore the social culture of the school. If it is one in which taunting and teasing are acceptable behaviors, your child will undoubtedly suffer a great deal. Look for a school with a character program emphasizing respect and tolerance – not just posters on the wall, but clear expectations and consequences for rude student behavior. We

have been amazed at the real differences among schools in this regard. Talk with parents of other children with similar challenges to learn both how their children have fared and how other students have acted towards their children.

Mental Health Challenges

What They Are, Why They're Important

Mental health challenges include both *ongoing* (long-term) and *serious tempo-rary* mental illnesses. Whether your child's condition is caused by a family event (e.g., divorce, death), stressful occurrence (e.g., car accident, injury), an inherited trait, or an unknown cause, you may want to find a school that can partner with you to help your child navigate the stormy seas of academic and social pressures associated with school. If your child suffers from a mental illness, her academic, social, emotional and physical development can be affected significantly. It is important to recognize and deal with your child's condition sooner rather than later, whether or not you engage your child's school in the effort.

Categorizing and Prioritizing

Examples of common mental illnesses include depression, anxiety or panic attacks, and bi-polar disorder (manic-depression). We will not attempt to help you make clinical diagnoses of the many complex and varied mental illnesses. We do say this: if you see significant negative changes in your child's academic, social, emotional or physical state that are not otherwise explainable (or even when they are explainable, do no just "go away" after a few days), you should seek diagnosis from a psychologist or psychiatrist. Many school counselors can help you take the first steps or recommend local professionals.

To decide whether this is an item you should consider in choosing a school, consider both of these:

- ➤ How much is your child's condition likely to affect her life at school?

 Consider not just academic performance but also social, emotional and physical development.
- To what extent do you need or want help from school?

 Examples include administering medications, providing counseling, allowing a flexible schedule or even just keeping a watchful eye for problems.

If your child's condition is very severe, this certainly will be a Must Have. You will need your child's school to actively, if discreetly, help you keep tabs on your child's condition and assist with treatment as needed (if only allowing some schedule flexibility for counseling or other therapy). Your child may be eligible for special education services in public schools.

But even if the illness is milder or recent in occurrence, you may want to seek a school that could be helpful, so that you have backup resources should the illness become prolonged. In other words, you may want this to be a Nice to Have and seek a school that will be socially and emotionally welcoming (or even helpful) to your child as a tiebreaker.

Identifying Your Child's Need

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- ➤ If your child displays troubling symptoms, take your child for professional diagnosis by a psychologist or psychiatrist. Many school counselors can help you take the first steps or recommend local professionals.
- ➤ Look for these general signs of mental illness:
 - ✓ Big changes, or ongoing problems, in your child's sleep sleepy all the time, not able to sleep, or suddenly begins erratic schedule (e.g., sleepy all day, awake all night).
 - ✓ Big changes in or ongoing problems with your child's eating packing it away in gorging sessions or prolonged loss of appetite. Extreme or sudden weight gain or loss is also a sign of a problem.
 - ✓ Loss of joy your child always seems to be unhappy, laughs very little.
 - ✓ Loss of excitement your child loses interest in school or activities that used to get her excited.
 - ✓ Loss of self-control your child is lashing out in anger frequently, acting violent towards siblings or parents, or wildly excited for extended periods.
 - ✓ Social changes your child is suddenly not interested in former friends, without explanation. Your child suddenly stops talking with you and/or siblings.
 - ✓ Changes in academic performance your child's grades drop suddenly.

Behavior Challenges

What They Are, Why They're Important

What child doesn't have a few of these, you might ask? And true, all children are by definition still learning how to behave themselves. But some children have further to go in learning both *what is expected* and *how to control their own behavior* in a group setting.

Children who have significant discipline/behavior problems that:

- prevent themselves or other children in the classroom from learning effectively or
- ➤ have led to serious or multiple formal disciplinary actions need schools that will work with parent and child to improve social and emotional skills. These children can disrupt not only their own learning but that of

other students around them until they learn how to identify and respond to their own strong emotional states.

