



Tips for the international transfer
process for foreign service families
with children with disabilities
and different needs

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Introduction

If you are a foreign service family with a child with a disability or different needs (learning differences, medical needs, behavioural or mental health issues, etc.), you will have a lot to consider when it comes to international transfers. You may have questions about where to apply, how much to say about your child in the transfer application, what to do when a post doesn't have all the support your child needs, or even whether to stay at headquarters for a while. In some posting locations, it may be difficult to find a school for your child. You may also need to look for new therapists, doctors, and medications.

This guide shares tips and experience from foreign service families who have been there. As every child, family, posting location, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs is different, some of the information, ideas and resources in this document may not apply to you, but we hope this guide helps make the transfer process a bit easier for you and your family.

1. Try to understand your child's needs as best as possible

If you or your child's doctors or teachers have questions or concerns about your child's development, behaviour, or ability to learn, try to get an assessment done before moving. An assessment by a licensed specialist can help pinpoint your child's specific strengths and weaknesses,

and what kind of support he or she might need. Getting a diagnosis will give your child access to more support for services, and will also help schools determine if they can meet your child's needs.

Some other things to think about:

- Because assessments often involve input from the child's teachers and others who know the child, they are likely to be more accurate if they are done with input from teachers and providers who know your child well; consider doing assessments before moving to a new location.
- Assessments should be shared with your child's teachers, support staff, and school administrators, so remember to have them translated if needed.
- In some countries or schools, assessments may be required every few years; find out what will be needed and plan ahead.
- Children with learning differences such as autism spectrum disorder or ADHD can often have more than one diagnosis. If your child receives a diagnosis that doesn't seem to cover all of his or her challenges, you might ask to have your child assessed again for other issues.
- For children with medical issues, follow your child's doctor's advice about any tests and follow-ups that might be needed. It's important to understand your child's current medical needs and expected or possible future needs (such as changes in medications and therapies, or surgeries) and to plan accordingly before the move.
- Children on the autism spectrum often have more difficulty with change than their peers, so be prepared for changes in your child's behaviour and emotions. For example, there may be more disruptive behaviour for a time after moving to an unfamiliar environment. Plan ahead to spend extra time with your child and to find places at the new destination where your child might feel more comfortable. Bring favourite toys, foods, clothes and other in your checked luggage when possible.

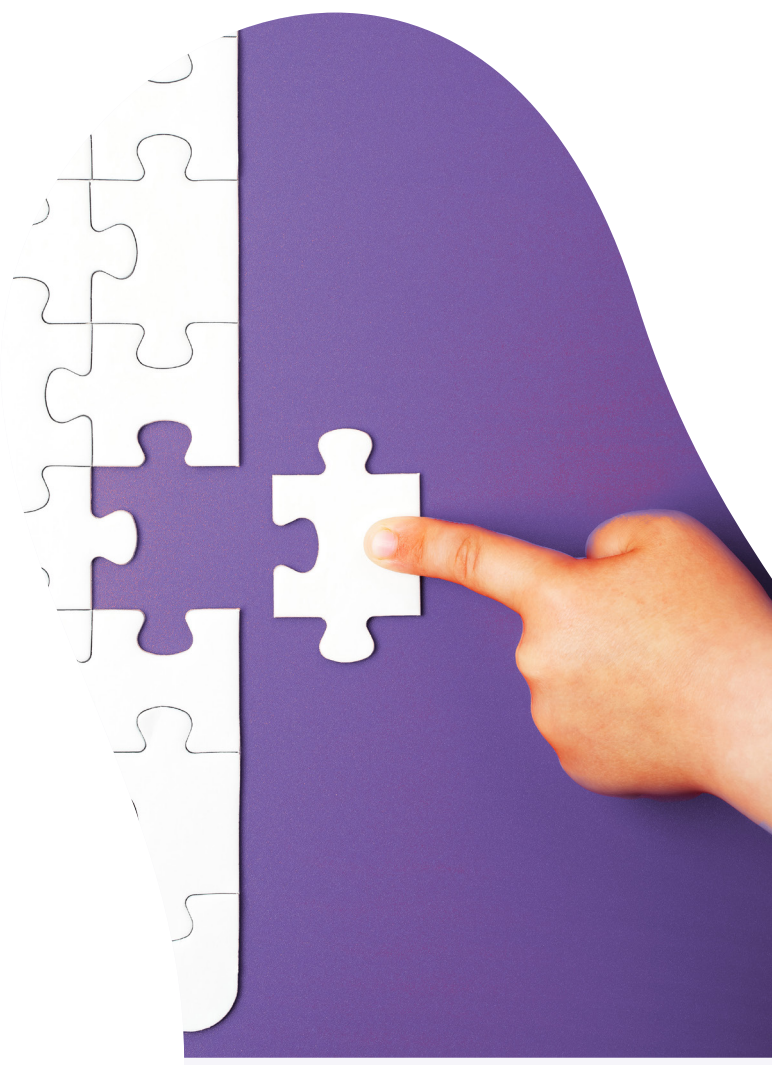
2. Find out how your Ministry of Foreign Affairs can support your family

Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) vary a lot in their awareness of and support for disabilities and different needs. If you aren't sure how or if your MFA can help, ask your MFA (or Family Office, if your MFA has one) if they provide any support for families of children with special needs. For example, this might include the ability to take your child's needs into account in the process of

deciding your next posting location; additional budget for learning support or transport to school while abroad; or advice/information from the MFA. You can also try asking your Family Office if they can put you in touch with another family in your system with similar needs so that you can learn from their experience.

Be flexible

You and your family will need to be flexible when moving abroad. Focus on finding ways to meet your child's medical and educational [needs](#), and be as flexible as possible with the rest. Apply for the posts that have suitable schools and the support your child requires. If your MFA can take needs into consideration when assigning posts, make it clear in the application that the posting locations were chosen because you have a child with additional needs that can be met in those places. Be as flexible as possible with applying for posts, while also being mindful of the local costs for special education and support. The less flexible your application is, the less likely that your MFA will be able to accommodate you.





3. Finding school options

Start early with the school search and research every possible post when the list of posts comes out. Find out which locations have a school that might fit your child's needs. Don't assume you know which countries

will have schools that meet your needs – check what is available in each location before assuming that it will or won't work.

Options to consider include:

- International schools. Check the US Department of State's excellent list of international schools around the world that accept students with various special needs. It covers the vast majority of posting locations for diplomatic, consular, and development missions: <https://www.state.gov/overseas-schools-offering-support-to-children-with-special-needs> Search online, as well, for example "schools for students with autism in Bangkok".
- Local public schools can be an option for some, even if your child does not speak the language. If language-related disabilities are not an issue, young children generally learn new languages quickly, and public schools sometimes have more resources for additional needs than international schools. Attending a local public school will also give your child and family more exposure to the local culture than attending an international school.
- Depending on your child's needs and what works for your family, online schooling or home schooling may also be an option. Many options and supports can be found online, for example Outschool (<https://outschool.com>), or perhaps you can find a group or program that fits your national curriculum. Be aware that some MFAs may require approval from the embassy / representation for home schooling – ask your MFA if you are not sure.
- One-on-one instruction with a teacher locally or online
- Staying at headquarters if the child's needs are very hard to meet abroad, either with the whole family, or with the partner/spouse staying with the child while the foreign service employee is posted abroad. As with any big decision, the impact on the family as a whole should be carefully considered.
- Boarding schools

Online parent support groups based in specific locations may also provide useful information about schools and services in that country/location.

Contact the Admissions Officer or Principal at each school that looks like it might meet your child's needs, give them enough information to get a sense of your child, and ask if they think your child would be likely to be accepted to the school. Be open and honest, clearly explaining your child's diagnosis, challenges, abilities, and needs. Tell them if your child has an individualized learning plan, takes medications, and/or receives therapy (physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, ABA, etc.), or requires any accommodations (for example, an aide or shadow teacher, extra time during exams, etc.). Be clear with them about what your MFA will pay for or provide, as some schools may be more inclined to say "no" if they think they will have to provide a shadow teacher, for example. This first contact should give you a good sense of whether each school might be an option for your child, or definitely won't work.



