

Making the most of an Open Day

The autumn term is normally the busiest time in the calendar for parents thinking about independent schools. It is when schools hold open days and events and when registrations for entrance tests are take place.

Open days are a great chance to make your first, informal visit to a school. Such events can give you a wonderful overview of a school. But do bear in mind that these days are carefully planned to showcase the best aspects of the school. So how can you best use your time to really find out whether a school will suit your child?

Many schools will use current pupils as tour guides during open days and other visits. This is a great opportunity to delve a little deeper and to find out what it is really like on a day-to-day basis. Many pupils are refreshingly honest about the things that they like and dislike.

Have your list of questions ready - using their website and prospectus think about the things that are important to you. Staff and pupils are usually on hand and this is your chance to talk to them face-to-face.

Do you think the facilities provide an environment that would inspire your child? Is there an atmosphere of achievement? Does the school celebrate all successes or is there a more narrow emphasis on academic or musical excellence?

A great school will take an interest in your child rather than in you. Is there evidence of this as you talk to staff and pupils?

Most heads will be present at their open days and, although they may be very busy, this is a chance to grab a few words with them. They should be able to express the ethos of their school and convince you that they will have the best interests of your children at heart. The head of other members of the senior management team will also be able to tell you about future plans for the school. Are there any major buildings projects on the horizon? Are facilities being upgraded?

It is always worth taking time to look at the pupil displays on the walls. Are all subjects and ability ranges covered? Or do you only see work from the top achievers? Is the work interesting and innovative? Would it be the sort of thing that would stimulate your child?

Don't forget the practicalities. If you work you may need to use after-school clubs or homework clubs. Is there provision for dropping off before the main school day starts? Are there flexible boarding arrangements to allow your child to sleep over one or two nights if required? How will your child get to school? Are there school-run or parent-run buses?

Some questions

Many questions can be answered ahead of a visit by reading the latest ISI Inspection Report and checking league tables. However, it is worth arming yourself with your own list before arriving at the school. Here are some of the questions worth asking.

- How are pupils selected? What is the school looking for in the pupils it takes? Is there any special preparation required?
- Ask about 'value added' scores. Good schools should use a system the improvement in pupils' performance over the years. Are good results only the product of a very bright intake?
- What are class sizes like at different stages of the school? What might be appropriate for KS3 might not be right for KS4.
- How much homework is set in each year? How do the different subject co-ordinate homework to ensure that your child is not going to be overburdened?
- What are the policies for setting and streaming? How often will your child be reassessed?
- Is there automatic promotion from the Junior School to the Senior? If not, under what circumstances are pupils rejected, and how many each year?
- What is the school's attitude to discipline? Bullying? Bad language? How are school rules enforced? Who is in charge of the pastoral system? How are issues spotted early? How involved are parents if problems arise?
- What are the extra-curricular activities on offer? How are they accommodated in the timetable?

- What are the specialist (Music, Drama, Sport, ICT etc.) facilities like? In particular focus on the ones that matter to your child.