The challenge for parents is to distinguish those times when poor behavior is a result of other easily changeable circumstances from those times when the child has a "behavior problem" resulting from underdeveloped social and emotional skills or a behavioral disability. Mild to moderate behavioral problems can result from a school (or preschool) that is a very poor fit in critical ways. For instance, shoehorning your child into a school with the wrong academic pace or teaching method can lead to mild behavior problems for all but the child with terrific self-control. A bright child who is bored or a struggling student who is lost often will wiggle excessively and fail to pay attention to school work. A strong learning style misfit between school and child also may lead to an excessively wiggly or upset child: a strong kinesthetic learner (who needs to move and touch) in a "look and listen" school may wiggle endlessly, and a strong visual or auditory learner in a too-chaotic school may be easily upset by the noise and disorder.

In the case of the school misfit, you will notice that your child behaves very well when she is in environments where she feels both engaged and successful. For these children, the burden should be on the school and teacher, not the child, to address the problem, or on you to seek a better-fit school. These behavioral problems should disappear with a better school fit or changes in how your child's teacher interacts with the child. If your child is very extreme in some way – very gifted or very challenged academically or very lopsided in learning styles, for example – then she will *need to learn better self-control than most other children*, because she may often find herself a "misfit." You'll give your child a great gift if you recognize the ways in which she is very different from peers and help her learn to recognize her feelings and manage her behavior when she feels out of place.

But these behavioral "problems" – though grave to parents when dealing with them – will pale in comparison to those of the child who is repeatedly violent towards teachers or peers or who consumes excessive teacher time by frequently violating basic behavior rules. The child who needs help with *behavior* specifically will have significant or repeated disciplinary problems *in most all group settings*.

The earlier parents and school jointly intervene to provide a stable, clear set of behavior expectations and consistent, appropriate rewards and consequences for actual behavior, the sooner the child will develop self-understanding and self-control in group settings. You are doing your child a disservice when you ignore or defend true behavior problems. Instead, it is a great gift to a child to learn these behaviors as soon as possible, since continued problems will prevent him from realizing his potential in other areas and enjoying life (not to mention driving teachers and parents batty).

Categorizing and Prioritizing

If your child has had

- ➤ significant, unresolved behavioral or discipline problems in group settings, or
- repeated behavior that prevents your own child or others in school, preschool or day care from learning effectively, or
- repeated behavior that puts your child at risk for formal disciplinary action,

then you should consider this a Must Have.

If this is a Must Have for your child, you will need to seek a school with a planful, consistent approach to discipline that is consistent with your parenting values so that your can work with the school to reinforce good behavior and reduce the inappropriate behavior. The method of discipline must also be effective with your child. If your own parenting style, limited time with your child, or an inconsistent approach among your child's caregivers may have led to repeated behavior and discipline problems, you may need to make changes at home, not just school. Think about what environments have worked best in past: when does your child behave well in a group – and why?

If you are still not sure what to seek, look for a school that proactively teaches about expected behaviors and self-control, not just one that punishes bad behavior. Think "clear expectations, consistent consequences (both rewards and punishments), frequent praise and discussions about good behavior, and firm but fair punishments when needed."

Regardless of the discipline approach, you will need a school with very frequent, personal communication between parents and teachers. This clearly is easier in a school with parent-teacher contact structured into the daily routine (e.g., classroom drop-off and pickup available and encouraged, rather than bus or impersonal carpool lines). In addition to this frequent informal communication, you should look for schools with a formal policy for working with students and parents to develop behavioral discipline.

Identifying Your Child's Need

Most likely, you are aware of the problem if your child has been in any kind of group setting thus far. You will have experienced:

- ➤ At school, preschool or day care: *Repeated* calls from teachers, principal or guidance counselor about your child's violent *or* disruptive words and actions.
- ➤ In group settings with you present (e.g., social or religious gatherings): Repeated moments when your child is mildly violent using words or actions and your child fails to correct himself after your reprimands. "Mildly violent" includes pushing, hitting, pinching (and the like) or spoken threats to harm other children or adults.

➤ In any setting: Any single very violent action, such as hitting or beating another person to the point of causing a serious injury, use of any weapon (knife, gun, or the like) against another person, or verbally threatening any of these actions.

If you are not sure and believe that your child's previous teachers (school, preschool or day care) may not have divulged important information about your child's behavior, just ask. Remember, all children are still learning to behave themselves, and it is important to consider whether your child's behavior is typical for one of similar age. Also consider whether a major misfit between child and a particular group setting might be stimulating poor behavior.

