

THE PARENTS' GUIDE TO SECONDARY SCHOOL



Your essential guide to everything you
need to know about applying to and
starting secondary school.



The Parents' Guide to Secondary School

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Introduction

We all remember the day our children started primary school – a nerve-wracking time for us as well as for them. Now, seven years later, it's time to start all over again at secondary, and for most of us it's just as scary as it was first time around. *The Parents' Guide to Secondary School* has been written to guide you and your child through this important time of transition.

Choosing the right school for your child can be a fraught experience, but selecting a school is just the first part of the process. You have to make sure that you meet the criteria for your preferred school and that your child has a good chance of being accepted. Then you have to work out what to do if your child doesn't get a place – whether to appeal, how to appeal and what the alternatives are. Once you've gone through that, you need to prepare your child for the transition: making sure they have all the equipment they need, buying the right uniform and helping them get ready psychologically for a big change. Finally, you want to help them through those first few difficult weeks and months, as they make new friends, cope with a new environment and adapt to a bigger workload.

This eBook takes you through everything you need to know about secondary school, from deciding which schools to apply for, through the application and appeals process, to supporting your child in the first weeks and months in their new school. It includes tips from experts and from parents who have been through the process.

Each chapter contains a wealth of expert advice to help you to navigate the secondary schools system, including how to choose a secondary school; different types of schools; how to apply; what to do if your child doesn't get a place at your first choice of school, including advice from a top education lawyer on how to appeal; practical steps to take to ensure that your child is fully prepared for starting secondary school, including what kit to buy, and ways you can help prepare your child emotionally and psychologically.

You will also find advice on how to help your child to settle in; how to adjust to the transition as a parent, including tips on ways to get involved in your child's school; a guide to the subjects taught in the secondary

curriculum; how to help your child manage homework; how assessments work and how your child's progress will be measured; how to help your child to tackle any problems they may face including dealing with an increased workload and coping with peer group pressure, and expert answers to real parents' questions about secondary school.

There is also a useful Resources section at the end of the book, which is packed with essential information to help you through the secondary school transition, including a sample letter for making an appeal, sample sets of admissions rules, information about organisations that can offer support, and useful websites covering everything from advice about passing the 11+ to staying safe on the internet.

Moving from the cosy world of primary school to the bigger world of secondary school can be a daunting prospect for both you and your child. The expert advice and practical tips contained in these pages will help to ensure that you are able to help your child to prepare for this exciting new chapter in their life, and that they begin secondary school feeling confident and supported both practically and emotionally.

Kim Thomas

Kim Thomas, PhD

Please note: Because education is now the responsibility of devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the information in this book is based on the situation in England, though some of it will apply to the other countries in the United Kingdom.

Chapter One: Choosing a secondary school

Unless you're lucky enough to have a good school on your doorstep, choosing the right secondary school can potentially be confusing and stressful. There are so many options: do I send my child to the local comprehensive, rated 'requires improvement' by Ofsted? Or the 'outstanding' faith school, which is 10 miles and a 45-minute bus ride away? What about that average comprehensive down the road that has just been turned into a swish new academy? Or should I bite the bullet and go private?

What types of schools can I choose from?

Let's take a look at what's on offer.

Comprehensive schools

The 1944 Education Act introduced a system of free secondary education in grammar and secondary modern schools for children over the age of 11. If children passed the 11+ examination, they went on to study at a grammar school; if they failed, they attended a secondary modern school (or, in a few cases, to a 'technical' school, designed to coach children in more practical skills).

Comprehensive schools, which are funded by local authorities, were introduced to replace the grammar and secondary modern system, and the aim was that they would be open to all children, regardless of ability. The first comprehensive school opened in the 1950s, but most were introduced in the late 1960s and 1970s. They are not allowed to select children on the basis of ability, so oversubscribed schools have to use other ways of choosing which children to take. This is usually done on the basis of criteria such as proximity to the school or whether the child has older siblings at the school.

There is one exception to the rule that comprehensives cannot select on the basis of ability: schools with a 'specialist' status are allowed to reserve up to 10% of places for children with an aptitude in the subject in which the school specialises. This applies to academy and foundation schools as well as to comprehensives.

