



CHOOSING A FIRST SCHOOL

By Carrie Symes, Illustrated by Vicky Scott

Your child's first day at school: it's a day to remember, a day for keeps but arriving at that day involves a huge amount of time, effort, research and discussion. The process can be fraught with uncertainty, indecision and fear of Getting It Wrong.

The choices presented to us can seem overwhelming. Our divisive two-tier education system, for example, private or state? For many of us, there is no choice; either there is no option financially or there is simply no good state school in the vicinity. Add faith schools, academies and free schools into the melee and it's not surprising that you're up burning the midnight oil. People often say, "Look at your child and think what type of school might suit him/her." I found this particularly unhelpful. I didn't really KNOW what kind of 4-year-old child I had.

For state schools, you need to apply through your local council. Go to gov.uk/schools-admissions/choosing-schools for comprehensive guidance. Read the latest Ofsted report and visit the schools' websites. For primary schools the application deadline is usually the January preceding the September they will start school, with results available mid-April.

If you are looking for a list of private schools in your area, log on to isc.co.uk/schools goodschoolsguide.co.uk and, of course, the a&u Schools Directory, which is updated and published every year.

THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN CHOOSING A SCHOOL

Proximity is key, making playdates, coffee mornings and getting to school under your own steam all easier. You might want to pick a school near a park so the kids can meet up after school; maybe you want it to be near a Tube station so you can get to work quickly.

How important is academic achievement?

Look at the league tables but not too seriously as they are sometimes merely a reflection of the catchment area. For private schools, find

out which secondary schools they send children on to. There is usually information on their website but, if not, ask. Some private schools also do the SATS tests in Year 6 (as do all state schools) and publish these on their websites.

- **How important are sport and art and what are the facilities for this?**
- **Does the school have an active PTA that you might want to be involved in?**
- **Do you prefer a single sex or co-ed environment?**
- **Is there a wide cultural and social mix?**
- **What is their pastoral care plan and how is it implemented?**
- **What is the provision for children with special educational needs?**
Very few of us know whether our child is dyslexic or dyspraxic until school age.
- **Do you have twins or triplets?** Think carefully before putting them in the same class as it's cute at four but by seven you may find, as I did, that they have different learning needs.
- **Should you consider a school with a nursery attached or does the school go on to a senior school?**

LOOKING AHEAD

Where do you envisage your children going to secondary school? Would you like your child to go to your old school? Boarding school at 13? The fab grammar down the road at 11?

Some prep/primary schools have automatic transfer to a senior school. If you decide you want to send your child to a different senior school, you should be aware that the school is unlikely to prepare your child for the exam and you will need to source extra tutoring for this purpose. Ask the school directly about this. Sending your child to one 'all-through' school has its benefits, not least by taking away the pressure of exams age 11, but 15 years is a long time

to be at one school.

With boys, in particular, it is important to think ahead as in the private system they have traditionally moved at 13 rather than 11 and, although there is a shift towards the 11+ in some schools, it rather depends on what kind of school you have in mind as the more traditional schools still tend to take children from 13.

Traditional feeders for 13+ start at 7 or 8 and sometimes have a pre-prep attached. If you are considering a state primary or any school that goes from 4 to 11, there will be no support for the 7/8+, and these exams may be actively discouraged.

If the school only goes up to age 11 and you want your child to sit Common Entrance for public (senior) schools at 13, you will have to send them either to a prep school (day/boarding) for two years or to a London senior day school at 11 with the prospect of more exams at 13.

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

- Scour the school's website: look at the lunch menus, sports fixture lists, even school trips and apparent parental involvement. The proportion of photos given to learning/play/sport etc will give you a sense of the priorities of the school.
- Read the latest Ofsted or ISI inspection report. Identify the recommendations and ask the head how they are being addressed.
- You should also talk to other people but choose carefully who. Find a parent with a child at a particular school, whom you may not know. Bear in mind that all parents want to justify their own decision to send their child to a school so it can be quite hard to get an objective view. It's worth discussing your child's future schooling with their nursery teachers. They know your child well.
- Go and see as many schools as you can. No amount of research is a substitute for spending time at a school. Schools increasingly use Open Days to show themselves off. Do walk right into classrooms – you see and notice much more than peering in from outside.

WHAT DO LOOK OUT FOR WHEN VISITING A SCHOOL

- Is there a lively buzz around the school?
- Do people smile at you?
- Is the school clean and tidy?
- Are the walls covered with recent examples of children's work?
- Do the children look focused? Ditto the teachers?
- Is IT being used? Do the children have iPads? How is it embedded into the curriculum?
- Do ask to see the playground/toilets/changing rooms/dining area; you can tell a lot from those parts of the school.
- Make sure you meet the head and don't be afraid to ask questions. It is not always the case that the more charismatic the head the better the school but it's important that you feel a connection.
- Also ask any questions that weren't answered in the prospectus or on the website, for example:
What is their policy on holiday homework? What clubs are offered after school? Is there a breakfast/holiday club? How does the head see the school developing? How do they cater for children with special needs? Which schools/nurseries feed into the school and which schools do the children go on to? What's the best thing about their school?

REGISTRATION

For private schools the registration fee does not guarantee you a place. Each school has its own criteria and you need to be vigilant.

Registering for state schools is more straightforward and admissions criteria will vary from school to school. I'll never forget the headteacher of my children's primary school counting the steps (343) as she measured the distance from school to our house!

Some private schools do pre-entry assessments at 3/4 years old. Others assess at 7 or 8. 4+ assessments usually take place in the Spring term before entry and involve your child going to the school and being observed playing with other children. At academic schools, they may also be asked to name letters, decode simple words and to recognise, add or subtract numbers. Tutoring for the 4+ was actively discouraged by all four schools I spoke to, with headteachers saying that it was easy to tell when a child had been prepped.

Although it may seem like you are forking out hundreds of pounds to register for several schools when he/she can only attend one, it is but a drop in the ocean if you are going private and worth it to avoid unnecessary stress in three years' time.

INDEPENDENT ADVICE

With London private school fee increases showing no signs of slowing down, parents inevitably want value for money and their expectations can be unrealistically high. Sally Hobbs, senior school adviser at Mavor Associates and newly retired head of Orchard House School in Chiswick, says, "Parents are more bewildered than ever. There is simply too much choice. We can provide a bespoke service and do much of the groundwork for clients. Collaboration is key, with parents and with schools." It appears to be just as much about getting the right fit for parents as it is for the child. "Wanting the child to be happy is not enough. Parents want to be sure the child will be stimulated by a wide range of activities too," continues Mrs Hobbs.

Marina Dawson Damer, a schools placement specialist, urges parents to be realistic about what they can expect both of schools and their children. She advises her clients not to put their child under undue academic pressure but to choose a school where their child has time to focus on making friends and settling in. This is sensible advice from an expert who prides herself on placing children in the right school. This type of service can take a lot of the stress out of choosing a school and make for a happy start to school life.

First and foremost, you must trust your own instincts. You will be expected to support the school and your level of support may be mentioned in your child's report to secondary schools. Generally, your child will be happy if you are happy. It's no good signing up to a highly competitive sporty school with Saturday matches if you like to go to the country every weekend. Forewarned is forearmed but you can't tell what the future holds.

On that first day when they come home all shiny-faced and dying to tell you all about it, all the questions and the worries and the hard work will seem like a distant memory. It's a day for keeps for you, too. Oh and don't forget to take a photo.

Carrie Symes has taught at Fairley House School and Orchard House School. She leaves Orchard House this year to become the Head of St Christopher's School, Hampstead.