

Schools in England

Portsmouth's Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS) have decades of experience working with parents from all over the world. We know that parents always want the best for their children when they start school here in the UK and we understand how hard it is to settle into a completely new country - most of our team have done just that!

There are, of course, many differences in education systems from country to country and some of the common differences can often cause misunderstandings between family and school.

Here are some very common experiences of new parents. Read on to find out more about education in England...

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In my country, we actually go to the school that we want our children to attend to request a school place.

In England, Local Authorities organise the admissions procedures for their local schools centrally. This is to keep the entire process as fair as possible. There are sometimes exceptions to this process e.g. some faith schools.

Parents fill in a form, usually online, and can express a preference for up to six schools for their children in primary, fewer in secondary. At certain times of the year, there are deadlines to meet but if you arrive mid-term, you can apply whenever you are ready. You will then be told which school you have been allocated and can contact the school to arrange for your child to start.

If this school is not your first choice, you can ask to be put on a waiting list for the other chosen schools for when a place becomes available - but this could be a very long wait! In the meantime, your child must start at the allocated school.

In my country, children don't start school until they are seven.

In England, we start school much younger than in many other countries of the world. In fact, some children can receive free places in Early Years settings from the age of two and school starts for children when they are four or five.

This may seem strange, but lessons in Reception classes and in Year 1, are always child-centred and have a lot of play and exploration built in.

In my country, all children take a bus to school.

In England, parents can choose how to take their children to school but walking and public transport are always encouraged and some roads near schools are 'car-free' during drop-off and pick-up times. If you have young children, you are expected to be with them if they are walking or travelling to school by bus. Transport is not paid for, however, and is the parents' responsibility, except in some very specific circumstances.



In my country, everyone wears their normal clothes to school.

In England, most schools have a school uniform that all pupils have to wear. Schools like this as they feel it makes everyone feel equal, that they belong, and it stops children pestering parents for expensive, fashionable brands.

Schools will share what they expect your child to wear e.g. black trousers, a blue blazer etc. but will always limit the number of items of uniform that have their own school badge or logo on, leaving parents free to shop around and find the best value items for their children.

If you are finding it hard to buy school uniform, always talk to the school as they may be able to help you. 'The Hive' also has a school uniform shop.



In my country, schools are really strict. Children do not talk and they listen to the teacher.

In England, schools may not appear to be so strict but teachers work very hard to create a good environment for learning. Teachers will choose the best way for children to learn - this may be individual, paired, group or class work. They value focused discussion and hands-on learning.

If your child has already experienced a stricter system, they may initially feel shy in class and unwilling to contribute. Give them time and encouragement and they will soon adapt to this new way of working.

In contrast, some children confuse active learning with play and are unsure how to behave when the rules they have been used to are removed. They can find these 'softer' rules of the classroom extremely difficult and might find settling down and focusing hard, as it is so different from their previous experiences.

Talk to your children and help them realise that they are still in class to learn. Working with the teachers can really help too and you can ask them for their behaviour policy so that you can support your child adapt to learning in a new country and understand the expectations, rewards and any sanctions.

In my country, we tell children off if they do something wrong.

In England, most schools help children learn how to behave well in class, based on praise and rewards and possibly small sanctions if they don't do what they are asked. You can ask your child's teacher how this works in their class and maybe try this at home too. Consistency helps children.

Many schools also use 'restorative' practices if things go wrong, encouraging children to take responsibility for their behaviour by thinking through the causes and consequences of their actions.

In my country, teachers are allowed to physically chastise pupils if they do something wrong.

In England, no-one is allowed by law to harm your child in school. We do not smack or hit children or beat them with objects and we do not lock them away or humiliate them if things go wrong.

It is really important to know that this applies in the home too and if schools think that a child has been hurt by their parents or other family members, they have a legal duty to report it. We call this 'safeguarding' and safeguarding is the responsibility of everyone who works with children.

School staff will keep an eye on every child and notice any physical marks or changes in behaviour and every school has a 'Designated Safeguarding Lead' (or DSL) whose job it is to make sure that children are kept safe at school, as well as at home.

As such, if you have always used physical chastisement in your home country, you need to be aware that this is not allowed in the UK.

However, schools will have support available to you to help you reflect on how you parent your children and will be able to offer you new ideas and alternative methods that are safe. Ask to speak to the DSL if you would like some support with new ideas that don't include physical chastisement. They will be more than happy to help.

