

Education Maintenance Allowance

Karen Spy gives a personal account

The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) is paid to young people aged 16 - 19 who are in full time education but whose family income is £30,000 per year or less. The young person can receive £30, £20 or £10 per week depending on income. There are 2 bonuses of £150 paid in January and July dependant on all the learning agreement criteria being met and 100% attendance

My son had been home educated for a total of 9 years although he had only become known to the authorities after he returned to school for a year aged 15. He got the chance to apply for the EMA in January 05.

I phoned the EMA office in Glenrothes and at first they were unsure how to process his application as we were the first ones applying in Fife. They presented me with a printed out learning agreement that was not entirely in keeping with the flexible approach secured in the EMA guidance. I suggested some changes and these were taken on board after a meeting with our advisor/development officer. He already knew me as a previous member of the Schoolhouse committee.

I know there were some issues which needed to be resolved internally at the Fife EMA office. The issue of just how much work our advisor would have to do came up...he would normally stop being our advisor after my son's 16th birthday. This meant that he had to agree to still keep my son on his books, so to speak. He was happy to do this but was assured that he would only need to communicate with us to review the learning agreement and no other contact was made until we wanted to re write the learning agreement later in the year.

The monthly returns were my responsibility and I had to make sure they were sent off on the last day of the month they were due. (This was not a normal calendar month but followed the school attendance dates). These returns were no more than a pre printed declaration that my son was keeping to the learning agreement and had 100% attendance, signed by my son and myself.

There is a huge amount of trust involved in this whole procedure and we were very aware of how important it was that we kept to the agreement. There is a requirement of 100% attendance. My son was able to choose in advance when and how his learning would take place. My son was ill for a week but this did not

affect his allowance as I phoned the office to let them know.

When it came to writing out a Learning Agreement, my sons particular situation was I think slightly unusual in that he was recovering from Post Traumatic Stress (PTS) after returning to school to do highers the year before and being badly bullied in the process. This meant that we had to be very carefully with regard to what he should set himself as goals for the year. The first learning agreement continued the work he had started in higher maths, physics, English etc. The PTS was making him depressed and the work was not therapeutic enough. I explained all this to our advisor when we decided to change the learning agreement and he was very understanding.

My son decided to cut back on the amount of academic work he was attempting to do and focus on the things he found most therapeutic. Incorporated into his learning agreement was his Youth Theatre work, sailing, music and Art his goal at the end of the Summer was to apply to Elmwood college to do an NC in Art & Design.

The award is progress based not achievement based. So long as there is progress the EMA is paid....even if the original goals are not reached or change along the way.

I was automatically sent a form to fill out when the time came for my son to apply for the bonus in July. I had a phone conversation with the advisor who asked us a few questions about how my son felt he had done and how I felt he had done. He was awarded £150 bonus on top of his £20 per week as he had progressed well enough.

My son received the EMA as a home educated young person from 3rd January to 1st July 05. He is currently half way through his NC in Art and Design at Elmwood and still receives the EMA through the college. Our experience of applying for and receiving EMA as Autonomous Home Educators was a very positive one and the extra money was extremely useful. My son used a good deal of it to travel to various workshops, his Youth Theatre and for art materials; He used the bonus to upgrade his guitar.

I hope anyone thinking about applying for the EMA will be encouraged by our positive experience.