Learning Disorders and Disabilities

Todd was constantly "disturbed" about his schoolwork. He avoided homework in his traditional, Catholic school like the plague, finishing only after long and exhausting work sessions with threats of "no fun until it's done" by mom. He excelled marvelously in some classes (math and science) but seemed utterly defeated in others – namely the language arts, especially writing. His feelings about school and himself academically were dimmed by his frustration with any assignment that required writing of any kind - most difficult in a school that emphasized not only the content of writing, but also penmanship. The toll was not simply lower grades in some subjects, but Todd came to think of himself as less capable than his older brother. After years of growing frustration, his parents at last took him to a child psychologist for testing. In short order, they found that their son had a recognized writing disability making it extremely difficult for him to think and write at the same time. He soon began to record his homework answers and his "written" papers on a small tape recorder. Then, as a separate step, he transcribed what he had recorded into writing acceptable to his teachers. His parents – with his consent – switched him to a school with a Paedeia program, which emphasizes oral discussion and presentation. He was at home at school, at last, and his grades and academic self-confidence showed it.

Learning Disorders and Disabilities: What They Are, Why They're Important All people possess learning strengths and weaknesses. All of us are simply better at some things and worse at others, thanks to the mysterious mix of genes, experience, hard work and luck. Children also develop at different rates, so slight delays in some areas may not be important in the long run. How weak must an area be to call it a "disability," and what areas of weakness count? The school hunt bottom line: what weaknesses rise to the level of "disabilities" or "disorders" that might affect your choice of schools?

In general, think of it this way: a *disability* is a problem with an important, basic part of your child's physical or mental functioning that is significantly different from your child's other capabilities or that significantly hampers your child's learning. A *disorder* is a *problem* with an *important*, *but not necessarily basic* part of your child's physical or mental functioning. Both disabilities and disorders may keep your child from fully utilizing her other capabilities.

In other words, disabilities and disorders are imbalances that have the potential to keep your child from learning and performing at the level of which she would be capable *if she did not have the disability or disorder*. This does not include just academic learning, but also social, emotional and physical development. If your child has a major weakness in one area, it will surely keep him from doing his best in the other areas, as well. If you are thinking that this sounds similar to "whole child" thinking, you're right. But for a weakness to rise to the level of "disability," it must be significantly different from your child's other capabilities or it must impair his learning or functioning in some significant way.

Categorizing and Prioritizing

Any disability or disorder should be a Must Have, though only you can decide where it falls in the school hunt pecking order, based on:

- > the severity of the disability or disorder, and
- ➤ how well you can accommodate it outside of school.

Consider the extent to which your child's participation or success in school (academic, social and physical activity) may be hampered if the school does not address your child's specific needs. The more severe your child's disability or disorder, the more your child's overall development may be harmed by an inappropriate school setting. Also consider how well your child will function socially in a classroom of more typical children for some activities.

As with other weaknesses, you will need to make a decision about the approach you want your child's school to take. Ignoring or working around a disability or disorder entirely may leave your child unprepared for the "real" world in which accommodations are not always available. Use this opportunity to help your child understand himself better and learn to develop his own weaknesses (and to help his teachers do

Viewpoint All Kinds of Minds

Physician and child-development expert Dr. Mel Levine focuses on eight critical abilities, controlled by various pathways in the brain, needed for children to function well in school and life. A shortfall in one pathway may prevent a child from using great strengths in another. Levine has developed training for educators to identify weaknesses in children and change how they teach to address the natural differences in children's "wiring." In *All Kinds of Minds*, he provides very child-friendly stories to help parents and children identify and address weaknesses in each area. In *A Mind at a Time* he clarifies his vision for how parents and educators should work to meet the needs of individual children with varying strengths and weaknesses.

When one set of functions is weak, it is a "disorder." His sets of disorders are different from disabilities, because they describe a broad set of functions and are found in many, many children. Levine has encouraged educators to assume that most children have learning strengths and weaknesses. His teacher training program helps educators learn to teach in ways that help every child reach at least a minimum level of functioning in each major area, while also appreciating and reinforcing each child's strengths.