Teachers also have an additional specific legal duty to report Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) which is against the law in the UK. FGM comprises all procedures involving the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs. It is illegal in the UK and a form of child abuse with long-lasting consequences.

If teachers discover that FGM has been carried out - or is about to be carried out, here or abroad - they must contact the police. If FGM is common practice in your home country, head teachers or the DSL might ask you about your thoughts on FGM. Don't be offended - they are working to protect the children in their care. It's important to know that there are many sources of support for you and your family. Talk to the school or one of the community organisations in the city, who will help and advise you.

In my country, we can leave our children on their own at home while we pop out or go to work.

Another challenge that some people who are new to the UK find is the age at which you can leave your child alone at home, even for just a few minutes. Schools may well have a safeguarding concern about any parents leaving children alone.

There is, in fact, no legal limit on the age that children are safe to leave alone but it is against the law if it puts a child at risk. Every child matures differently, so it would be almost impossible to have a 'one size fits all' law.

Every child is different but infants and young children should never be left alone and children up to twelve usually still need adult supervision. Children over twelve may be ready but remember – you should never leave a child home alone if they don't feel ready, or if you don't feel they're ready. Every child is different. This also applies to children walking to and from school on their own.

In my country, children get a lot of homework every day.

In England, most children will get some homework but how this looks depends on the age of your child. Younger children will bring home reading books every night to share with you and will maybe have spellings to practise or times tables to learn each week.

Older children may have tasks every day from different subjects or longer projects which might last several weeks. There are often ways for you to see what your child's homework is by logging onto the parents' section of the school's website or portal.

Teachers try to make homework interesting and will often encourage you to help your child with it. If you need help 'helping', talk to the school and they will suggest ideas and/or websites which might help, such as BBC Bitesize.



In my country, children have to take tests all of the time and cannot progress to the next year unless they pass them.

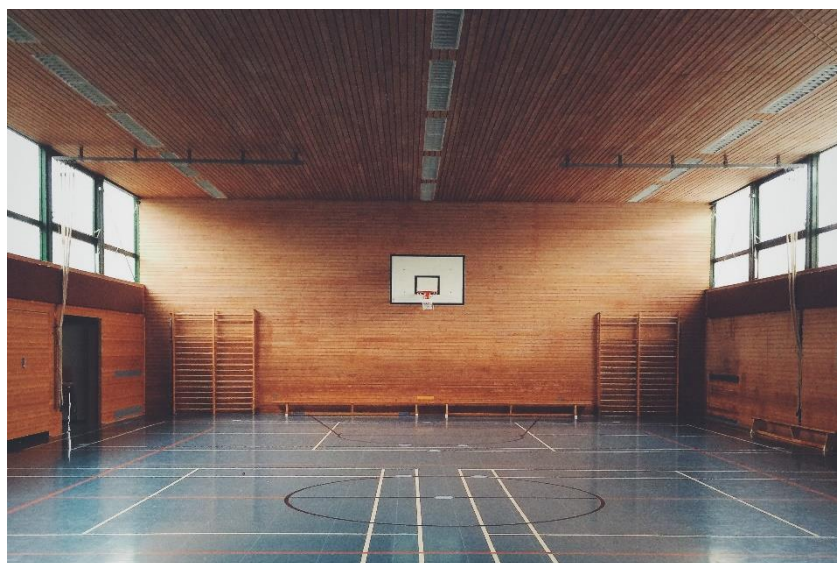
Teachers may use tests to check a child's understanding but these will be informal and may be in the form of a quiz. In fact, other ways of assessing your child's progress and attainment will usually be preferred.

There are certain points when national tests happen - the end of Year 2 (although these are now optional), the end of Year 6 and national qualifications (including GCSEs) at the end of Year 11 - but the tests in school do not have any bearing on your child's being able to move up to the next school year.

In my country, children don't get changed for Physical Education (PE) or, if they do, the boys and girls get changed separately.

All schools will expect your children to have a PE kit in school and will tell you which days your child has PE. They ask children to change clothes for hygiene reasons. Most younger children keep their PE kits in a PE bag on a peg or in a class box in school but older children will have to remember their PE days and bring in their PE kit for those lessons. PE will also include swimming for some year groups. Occasionally, some schools ask children to come into school in their PE kit on the days that they have PE lessons, so check what your child's school policy is on this.