Warning!

International schools generally do not receive any money from the local government, and therefore they are usually not required to accept all students. **In other words, international schools can (and sometimes do) refuse to admit students with special needs if they do not have the infrastructure, staffing, or the desire to accept them.**

It is best to be honest – do not hide your child's needs or challenges in order to get your child accepted into a school. If a school finds out that parents hid information about the child's needs during the application process, the child can be expelled from the school. If a school does not accept your child, ask them if they can recommend another school in that location; international schools usually know the other international schools in the area, and may be able to recommend a less well-known school that is a better fit for your child.

4. How to assess a school

Visit potential schools before enrolling (or even before applying for the post) if possible, and bring your child with you. Watch how the teachers and staff interact with your child, and how your child reacts in the school environment. Does the school seem welcoming and inclusive? Does it have the resources to meet your child's needs? Do you think your child will feel comfortable there? Plan a lot of time for school visits – you may have to visit several schools to find one that can meet your child's needs and which will accept your child.

If actual visits are not possible, ask the schools if they can arrange a virtual (online) visit and tour for you and your child, instead. You can still see how your child reacts to the school, whether the school seems like it would meet your child's needs, and how the teachers and staff

interact with your child during a virtual visit.

If your child has a condition that is not well known, it may be helpful to provide some brief background information about your child's diagnosis, and guidelines for teachers (try looking on specialised websites). If there are issues you will need to discuss with the school that may be uncomfortable or embarrassing for your child, be sure to plan a visit or discussion without your child so that you can talk openly with the teachers, therapists, or school administrators.

Ask questions to find out if the schools have the experience and resources to meet your child's needs and to provide a supportive learning environment for your child.

Some questions that might be helpful are:

- What diagnoses do other students with additional needs at the school have? *(Are there other students with similar needs at the school? Does the school have experience with needs similar to your child's needs?)*
- What sort of learning support is available at the school, and what training do the learning support staff have? *(Does the school have the resources to help your child?)*
- How many students at the school get learning support? *(If your child would be the only one receiving learning support, the school may not have much experience with students with additional needs, and may be overestimating their ability to meet your child's needs).*
- What extra costs should be expected for additional support such as an aide, learning support, etc.? Would the number of children who receive extra support at the school affect the costs for your child? *(Is this option affordable for your family, keeping in mind any financial support you will receive from your MFA? Will your family have to cover the full cost of an aide, or would the costs be shared with other families?)*





- Is the entire school accessible and wheelchair / walker-friendly, including bathrooms, entryways, width of hallways, gym/pool? Is transport to/from the school accessible?
- How many students are in each class (teacher to student ratio)? *If your child requires a lot of assistance or has difficulty with concentration, will the child get enough attention and help?*
- Are there students at the school with shadow teachers or one-on-one aides? Does the school help find shadow teachers/aides if needed? *(If your child needs assistance, is the school open to that and supportive?)*
- Is any therapy provided at the school during or after school hours, for example a social skills club for students who have difficulty with social skills? Do they have therapists that they work with who they can recommend? *(If your child needs therapy or extra support, being able to receive some of that at school can make it easier for parents and students).*
- Would it be possible to talk with a parent who currently has a child at the school? *(Other parents can be a great way to get a sense of how the school works in practice, how good the support is, etc.)*

When you find a school that looks like it would be a good fit for your child, see if they can commit to accepting your child if you should get the post, before you apply. However, be aware that in many cases, schools may not be able to guarantee your child a spot before you officially apply, as this will often depend on the number of children applying in that grade, your child's specific needs, the availability of support services, and other factors.

No matter how much you prepare, however, things can still go wrong. The international school you thought would be perfect might have a change in management, or your child's shadow teacher might decide to leave and you can't find a suitable replacement. There may be times when you might need to consider acting as your child's shadow teacher, or home schooling for a short time. Flexibility and being open to creative solutions will help in such situations.