Levine's eight categories of capability are these:

- 1. *Attention* ability to concentrate and focus on one thing, finish tasks and control one's own behavior
- 2. *Temporal-Sequential Order* ability to understand and use steps and things that fall into an orderly pattern (e.g., alphabet, step-by-step instructions)
- 3. *Spatial Ordering* ability to see and understand how things are organized in space around us, including small areas like a piano keyboard and large areas like a room or space
- 4. *Memory* ability to store and recall information at a later time
- 5. *Language* ability to speak, write and understand language using sounds, symbols (letters) and combinations of words
- 6. Neuromotor ability to use the brain to coordinate all of the muscles of the body
- 7. *Social Cognition* ability to succeed in social relationships, one-on-one and in groups, with peers and authority figures
- 8. *Higher Order Cognition* ability to understand and solve problems, learn new things and create

Levine's work has been a godsend for many adults and children who have been hampered by seemingly basic matters such as paying attention and staying organized, getting along with others socially, and remembering important facts. If you suspect that your child has a major weakness in one of these eight areas, investigate further to see if this is a Must Have for school or if you feel you can enhance your child's development outside of school. Nearly every parent (and child) can benefit from a basic understanding of these eight pathways. See the *Resources for Parents* section on page 354 or visit **PickyParent.com** for links to Dr. Levine's resources.

the same). Most experts now agree that the least restrictive environment in which a child can achieve academic and social success is best for a child with a disability. Children will learn to cope with their weakness better if they have the opportunity to learn and interact among children who do not share the disability.

This does not mean that you should ignore your child's disability, only that segregating your child into a group of similarly disabled children may rob him of important coping skills. That said, you may find such a setting preferable if the "regular" schools available are of low quality or ill-equipped to meet your child's needs.

Most importantly for our purposes here, seek a school that recognizes and develops a wide range of children *and* that attracts a supportive social group. Avoid using a disorder as an *excuse* for your child not enjoying or using his strengths. Indeed, make sure that your child's school *fits his strengths very well*. Allowing your child to enjoy success from his strengths may give him the confidence and energy to develop weaker areas.

Identifying Your Child's Need

Learning disabilities and disorders can be hard to diagnose. Indeed, many go undiagnosed for years.

Whether you know your child has a problem or only suspect it, you will need professional diagnosis of the specific disability. No parent should go it alone, because the effects of misunderstanding – or not recognizing – your child's needs can be devastating for your child and family. On the upside, many milder disabilities can be overcome or well accommodated if they are detected and addressed early in a child's life. Call your local public school district central office to inquire about free testing or seek private testing through a child psychologist or psychiatrist your area. The U.S. Department of Education publishes the current definitions of disabilities recognized as eligible for special needs services in public schools and information about your rights as a parent if your child has a disability (see *PickyParent.com* for details).

Some signs that your child may have a hard-to-detect disability include these (even one sign can indicate a possible disability):

- Your child does well in most or all *subjects*, except one.
- ➤ Your child does well with most *aspects* of his school work, except one that may cut across many subjects (e.g., reading, writing, speaking aloud).
- ➤ Your child speaks well, but *does not write* well compared to others of same age (e.g., takes a very long time, makes many errors, gets very frustrated).
- ➤ Your child writes well but *does not speak* so that others understand (compared

to others of same age).

- ➤ Your child follows written instructions well, but *not spoken instructions*.
- ➤ Your child follows spoken instructions well, but *not written ones*.
- ➤ Your child *does not focus* on his school work for long enough periods of time to accomplish what is expected of children his age.
- ➤ Your child is unable to work and learn in a *group of children*; behavior problems or emotional outbursts regularly prevent him from doing his school work.
- ➤ Your child has extreme difficulty forming relationships with others his own age.
- ➤ Your child has trouble *moving or working his body*, so that typical, day-to-day activities are difficult.

Self-Understanding

Samantha was a "born follower." She tagged along with her older sister Laura for most activities, having no same-age friends or interests of her own. Laura, age nine, was an avid competitive swimmer. When at age six it seemed that Samantha's swimming talent outstripped her sister's, Laura began to feel jealous and stopped letting Sam play with her friends when they came over. Sam quickly lost interest in swimming. Laura also possessed great talent and interest in drawing and painting. Samantha had never displayed the same early talent as Laura in this area. But Sam insisted on taking art lessons, though she fretted continuously over her dim results. This pattern continued – Sam avoided competing with her sister when she might excel beyond Laura, and she pursued the same activities as Laura when Sam had little talent or interest. When this pattern began applying to academic work, Sam's parents took note. They sought and found a school for Samantha that paid close attention to students' personal development, focusing on the "whole child." At first, Sam continued the same pattern, befriending outgoing bully types who would tell her "what's what." But by the end of her first year, Sam had her own set of likable friends and had developed her own interests. She could tell her parents matter-of-factly what she liked to do and what she was good at - in academic and extracurricular activities. Her parents were thrilled that the "real Samantha" had been revealed.