Older children will have changing rooms for boys and girls and swimming pools will all have separate changing rooms too. Younger pupils will usually just get changed in their classroom, although teachers may have some ways of segregating the pupils. If you are concerned about anything, always speak to the school and they will work something out with you.



In my country, we don't bring food to school for our children.

In England, all children in Reception or Key Stage 1 (aged 4-7) have free school meals (FSM) provided for them every day. Older children may also have FSM if their parents are claiming some benefits or in certain other circumstances - ask the school for details of how to apply for this.

There will always be vegetarian and halal options to choose from and the menu varies every day. Parents can choose to pay for these too and they usually cost around £2.50 or £3.00 every day. Older children often have a 'sandwich bar' or cafeteria.

If you'd prefer, you can make a lunch at home for your child to bring in each day. This can be anything that you'd like but these 'packed lunches' usually have a sandwich, wrap or salad; some fruit or vegetables; a drink and maybe a small treat too! Schools encourage parents to make healthy choices.

Most schools do not allow children to bring nuts or nut-based products into school for snacks or lunch due to the number of children who have severe allergies. Your child's school will communicate with you about this.



In my country, we don't teach children about sex education. We also don't think that we should talk about being LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Queer).

Although all schools in England must - and do - respect the cultures, languages and faiths of the school community, there are some subjects that they have to teach and 'relationships, sex and health education' (RSHE) is one of these compulsory lessons.

Schools are always very careful to make sure that what they teach is age-appropriate and will always share with parents when and how they are going to teach this subject and what it will include - often sharing with parents any film clips and resources that they are planning to use at a special meeting in the weeks before the topic is scheduled.

Sex education does not have to begin until secondary school, although some primary schools may decide to gently introduce this subject to their older pupils. Before this, primary schools focus on subjects including families, friendships, relationships and being safe, including the characteristics of a happy, healthy family life. As part of this, schools are free to determine how they address LGBT-specific relationships - but they all have to.

Parents do however have the right to withdraw their children from the sex education aspects of RSHE lessons, as well as for religious education (RE). You have to request withdrawal from the head teacher and you do not have to give an explanation. However, talking to the school is usually the best way to make sure that your child is supported.

In my country, parents don't really get involved with school.

In England, schools really welcome your support and will often invite you into school for celebrations, assemblies and school events. There will also be regular parents' evenings throughout the year for you to discuss with the teacher how your child is getting on. It is really important for you to try and attend parents' evenings, wherever possible.

Schools recognise how much better children do when they know parents and teachers are working together and they know that you are the people who know your child best - they love the insights that you bring to a child's work or behaviour.

In my country, everyone is taught the same.

In England, teachers provide the opportunity for all pupils to experience success by adapting their lessons. Teachers will be maintaining high expectations for everyone whilst giving different support to different learners and checking that everyone is progressing.

That means that your child may not be doing the same as everyone else or may be given different amounts of time or different 'tools' to complete a task - extra apparatus, a teaching assistant to help individually or with a small group, additional steps or adapted tasks.

If your child is finding lessons a little hard, talk to the teacher and you can work together to find out what might work best.

In my country, every child who has special needs or a disability is put in a different school.

In England, the majority of children who have additional needs are taught in mainstream schools alongside their peers. Teachers use 'adaptive teaching' to support a pupil's needs (see above) and this work is part of their standard offer to children.

If a child's needs are beyond what a school can typically deliver from their usual way of working, they might also consider an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) for your child.



An EHCP is a legally binding document created with your views and those of your child, the teachers and other professionals taken into consideration. EHCPs outline a child's special educational, health, and social care needs, agree provision to meet each of the needs and are reviewed annually.

However, in England, there are also Special Schools for specific groups of children and young people whose needs would not be able to be met in a mainstream class.

In my country, we keep our children at home if they have a cold or other minor illness.

In England, schools really understand the importance of attending school every day. Research has shown that being in lessons every day has a significant impact on success and, as such, if your child has a minor cough or cold, you should still send them to school.

If you are unsure, you can always contact the school to ask for advice or to let them know that your child is not feeling 100% and the teachers will keep an extra eye on them for you.

However, if your child has been physically sick, they should stay at home for 48 hours. Certain other contagious diseases will need extra time out of class too.

Remember - always contact your child's school by phoning them first thing in the morning (there is usually an option to leave a message on the answerphone) or using the Study Bugs or other apps to let them know if your child will not be in school that day.

You will always be contacted by the school if your child does not turn up at school without a reason.