5. Therapists and medical specialists



If your child requires any kind of therapy or a specialist, you might want to search online before applying to be sure you can find therapists who speak your child's language / specialists you can talk to at that post.



Therapy options may look different in different posting locations; try to be as open-minded as possible, while making sure that you would be able to find qualified, licensed therapists for needed services.



If your child has disability insurance from your government, the insurance may be able to reimburse at least some of the costs for therapies received abroad. In this case, they are likely to require that those therapies are provided by licensed therapists, and only for recognized therapies that your child has been prescribed.



If providers are hard to find, try asking an online parent group / support group based in that location.



When you know where you will be posted, ask the doctor or specialist if they can recommend a new doctor, specialist, or medical centre in that location. You can also ask the current doctor for a referral letter describing your child's diagnosis, and the care they have been giving to your child, to make it easier to find a new specialist in the posting location.



The legal age at which a child/young person may decide whether or not to share their medical records varies from country to country. This can make it difficult to share your child's medical records with new specialists when moving internationally. For example, in some countries a child as young as 10 or 12 can choose not to share their medical information with a new doctor, specialist, or parent. It may be a good idea to check the situation in the country you will be moving to.



6. Medications

If your child takes medications, check if those medications are allowed in the countries where you are considering a posting. For example, prescription medications for ADHD which are allowed in some countries are banned in others. If a medication is banned, alternative medications are often available. However, they may not work as well, or may cause side effects, and finding another medication that works can take some time. Inform yourself early about the situation so you have time to make adjustments if necessary.

Be aware that this can apply to non-prescription medicines, as well. CBD oil (generally used to help with behaviour and mood issues) is illegal in some countries, and bringing it into these countries can lead to very serious legal consequences. Although diplomatic privilege “should” mean that your luggage may not be checked when entering the country, in practice checks may still happen and you do not want to be in the position of being found bringing illegal substances into the country. Melatonin (used to improve sleep) is available without a prescription in some countries, only by prescription in others, and is banned in some countries.

What about sending medications by diplomatic pouch? If you have the possibility to use diplomatic pouch services, you might consider sending medications from your home country to your posting country. However, depending on the country and the medication, some prescriptions require regular follow-up visits to a doctor or specialist, which may make it impossible to continue to receive medications from home after the first few months abroad. Check with your child’s doctor or specialist before you move to find out if and how often follow-up visits would be required. You can also ask your doctor to give you as large a supply of medication as possible when moving, so that you have more time to see a doctor in the new country and get a prescription there.

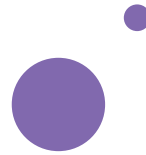
Because of the potentially very serious consequences, we do not recommend sending medications by diplomatic pouch or regular mail if the medication is illegal in either the posting country or home country.



Think outside the box

It might not be easy to find everything your child needs, but there are often a lot more options available than you might think. Don't be afraid to try a "crazy" solution if it helps your child! Some examples of creative solutions include:

- Attending school in a new language because it has better services;
- Organizing online learning support, tutoring, speech therapy, or executive functioning coaching;
- Hiring a therapist from abroad and bringing them with you on an *au pair* type of contract;
- Asking a school if your child can attend part-time for a reduced fee, for example because of the child's low energy, time needed for medical care or therapy, or to reduce costs;
- Sending your child across a border for school in a nearby country with better support (be sure to discuss all the implications with your MFA, for example emergency health care, diplomatic status, and residency requirements);
- Trying a different (professionally recognized) therapy that might help your child if you can't find the child's current therapy in the country;
- Turning down a career move to allow your child to attend/finish school or start job training at headquarters;
- Regularly returning to headquarters for visits with specialist doctors and providers who make your child's hearing aids, specialized insoles, walker, or other aids, or who prescribe your child's medications, etc.