Between 1994 and 2011, many comprehensive schools were awarded 'specialist' status. This means that they identified a particular subject area or areas they wanted to specialise in, such as science or modern languages. Any state secondary school could apply for specialist status, and those that succeeded were given extra money from the government and private sponsors. With this extra money, they could, to quote a government website, 'establish distinctive identities through their chosen specialisms and achieve their targets to raise standards.' Around 95% of state secondary schools have specialist status but the Specialist Schools Programme was abolished in 2011 and no new specialist schools have been created since. Some specialist schools were designated 'high performing' by the Department for Education (DfE) and allocated extra funds to enable them to share good practice with other schools in the area.

Some comprehensives unfortunately get stuck with a negative reputation, despite efforts to improve. Because comprehensives take a full range of abilities, they are unlikely to achieve the same stellar results as a school that selects the ablest children.

Linda, who chose a comprehensive school for her two sons, says, 'The local comprehensive did not have a wonderful reputation but we attended open days for two or three years before we had to apply. Over that time we could see distinct improvements, a new head was appointed and we were optimistic that the upward trend would continue. It took a leap of faith but we haven't regretted it.'

Selective or partially selective schools

Only a few local authorities in England still operate a system of selective (or grammar) schools, including Kent, Lincolnshire, Medway, Trafford, Wirral and Buckinghamshire. Parts of Warwickshire, Wiltshire and Gloucestershire also operate a selective system.

In these authorities, it is usually not compulsory for children to sit the 11+ exam. In Kent, for example, about half of the cohort chooses to take the exam, and about half of those pass it, so about 25% of the pupil population will attend one of the county's grammar schools. Most of the rest attend non-selective comprehensive schools.

In some areas, the local authority itself may not run a grammar school system, but there are individual schools within the state sector, run by trusts, which require pupils to sit an entrance exam. In Birmingham, for example, the King Edward VI foundation runs a number of grammar schools, many of them single-sex.

In London, too, there are several selective schools and some partially selective ones. The latter take a percentage of children based on their ability, with the rest awarded places on other criteria, such as proximity to the school. Typically each school has its own entrance exam, so, for example, if you apply for three separate selective schools, your child will have to take three separate examinations.

Selective schools that operate individually (rather than being part of a wider grammar school system, as in Kent) tend to be highly competitive, with only a small proportion of pupils who apply being offered places.

Examinations for selective schools vary, but usually they have three elements: verbal reasoning, non-verbal reasoning and numerical reasoning. If you plan on entering your child for a selective school examination, it makes sense to prepare them beforehand by giving them past papers or sample papers to work through. You can usually obtain these for a fee. (There is more information about sitting these examinations in the next chapter.)

Note that some selective schools apply age standardisation to the test results – a child with a September birthday will have to gain a slightly higher mark to pass than a child with a birthday in the summer.

Faith schools

Around a third of all state-funded schools are schools 'with a religious character', which is the legal term for faith schools. These schools are able to give priority to a particular faith in the teaching of religious education and in school assemblies. The religious faith may also inform the ethos of the school in other ways, although, if they are comprehensives (rather than academies) they are still expected to teach the national curriculum. In the 19th century, before there was a system of universal education, churches set up their own schools which ran alongside state schools. The 1944 Education Act brought the church schools into the state sector. About a third of faith schools in the secondary sector are Church of England schools, and most of the

rest are run by the Catholic Church. A small percentage of secondary schools are allied to other faiths, principally Judaism.

Most faith schools have admissions rules that give priority to pupils from a faith background. Some of these can be very stringent, prioritising children who have been baptised, attend church regularly and have attended a faith primary school. Others may simply ask for regular church attendance in the church of a Christian denomination, rather than in the specific faith of the school.

There are two kinds of faith school in the state sector: voluntary-controlled and voluntary-aided ('voluntary' means that the school was founded by a voluntary body, usually the church):

Voluntary-controlled schools

These schools have all their running and building costs funded by the local authority. Admissions rules are set, and staff appointments are made, in consultation with the local authority. Most Church of England schools are voluntary-controlled.

Voluntary-aided schools

These schools have all their running costs, and 90% of their building costs, funded by the local authority. They have more independence from the local authority than voluntary-controlled schools: governors, who mostly come from the founding organisation (usually the church), set the admissions rules and employ staff. Senior staff are sometimes required to practise the faith of the school. Catholic schools are all voluntary-aided.

Research the admissions criteria – and the number of children admitted under each rule – carefully before you apply. For example, you will be wasting your time if you apply for a school that has, for the past five years, taken only baptised Catholic children with regular church attendance if you are not bringing your child up in the Catholic faith.