In my country, we can take holidays in school time or travel during the long university holidays.

In England, you are not able to take holidays in term time without permission from the head teacher of your child's school. You need to make an application for this in advance (the school will share a Leave of Absence form with you) but permission will not be given for family holidays in term time - there must be exceptional circumstances for why you want to take your child out of school.



You can be fined for taking your child on holiday during term time without the school's permission. This also applies to the period when it is still term time for schools but universities, with their shorter terms, have already broken up.

In my country, we are not in school for important religious festivals.

Schools will be keen to support families from different faith backgrounds to observe their religious days and head teachers have the discretion to allow children to celebrate important religious festivals by authorising a day off.

Parents must request this absence from the head teacher in advance but they may only agree a maximum of one or two days in an academic year.

The Bilingual Learning Assistants (BLAs) at EMAS have, over many years, helped hundreds of children and parents new to the UK.

We asked them about their own experiences and those of their friends and here's what they say helped them settle here:

The English Language

- Start learning English as soon as possible; this will set your children a good example and will help you communicate with their school.
- Don't worry about making mistakes, that's how you will learn.
- Keep using your first language at home; the stronger the native language is, the easier it is to learn the second language.
- Talk to English people as well as speakers of your own language. Don't isolate yourself or only mix with your own community.
- Surround yourself with things that will challenge your speaking, listening and literacy skills in English (e.g. TV, books, websites, newspapers, writing a journal etc.).
- Look for free or affordable English lessons as well as online learning apps and lessons on YouTube. If you already speak some English, it may take you a while to get used to the Portsmouth accent and the local grammar and vocabulary and you may find that people speak very fast!

Daily life

- There is lots of information about life in the UK on council and government websites, e.g. about work, schools and the National Health Service (NHS).
- Try and find a doctor's surgery (a GP) and a dentist as soon as you arrive.
- Be prepared for many things to be done in a different way from your home country. Learn about and accept these differences.
- Familiarise yourself with the laws and cultural expectations. For example, British people are very polite; saying 'please' and 'thank you,' being punctual and queuing are very important. British people also have a good sense of humour!
- Ask for help if you need it. You can ask people from your own community or English-speakers; there are many people who will be happy to help.
- Try British food, music, TV programmes... it helps understand this new culture. But cherish your own culture and customs. You are now part of a multicultural society.



School

- The education system may be very different; ask questions, look at the school website and learn the routines and expectations day-by-day.
- Mix with other parents. Start by speaking to other mums and dads you see at the school gate, even if you just say 'hello'.
- Parents are expected to take part in the life of the school. Join in with parent activities and accept any invitations to attend events (e.g. assemblies, plays, concerts, sports days, cake sales, curriculum workshops, parent evenings, requests for helpers etc). This will improve your English skills, get you meeting people and teach you about the education system.
- Don't expect your children to learn English straightaway. They will also have to settle into their new school and make friends. They will need encouragement from you; don't put them under pressure.
- Trust the learning abilities of your children. They will spend at least six hours a day in an English-speaking environment and will eventually learn the language.
- Give your children time to relax at home, let them speak in first language so they can tell you what they did at school and ask you about things they didn't understand.
- Be aware that being a child in a class, where you don't speak the language, is exhausting. The children put in a lot of effort and concentration, so it is physically and mentally tiring. Don't expect them to do hours of homework, they need time to rest.

Your new city

- Go out as a family as much as you can, so the children can associate their new home with positive experiences. Explore what Portsmouth has to offer (libraries, museums, the beach, parks etc).
- Portsmouth is a diverse city. Be open-minded about meeting people from different backgrounds, religions and cultures. Learn things about them and teach them something about your rich culture.
- If you aren't working, try and find a volunteering role. It will help your English and can be a way into paid employment.
- Get involved, accept invitations, embrace all the great things Portsmouth has to offer! The city, and the UK in general, is a very vibrant place so make sure you enjoy it and make the most of it. Eat the food, see the sights and learn the history.

Finally...

- Try to be patient because it takes time to settle in a new country.
- Remember that children learn by example so they will be encouraged if you have a positive attitude.
- Whenever you feel discouraged or feel that things are not going well, remember why you decided to move to the UK and focus on that. There are also lots of sources of support for you - always talk to someone if you feel down.
- Thousands of people have moved to the UK and now live happy, successful and fulfilled lives. It may take a while, but things will work out and you are doing the best you can for your family.

For more information and support, contact:

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