7. Further considerations: finding a good balance

International schools typically charge additional fees for learning support, shadow teachers, aides, speech therapy, etc. Ask your MFA, insurance, and public disability insurance (if your child has it) which costs they will cover while your family is posted abroad. In some countries, your child may be eligible to receive therapy or other services through the public system. Sometimes you might decide that it is worth it to you to pay for some services or supports privately,

if the MFA or insurance does not cover it.

In some cases, the best option might be to stay at headquarters, or to have a separate household for a while, with the foreign service employee posted abroad and the rest of the family at “home” to get the support they need. Talk openly with your partner/spouse to find the best balance between the career and your child’s needs, trying to be as flexible as possible on both.



Attention!

Foreign service employees and their family members are often covered by the social insurance system of their home country. In this case, the **social benefits** that are supported by tax payers (for example, benefits related to illness, disabilities, occupational accidents, etc.) will generally be determined according to the home country's laws, also while you are posted abroad. Using social benefits in the country where you are posted would allow foreign service families to benefit from two systems at once, and therefore may not be allowed – and could even result in legal conflicts. Before you use any service offered by local public institutions abroad (such as a school bus, personal assistant etc.), be sure you understand how the situation is for you.

There is of course no conflict if you privately pay for similar services outside of the public system (for example, privately hiring an assistant, or paying for school bus service at an international school).

8. Preparing for the next move

When preparing for the next move, much of the process will be the same. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Be sure to ask for your child's school, therapy, and medical records so that you can share them with the schools and providers at the next post.
- Ask your child's teachers if they have any recommendations to give the teachers at the next school (for example, strategies they have found work well with your child).
- Ask your child's therapist(s) if they would write a short report for the next therapist(s) summarizing what they have worked on with your child and any important issues. Therapists may also have recommendations for teachers at the next destination as well, for example with improving attention in the classroom or strategies to stay on task.
- If returning to headquarters, check if there are specific requirements, for example registering your child before arrival in the school district, or having a new assessment done of your child's current needs if required for setting up educational supports.
- If your child has an individualized education plan (IEP), make sure it is up to date. Also make sure before you return that your home country will accept/reinstate the IEP so that your child is placed in a school setting which matches their needs.





You are not alone!

Parents of children with disabilities and different needs must often take on the roles of medical assistant, interpreter, special needs advocate, physical therapist, tutor, and unofficial expert in disability issues. It takes time to build a support system to meet your child's needs – medical specialists, learning support teachers, therapists, orthopaedists, a hospital – and rebuilding that team in a new place can take a lot of time and energy.

Family and friends may not always understand the challenges involved, or may assume that, as a diplomatic family, you receive more assistance than you really do. Try to find time to relax and explore your posting location, and also some support for yourself, for example among parents of other special needs children, in a local parent support group, or from a psychologist.

Planning an international transfer with children with a disability or different needs is a challenge, but preparation, flexibility, and good support can make it easier.

We wish you good luck and all the best on your international journey!



9. EUFASA, advocacy for foreign service families, and policy recommendations

What is EUFASA?

The European Union Foreign Affairs Spouses' Partners and Families Association (EUFASA) is an international non-profit association (*Association Internationale Sans But Lucratif* or AISBL) under Belgian law. The purpose of EUFASA is to promote the exchange of information and ideas among its member associations, thus improving the support of spouses, partners and families of officers employed by European Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs). EUFASA aims to identify effective family support practices, raise awareness both at national and EU levels, and gain support for family-friendly policies within European MFAs. More information about EUFASA can be found at <https://eufasa.org>.

Advocating for better support

Through EUFASA's work and exchange, we recognize that awareness of – and support for – special needs is poor within many foreign service systems. We also recognize that it is sometimes difficult for families to advocate for their own needs within their foreign service. At the same time, we understand that MFAs have limited resources. If you feel that better supports are needed within your system, here are some things you can do:

- Ask your Family Office (if you have one) or MFA to provide support (or better support), for example by providing information and advice on transfers with children with disabilities and different needs; taking needs into account when organizing transfers; and providing financial support for learning support, therapies, and other needed support when abroad.
- Share the policy recommendations below with your Family Office or MFA.
- Ask your partners' and spouses' association to advocate for better support for special needs within your MFA. If there is no diplomatic partners' and spouses' association in your system, consider starting one.
- Encourage your partners' and spouses' association to join EUFASA if they aren't already a member. Being a member of EUFASA makes it easier to exchange information and best practices within European MFAs.