City Technology Colleges

These are independent state schools that are free to attend for pupils of all abilities aged 11 to 18, located in urban areas. They sit outside local authority control and receive most of their funding directly from the government, with 20% coming from private sponsors. They are geared towards science, technology and the world of work, offering a range of vocational qualifications as well as GCSEs and A levels.

Rachael, who chose a Catholic secondary school for her son, says: 'We wanted Daniel to go to a school where he could be open and honest about his faith, and where he was encouraged to practise it surrounded by children from similar families so he didn't feel like he was any different or that he had to hide anything. Teenage years are difficult enough!' It wasn't just their faith that convinced Rachael that the school was the right one for her son. 'Most importantly, when we went to visit the school we immediately got really good warm feelings about it and could see Daniel thriving there. We liked the ethos and it felt very nurturing, but we also liked the fact that the headteacher is hot on discipline, particularly important, I feel, when you have boys.'

Academies

The academy schools programme was introduced by the Labour government in 2000. Although they're publicly funded, the money comes from central government rather than from the local authority. The idea initially was to remove poorly performing schools from local authority control. While some academies were built from scratch under the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme, others simply took over the buildings of existing comprehensives.

Initially, all academies had to have a specialism, such as maths or science, but the government has dropped this requirement.

In many respects, academies are like ordinary comprehensives. Like comprehensives, they are free. The key difference is that each academy is run by a sponsor, such as a private business, a faith organisation or a voluntary group. Academies have greater freedom in how they spend their budgets than comprehensives, so they are able, for example, to pay staff more or less than they would receive elsewhere in the state sector. Sponsors are expected to contribute to the running of the school by setting up an endowment fund. Unlike comprehensives, academies do not have to follow the national curriculum.

Since 2010, when legislation was introduced to make it possible for schools to become academies without

local authority permission, the number of academies has risen from 200 to over 3,300. You can find out more about the academies programme on the Department for Education website:

<https://www.gov.uk/types-of-school/academies>

Foundation and trust schools

Like comprehensive schools, foundation schools are funded by the local authority, but, as with voluntary-aided schools, the governing body has responsibility for setting admissions and employing staff. The governing body also owns the school's land and assets. Foundation schools are not selective, and pupils in these schools follow the national curriculum.

Some foundation schools, known as trust schools, have a charitable trust that owns the land and buildings. The trust has responsibility for appointing some of the school governors.

It is possible for other schools in the state sector, such as comprehensives, to apply to become foundation or trust schools. An existing foundation school can apply to become a trust school by setting up a charitable trust. About 15% of secondary schools in the state sector are foundation or trust schools.

Free schools

Free schools were introduced by the coalition government when it came to power in 2010. Anyone can set up a free school – groups of parents, universities, charities, teachers or business groups. Like academies, they are funded directly by central government rather than by local authorities. They do not practise academic selection.

Free schools control their own budget, set pay and conditions for staff, and can change the length of terms and school days. They do not have to follow the national curriculum.

Free schools are set up in areas of parental demand, as evidenced, for example, by a petition – typically these will be areas where there are not enough local school places, or local schools are thought to be doing a poor job. The Department for Education considers each application for a free school on its merits. There are currently over 400 free schools in England.

Fee-paying schools

There are about 2,500 fee-paying, or independent, schools in the UK. That figure includes the primary as well as the secondary sector. Fee-paying schools are run independently, and are exempt from state control. They can set their own curriculum, though some choose to follow the national curriculum. They are monitored and inspected either by Ofsted or by the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI). Generally, fee-paying schools will have better maintained buildings, better facilities for activities such as sport and drama and fewer children in each class.

The older fee-paying schools, such as Eton, Winchester and Harrow, are known for historical reasons as 'public' schools. They are usually regarded as more prestigious than other fee-paying schools, which are referred to as 'private schools'. These days a school is commonly designated 'public' if its headteacher is a member of the Headmasters' and Headmistresses' Conference (HMC).

The fee-paying schools sector is diverse. Fees range from about £5,000 a year at the low end to £30,000 a year if you're planning on sending your child to Eton. Usually, the fees for older pupils are higher than those for younger pupils. Many schools offer bursaries or scholarships (sometimes related to a particular aptitude, such as music) for a proportion of pupils; if money is short, it can be worth investigating these.