If your child has a great understanding of her own strengths, weaknesses, interests, needs and wants and has the self-control to make decisions accordingly, you will have more flexibility in choosing a school. This child will certainly let you know if something is not going well in school and may have laser-accurate views of her teachers' strengths and weaknesses as well! Of course you still want to seek a Great Fit school for your child. Just because your child *understands* how a school is not the perfect fit, she will have little power until she is older and more independent to do anything about it.

On the other end of the scale, a child with very weak self-understanding will regularly make choices that are not appropriate for her abilities, interests, needs and wants – often just following the path of a sibling, friends or others. These children need help developing their self-understanding and learning to make life decisions. An appropriate school setting is one way to tackle the problem.

Categorizing and Prioritizing

If your child seems to have low self-understanding – little awareness of her strengths, weaknesses, interests, needs and wants – then this should be a Must Have in your school hunt. She will not understand and communicate when things aren't working well at school. She may have trouble making choices and prioritizing her activities to enjoy her strengths and develop her weaknesses.

Identifying Your Child's Need

- Ask your child's current school, preschool or day care teacher about behaviors listed below compared to other children of the same age.
- ➤ Observe and compare your child. Look for consistent choices that seem inappropriate to you, such as:
 - ✓ Focusing little time on activities she enjoys and does well, or
 - ✓ Spending too much time on activities that are of little consequence (no enjoyment to her, no help for schoolwork or other achievements, and no help to others), or
 - ✓ Having few interests of her own (usually lets a sibling, parent or friend choose), or
 - ✓ Choosing friends who are unkind to her or who do not bring out the best in her, or
 - ✓ Expressing little recognition of her own strengths and weaknesses

If these describe your child, then you will need to find a school that closely fits her other needs, proactively teaches self-understanding, and communicates fre-

Selfunderstanding
can help your
child succeed
not just in
school, but in
life. Give your
child this gift
by allowing
your child to
make choices
(amenable to
you) from an
early age.



- ➤ Refer back to your Child "Quick Think" on page 37. Estimated Time: 2 minutes
- ➤ Use the Child Needs Summary on page 38 to get a quick fix on the Fit Factor # 2 characteristics. Estimated Time: 5 minutes
- ➤ **Use the Know Your Child's Needs table** on page 368 to further clarify your child's Fit Factor # 2 How Your Child Learns characteristics and the importance of each for choosing a school. You need not read the whole table: focus only on items you suspect are important for your child. Estimated Time: 20 minutes
- ➤ Record your Must Haves and Nice to Haves on your Child Needs Summary (page 38). Estimated Time: 10 minutes

Optional Activities

- ➤ Discuss your child's needs with your spouse or other parenting partner. Estimated Time:

 As needed
- ➤ Plan now to schedule professional testing for your child if you want help identifying your child's learning styles, physical health, mental health or behavioral challenges, and learning disabilities and disorders. Estimated Time: 30 minutes to find a tester and schedule an appointment
- ➤ Mark your calendar to ask current school, preschool or day care teachers about your child compared to other children. Estimated Time: 5 minutes to schedule time to talk with teachers, 45 minutes to talk with teachers
- ➤ Make a plan to observe your child and read other resources, as needed. See the Resources for Parents section starting on page 354 for readings and websites related to how children learn. Estimated Time: 20 minutes to plan; you decide how much for observing and reading other resources

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quently with parents about children's individual progress. If you cannot find these things in a school, you certainly will want to take the initiative to guide your child and her teachers.



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- ✓ Complete research-based introduction to the seven universal Great School Quality Factors that any parent can learn to recognize. Unbiased with respect to school type
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- School types, teaching methods and educational lingo explained and demystified
- Customized questions, targeting your needs, to ask when visiting schools
- Stress-saving tips on getting in to your favorite schools
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