Recommendations

EUFASA recommends that MFAs...

- Provide diplomatic families with a Family Office or another designated MFA employee or office for basic information and support.
- When the MFA cannot provide a Family Office, ensure that other mechanisms are in place to provide information on schooling and support for families of children with special needs. For example, in systems where the diplomatic partners'/families' associations are supported by the MFA to provide some assistance to families, this support should include resources to support families with special needs.
- Take special needs into consideration as one factor when planning international transfers, along with the foreign service officer's experience, languages, and other competencies.
- Be open to discussing creative solutions with foreign service families to meet their needs.
- Provide adequate financial support for foreign service children with special needs, including matching the level of support the child would have received had she or he stayed at headquarters for things like learning support, therapies, shadow teachers or aides, transport to and from school, etc.

Although providing supports to foreign service families has a cost, MFAs should be mindful that there are many costs and risks when adequate supports are not provided, such as:

- lost efficiency when employees must spend more time finding and organizing supports;
- inability to place the best-suited candidate in a position abroad because there is not enough support for the child at post;
- lost know-how if employees leave the system because their foreign service career is not compatible with their family life;
- lost reputation as a desirable employer; and
- a reduced ability to attract and retain talent in the system.

Providing adequate support for foreign service families with disabilities and/or different needs children is therefore good policy for MFAs.



Resources

Resources in English

ADHD: A [Guide for Parents](#) by the ADHD Foundation is a great source of information about ADHD and the effects it can have on children. The guide also provides parents with lots of practical tips and information to help children with ADHD.

www.autismspeaks.org offers lots of information, resources and toolkits on many autism-related issues like challenging behaviours, assistive technology for people who are non-verbal, safety issues, sleep, etc.

www.chadd.org The US-based Association for Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder has comprehensive information and tips for parents, teachers, and professionals on diagnosing and managing ADHD in children, including psychosocial treatments, medications, ADHD in teenagers, coexisting conditions, etc.

www.cty.jhu.edu CTY offers high-quality advanced courses online and in person for gifted students in grades 2 – 12 on a wide variety of topics.

www.interdys.org The International Dyslexia Association has resources for families on assessing for dyslexia, strategies, accommodations for dyslexia, dysgraphia, and more.

www.helenarkell.org.uk The Helen Arkell Dyslexia Charity has good videos, information about dyslexia, and courses for young people, parents, and professionals.

www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk Information and tips for parents of children with dyspraxia / developmental coordination disorder, which affects fine and gross motor coordination, as well as planning, time management, and many activities of daily life.

www.hoagiesgifted.org/parents.htm Hoagies' Gifted Education page has extensive resources for parents of gifted and "twice exceptional" (also called "2e") children – children who are both gifted, and have a learning difference like ADHD, "high-functioning" autism, or dyslexia.

www.kelly-mahler.com Kelly Mahler is an occupational therapist who provides resources, courses, and support for difficulties with interoception (the ability to feel what is going on inside one's body, for example hunger, thirst, a need to use the bathroom, etc., which also affects the ability to recognize one's emotions). She also manages a Facebook group on this topic.

www.ldonline.org has many resources for parents and teachers on learning disabilities and ADHD.

www.rarediseases.org This US-based organization provides information for patients and families of people with rare diseases, including links to patient organizations, genetic testing and gene therapy, clinical trial information, etc.

www.seniainternational.org SENIA (the Special Educations Network & Inclusion Association) is an association of mostly international schools, educators, and special education professionals who work to improve support for children with special needs. Their international and regional conferences are open to parents and specialists, and membership in SENIA can be a good indication that a school is inclusive and supportive for children with special needs.

www.spdfoundation.net The SPD Foundation provides research and resources on sensory processing disorder, including links to international parent groups, and lots of information in their online library.

www.woodbinehouse.com has books for parents, teachers, and children on special needs such as ADHD, Down syndrome and the autism spectrum.

www.understood.org is a website for parents and teachers of children with learning and attentional issues, with a range of information and strategies.

www.outschool.com Outschool offers a wide range of online classes and study groups for a variety of age groups, which can help children who are home schooling or who aren't receiving everything they need at school.