If you want to send your child to a fee-paying school, here are some of the things you need to think about:

Boarder or day? A number of fee-paying schools take boarders, either weekly (with the child attending from Monday to Friday and going home at weekends) or termly. Some take day pupils only, while others take a mix of boarding and day pupils.

Single-sex or mixed? There are far more single-sex schools in the independent sector than in the state sector, so if you are keen on a single-sex education, this may be your only option.

Faith or non-faith? Just as in the state sector, many fee-paying schools are allied to a particular religious faith.

Selective or non-selective? Many fee-paying schools use academic selection as the basis for offering places to pupils at age 11 or 13. Some schools set their own examination, while others use the Common Entrance Exam (CEE). Whereas many selective schools in the state sector tend to set papers based on the traditional 11+ format, and are designed to measure aptitude rather than knowledge, the CEE is a set of papers on specific school subjects, including English, maths and science. You can order past CEE papers online from suppliers such as Galore Park Publishing, www.galorepark.co.uk.

How to choose a secondary school

In some parts of the country, it's not so much a case of you choosing the school as the school choosing you. Even in places where all the local schools are comprehensive, and in theory open to anyone, the more successful schools will be oversubscribed, and whether you get a place will depend largely on how near to the school you live.

Given that caveat, you will want to find the best school that you can for your child. It can be difficult, given the range of options, but there are some particular places you can look for tips. Don't rely on a single metric, such as an Ofsted report, because there's no guarantee of reliability, and there are many more factors to consider when choosing a school. With that in mind, these are some of the ways you can find out more about local schools:

Understanding Ofsted reports

Ofsted inspects all the secondary schools in the state system in England. Independent schools are also subject to an inspection regime, either by Ofsted or the ISI. You can find a school's Ofsted report by going to the Ofsted website at www.ofsted.gov.uk and searching for it by the school's name.

Ofsted reports are a useful starting point. Each school is given an overall rating on a four-point scale:

- 1 = outstanding
- 2 = good
- 3 = requires improvement
- 4 = inadequate

Schools are also rated on individual elements, such as leadership and management, teaching and learning, and pupil outcomes. It's worth paying attention to those individual elements – an overall grade of 2 becomes less impressive if teaching and learning is rated 3, for example. Also look at how recently the school was inspected by Ofsted – if the last inspection was three years ago, has anything changed since then? For example, has a new head been appointed, or has the school gained specialist status?

League tables

League tables show you how well the school's pupils performed at GCSE relative to other schools. The tables show the proportion of children who achieved five or more A*-C grades at GCSE, including in English and maths.

League tables should be approached with a degree of scepticism. Some schools may have found a way of pushing up their GCSE results by entering pupils for 'GCSE equivalents', which are vocational qualifications that count as the equivalent of four GCSEs. Some may take the simpler expedient of not entering the less able pupils in the GCSE examinations. Some schools may focus, in the terms before GCSE, on the pupils who are borderline grades D/C to get them up to the mark, while letting the more able pupils 'coast'.

League tables also show the percentage of students obtaining the 'English baccalaureate', which focuses attention on traditional subjects. The baccalaureate shows the percentage of pupils gaining grades A*-C in five core subjects: English, maths, a foreign language, two sciences and either history or geography. This is designed to counter the habit of some schools of pushing weaker pupils into 'softer' subjects to artificially push up their GCSE pass rate.

To some degree, the school's results will reflect its intake as well as the quality of its teaching. In some schools with an intake of pupils from deprived backgrounds a 40% pass rate at GCSE may represent a good deal of commitment and hard work on the part of the teachers and the students.

Open evenings and visits

Attending open evenings is a must. They give you the chance to look at the facilities on offer, the classroom

displays and the physical condition of the school. More importantly, they give you the opportunity to talk to teachers about their approach to teaching and to pupils about what they like and don't like about the school. It's a good time to ask questions about the school's approach to pupils with special needs, for example, or the extension opportunities it offers to more able pupils.

Wall displays give you the chance to look at the quality of pupils' work, the extra-curricular activities on offer (are there pictures of pupils on trips abroad, for example, or taking part in sports tournaments?) and the school's own standards when it comes to literacy (it can be dispiriting if internal school notices are spelled or punctuated incorrectly).

Ask other parents

Parents whose children attend the school are a good source of information about what it's really like, information which you won't find in the Ofsted report or at the open evening. Parents (or their children) are the people to ask if you want to find out whether the school's claim that every piece of homework is marked or that discipline is rigorously enforced bears any relation to the truth. They will be able to give you a more realistic view about what behaviour is like in the classroom, whether children at the school are stretched academically and whether or not they enjoy school life.

Visiting the school during opening hours

It's usually an encouraging sign if the school is prepared to welcome visitors during normal opening hours. Seeing the school in a normal school day won't give you a complete picture, but it will at least enable you to see whether pupils are running riot in the classroom and how they behave in the transition between lessons. Some schools offer parents the chance to be shown around by pupils, and this is a good time to ask them what they really think of the school.

Mum Linda says: 'During visits to the school we were particularly impressed with the teaching staff – they seemed genuinely interested in and concerned about the children regardless of background or ability. They were approachable and relaxed with the students while maintaining a teacher/pupil relationship; that has continued to be a feature of the school.'

She and her husband chose the school despite the fact that many other local parents opted for private or selective schools further away. They decided not to judge the school purely on the basis of its results: 'We knew that GCSE results were not good but also were aware of the disproportionately high number of SEN pupils at the school and we knew children who had been there and had achieved excellent results.'

Talking to the headteacher

Some headteachers offer parents the chance to make individual appointments, but it's more likely that there'll be an opportunity to ask the head questions as part of a group during an open evening or a daytime visit.

Here are some questions you could ask of the headteacher:

- “ What is your staff turnover?
- “ How do you deal with discipline problems, such as bullying?
- “ Do you stream pupils by ability?
- “ Do you have staff shortages in certain subject areas, such as maths?
- “ How much homework do children get?
- “ Do pupils have the opportunity to take separate science GCSEs?
- “ How often are books marked?
- “ What provisions do you make for particularly able (gifted and talented) children or children with special needs?
- “ How many exclusions do you have a year?
- “ What sporting and music facilities do you offer?
- “ What after-school clubs and other extra-curricular activities do you run?

Scorecard – Is this the school for my child?

Keeping track of what you like and dislike about the different schools you look at can get complicated, so we've produced a scorecard to help you make a fair comparison between the schools you visit.

Print the 'scorecard' on the next page out as many times as you need and compare your scores later to help you decide which secondary school is right for your child.

School name:

Attribute	Marks out of 10
Location of school	
Attitude to discipline	
Amount of homework	
Academic standards	
Staff turnover	
Motivation of pupils	
Quality of Ofsted	
After-school clubs	
Music and drama facilities	
Sporting facilities	
Quality of buildings	
Provision for gifted or special needs children	
Total	

Chapter Two: Applying to secondary school

Applying for secondary school is rarely straightforward. Admissions rules can be complicated and sometimes confusing. While most secondary schools in a local authority will share a common set of admissions rules, some schools, such as fee-paying schools, academies, faith schools and certain selective schools, will have individual admissions rules. You need to read these carefully, looking in particular for changes from previous years. Sometimes a school will introduce a rule that makes it more difficult (or, if you're lucky, easier) for your child to gain a place.

Just to make it a little more complicated, different local authorities have different admissions rules, so if you live near the border between two authorities and want to apply for schools in different authorities, you will have to check what the different admissions rules are.

In London, where many people live on the borders between different local authorities, the situation has the potential to be particularly confusing. For this reason, the Pan-London Co-ordinated Admissions Scheme was introduced in 2005 with the aim of simplifying the application process for secondary school admissions. Admissions are co-ordinated between the 33 different authorities; 32 boroughs and the City of London. When parents send in their applications, these are pooled in a Pan-London register. Local authorities can then exchange information with each other about parents who have applied for schools outside their own authority's boundaries. The system ensures that nobody is offered more than one school place.

The School Admissions Code (SAC) 'ensures a fair and straightforward admissions system that promotes equity and fair access for all'. It was introduced in the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, and has made certain admissions practices illegal. For example, some schools used to interview parents, or ask for a financial donation, before offering a place to a child. This is no longer allowed – though a 2009 report by the London School of Economics (LSE) and Research and Information on State Education (RISE) found that some schools were still breaking the code.

The code states that: 'It is important that parents can easily understand admission arrangements and can assess whether they have a reasonable likelihood of gaining a place at a particular school.' The full code is available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-admissions-code--2>

When you apply for a school place, the application form will normally allow you to list three schools, in order of preference. There is one golden piece of advice for applying for a school place, and that is:

Always include a school on your list at which you are almost certain of being offered a place.