[Transitioning to and from a Foreign Assignment with a Child with Special Learning Needs](#) Written by the US Department of State for their foreign service families.

[Third-culture kids: A handbook for globally mobile families](#) was produced by EUFASA specifically for foreign service families, and gives some good background and tips about raising children abroad:

<https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/63328748/tck-handbook-2020>

[The reason I jump](#), by Naoki Higashida. This book by a 13-year-old boy with autism provides rare insight on how autism is experienced by people who have it. While each person is unique, the book can help parents better understand how children with autism may experience the world and why they may behave the way they do. The book has been translated into many other languages, including French, German, Spanish, and Portuguese.

Resources in French

www.tousalecole.fr The website includes information on a wide range of children's health issues including epilepsy, asthma, depression, cancer, anorexia, with the goal of helping children with health issues to attend school.

www.dys-positif.fr The Dyspositif website offers a wealth of information, articles and practical tools for children with learning differences (dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, etc). The website includes useful worksheets and games/activities for each age group and class level.

www.happy-autisme.com A blog by a mother of a child with autism with tips to experience autism positively, including tips for starting school, speaking about autism to children in school, and travelling with a child with autism.

(www.happy-autisme.com/comment-voyager-avec-un-enfant-autiste)

www.autistessansfrontieres.com A good starting point with a lot of resources and links for everything related to autism in France/French speaking countries.

Resources in German

www.autismus.de This website from a self-help association has a lot of information about autism for parents/families and teachers in German.

www.autismus.ch This Swiss site has a lot of information about supporting children and youth with autism, including parenting, communication, school, government support, etc.

www.autistenhilfe.at This website from the Austrian autism organization Österreichische Autistenhilfe provides information and tips about autism for family members, teachers, and professionals in Austria.

www.adhs.info The German Central ADHS Network provides scientifically-based information, tips, and links about ADHD for both parents and family members, as well as for children, adolescents and adults with ADHD.

www.legasthenie.at The website of Austrian dyslexia organization offers information and a lot of hands-on resources for children (e.g. apps, videos, etc.).

Information about support in the public school system in Berlin is available at: www.berlin.de/sen/bildung/schule/foerderung

Information about support in the public school system in Bern (Switzerland) can be found at: www.bern.ch/themen/bildung/schule/foerderangebote

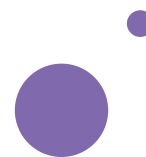
Resources in Hungarian

www.auti.hu provides a lot of information and advice about autism for families in Hungarian.

Resources in Portuguese

[Sentidos: O grande Livro das Perturbações do Desenvolvimento e Comportamento](#), by Nuno Lobo Antunes. This book on developmental and behavioural disorders discusses diagnosis, pharmacology, and the role of parents and caregivers.

[Mais Forte do que eu: hiperatividade e défice de atenção. Causas, consequências e soluções](#), by Ana Rodrigues and Nuno Lobo Antunes. This book for parents and teachers explains current knowledge, symptoms and diagnosis of hyperactivity and attention deficit. Medication, follow-up, and how to manage at home and at school are also discussed.



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This document was produced by EUFASA's working group on children with special needs: Amanda Neil (UK), Manuela Caramujo (Portugal), Petra Horáková Křištofová (Czech Republic), and Melissa Woods Nelson (Switzerland). We thankfully acknowledge the Swiss Family Office for sharing their document "*International transfers with children who have special needs*", which provided a helpful basis in developing this guide. Contact: kids@eufasa.org