If you simply list your three favourite schools when there is no guarantee of your child being offered a place at any of them, you run the risk of being allocated a place in whichever school has places left over at the end of the admissions run. The chances are that this won't be a school you want your child to go to.

We'll now take a look at the popular criteria used in admissions rules, and at how they may differ in special cases (such as at faith schools and selective schools).

Popular criteria used in admissions

There are usually a number of admissions rules, and these rules are applied in order. So, for example, if a school uses a set of seven rules, and admits 200 children a year, it will go through applying the rules until it has filled its quota. A popular school may never get to the rules at the bottom of the list. There is a list of the most common admissions rules further down in this chapter.

Imagine that Fairhill Comprehensive is a popular school which is able to admit 200 pupils per year. It may admit 10 children under Rule 1, 12 children under Rule 2, 18 children under Rule 3, 100 children under Rule 4 and 60 children under Rule 5 – and if you were hoping your child would get in under Rule 6, then unfortunately you're out of luck.

It's always helpful to check how many children were admitted in previous years under each rule, because if your child only meets the criterion for Rule 7, and children have historically been admitted only under Rules 1 to 5, then you may be better off not applying. This information is usually available from the admission

authority – either the local authority or the school itself.

Special requirements

There are, however, two groups of children who are given special consideration in admissions rules:

- Children with a statement of special educational needs that names a particular school.
- Looked-after children (children in local authority care).

There is a legal requirement for state schools to offer places to children who have a statement of special educational needs (SEN) or an Education, Health and Care (EHC) Plan that names the school. Because admission is automatic, this isn't usually listed as one of the admissions rules. As any parent who has navigated the system of statementing knows, SEN statements and EHC Plans are hard to come by – they require parents to go through a lengthy application process and even then you may not be granted one.

There has to be a good reason for your naming a particular school that you wish your child to go to on the statement or Plan – perhaps because the school specialises in helping children with your child's particular need, for example.

Once the children with SEN requirements are admitted, schools must give top priority to looked-after children, that is, children in local authority care. So this rule should always be top of the list.

The other most common admissions rules (though they won't necessarily appear in this order) are:

- **Children with a social or medical reason for attending the school:** This is a difficult rule because it can be hard for parents to know what constitutes a valid 'social or medical' reason, and it may differ from authority to authority. You have to include a statement along with your application about why you think your child has a social or medical reason. You will need to provide supporting documentation, such as a letter from your GP or psychologist. A typical medical reason might be that your child has a disability that means he needs to be at a school that is adapted to his needs; for example, that it has lifts available rather than just stairs. A social reason might be that a parent has died and your child needs the stability of being with friends.
- **Children with an older sibling at the school:** Most authorities apply a sibling rule, though a few don't. (The School Admissions Code states that admitting authorities should aim to keep families together

where possible.) The rule may state that the sibling, or half-sibling, or step-sibling, has to live in the same house as the child applying.

- **Children who live nearest to the school:** There are variations to this rule. Some authorities may give priority to children for whom this is their nearest school, rather than to children who live nearest the school. So, for example, imagine that John lives half a mile from Fairhill Comprehensive, and Sam lives a mile away. If John has another school, Springfield High, a quarter of a mile away, but Sam doesn't have any schools nearer to him, the authority might give priority to Sam, so he can avoid travelling a much further distance to his nearest school.
- **Children who live in the catchment area of the school:** This gives priority to children who live within a particular radius of the school. Living in the catchment area does not however guarantee a place.
- **Children who have been to a 'linked' primary school:** Some schools give priority to children who have attended a particular local primary school or schools.
- **Children who have a particular aptitude for the school's specialism:** Some schools reserve a small number of places for children with an aptitude in, for example, music or sport. Your child may need to take a test to demonstrate their aptitude.

Make sure that you research the rules carefully, because they may change from year to year. If you're hoping to apply on the basis of the distance rule, find out the distance from the school of the furthest child admitted last year (the admission authority will have this information). This will give you a rough guide to your child's chances of being admitted.

Faith schools admissions rules

Faith schools, which may still be comprehensive schools, will usually have a different set of admissions rules, though they will still be required to admit children with a SEN statement or EHC Plan that names the school, and to give priority to looked-after children.

Apart from the two criteria above, faith schools' admissions rules can vary widely. Voluntary-aided schools, which are managed by governors, are more likely to have stringent rules specifying that children must be brought up in the religious faith of the school. Voluntary-controlled schools, which are managed by the

local authority, may have more relaxed rules. The order of the rules is important; faith schools will still usually have a sibling rule or a location rule, but these may be quite far down the list. If the school is highly popular, the school may fill its quota entirely from the faith-based rules, without ever reaching the sibling or location rules.

Here are some typical admissions rules you will find in faith schools:

- “ The child must be baptised in the faith of the school.
- “ The child must be confirmed and/or have received their first Holy Communion.
- “ The child must attend church at least three Sundays out of four. (The school will usually expect a written confirmation from the vicar, minister or priest that this is the case.)
- “ The child has attended a primary school of the same religious faith as the secondary school.
- “ Some faith schools are keen to deter parents who have experienced ‘convenient’ last-minute religious conversions as a way of gaining a secondary place, so some may specify that your child has been baptised before the age of one. You will be required to provide documentary proof that your child fulfils the criteria for admission.

Many Church of England (C of E) schools have rules giving preference to children who attend any Christian church, not just C of E, whereas Catholic schools will tend to give preference to children who attend Catholic churches.

Selective schools and entrance examinations

If you want your child to attend a selective school, whether it's part of a wider grammar school system or a selective school operating on its own, then they will have to sit an entrance examination.

Entrance examinations vary, but many contain three papers: verbal reasoning, numerical reasoning and non-verbal reasoning. Others may use more standard tests of English literacy and mathematics. There are distinct differences between the two kinds of tests. The ‘reasoning’ types of test aim to assess the child's natural problem-solving abilities using words, numbers or shapes. The English literacy and mathematics tests are usually based on what the child has learnt at school. So, for example, an English test may require

candidates to write an essay or answer some comprehension questions, while a mathematics test may ask questions that test the child's ability to add fractions or do simple algebra.

Reasoning tests

Here are examples of what you might expect from 'reasoning' tests:

Verbal reasoning test – this tests children's understanding of what words mean and their ability to solve verbal problems. Typical verbal reasoning questions include:

- Choose the odd one out from a list of words (for example, dahlia, carnation, poodle and rose)
- Put a series of words (chair, cat, choir, candle) in alphabetical order
- Choose the opposite of a given word from a list of words (for example, 'What is the opposite of "clean"? Is it ugly/stupid/dirty/unhappy?')

Numerical reasoning test – this assesses your child's ability to solve problems using numbers. Typical questions include:

- Give the next number in a sequence (for example, 10, 20, 40, 80, ?)
- Identify the largest fraction in a series (for example, $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{2}$, $\frac{3}{5}$, $\frac{5}{6}$)
- What is the missing number? $85 - 31 = 26 + ?$

Non-verbal reasoning test – this assesses a child's ability to identify patterns in a series of shapes.

Typically, questions will show a sequence of three shapes in a logical order and ask the child to identify the next shape in the sequence from a group of four, or ask them to identify what a shape will look like if it is folded in half.

Tests such as these are designed, in theory, to test a child's natural aptitude – in other words, to select children who are naturally bright rather than those who have been coached. In practice, it is possible to improve children's performance at tests through coaching, and when applying for schools where competition for places is high, it may be a good idea to hire a tutor for your child, or tutor them yourself. TheSchoolRun.com offers a programme of 11+ resources and information to help your child develop their skills.

If you decide not to coach, then it is still worth obtaining copies of past papers, which you can usually obtain from a school's website, so that they can practise beforehand. Some children may not understand the importance of speed in answering papers, or that it is better to attempt every question than to complete only 75% of the paper. Practice will help with this.

Competition for places in some schools is much stiffer than in others. In a local authority such as Kent, for example, grammar school places are open to 25% of the children within the local authority. Children take an 11+ examination and, if they pass it, they can then apply to grammar school. In some areas, there may be only one selective school, or even a partially selective school that takes some children on the basis of ability, with the remaining children admitted on other criteria. These schools can be very hard to get into and perhaps only 5-10% of applicants win a place. For those schools, practice beforehand is strongly advised.

Before you apply for a place at a selective school, do your research:

- Compare the requirements of different selective schools – some may set tests that are better suited to your child's particular aptitude than others. Find out the typical pass mark required to get into the school.
- Identify any special requirements: for example, some schools use age-standardised tests, which means that an autumn-born child needs a higher mark to get in than a summer-born one; some schools may state that if you don't achieve a particular mark in the verbal reasoning paper, then the mathematical reasoning paper won't be marked and so on.
- Order past papers and give your child a chance to work through them to aid their understanding and give them confidence in exam situations.

Louise, whose daughter Olivia passed the Kent 11+, says that working through past papers was an important part of the preparation:

'We prepared her with familiarisation papers for verbal reasoning and non-verbal reasoning as these materials were not something she had come across at her primary school. We started these after Christmas in Year 5, and she did them mainly with her dad at the weekends. She probably got through 15 of each test – with an increase in regularity over the summer holidays in preparation for the tests in the middle of September.

'We decided from the beginning not to have Olivia formally tutored. Many parents seem to get children tutored specifically for the 11+ and begin this in Year 4, or perhaps even earlier. We felt that apart from the familiarisation process Olivia should be capable of passing the test on her own merits. The last thing we would have wanted was for her to struggle at grammar school.'

Musical aptitude tests

Some comprehensive schools with specialist status, as well as some private schools and some selective schools, offer places to children able to demonstrate an aptitude in a particular subject. In comprehensive schools, no more than 10% of places can be offered on this basis.

Perhaps the most common aptitude looked for is musical. You will have to check the website of the individual school for details, but it is common for students to be called to the school to undergo an aural examination, which will assess their ability to identify which of two notes is the higher, or whether two sequences of notes have the same or different rhythms. If the child passes the aural examination, they may then be asked to perform on the instrument of their choice, and assessed on the quality of their performance. Some schools specify that a child has reached a certain level (usually grade 2) before they are able to apply for a music place.

As with the academic examination, it makes sense to rehearse musical aptitude tests beforehand. If your child is learning an instrument with a teacher, ask the teacher to work through some tests with your child.

Admissions checklist

Applying for secondary school can be a time-consuming process, and it's easy to forget an important step along the way. A handy checklist to remind you of the steps you need to go through is provided on the next page.

Task	Completed (✓)
Receive an admissions booklet from local authority	
Decide which schools I'm thinking of applying for	
Make a note of the closing date for applications	
Read the admissions rules for each school, making a note of special requirements	
Calculate the chances of my child getting into the different schools	
Read the Ofsted report of each school	
Visit the schools I'm interested in	
Narrow my choice to the top three	
Make a note of the date of any entrance exams for the schools I'm interested in	
Make sure that at least one of my top three is a school my child is almost certain of getting into	
Obtain any necessary additional documentation (e.g. baptism certificates, letter from vicar, statement from child psychologist)	
Fill in the application form and submit it by the correct closing date with accompanying documentation	

Chapter Three: Making an appeal

If your child doesn't win a place at their preferred school, it can be difficult to know what to do next. You don't have to take it lying down, though.

What to do if your child does not get a place at your first choice school

The first thing you should do is accept the place you've been given – this is to ensure that you don't end up without any place at all.

The next step is to put your child on the waiting list for your preferred school or schools. Some local authorities may put you on the waiting list automatically, or you may have to do it yourself. You can usually go on waiting lists for more than one school, including schools you haven't applied for. There is usually a lot of movement at this stage – many parents will turn down the places they've been offered, and there's a chance that your child will be offered a place on the waiting list before too long.

Step-by-step guide to the appeals process

You may want to appeal for a place at your preferred school or schools (you are not confined to one appeal). To do this, you will need to fill in a form provided by the local authority and set out the reasons you believe your child should be offered a place at your preferred school. You may have been sent a form with the letter offering you a school place; if not, phone up and ask for it. If the school is run by the local authority, you should send the completed appeal form to the local authority. If the school is not run by the local authority (if it's a voluntary-aided school, for example), you should send the form to the school itself.

Once the admission authority has received your appeal form or letter, it will notify you of the date on which your appeal will be heard. The appeal panel hearing should take place within 40 school days of the deadline for appeals.

The authority must send you written notice of the date of your appeal hearing at least 10 school days before it is held. If you are unable to attend, and it is not practical to offer you another date, the appeal will be

decided on the written information that you have sent in.

At least seven working days before the hearing, the clerk will send you all the appeal papers. At least three working days before the hearing, the admission authority must give you details of the panel members and clerk, all the information you have reasonably requested, and details of any witnesses who will give evidence to support your case.

How to conduct a successful appeal

If you've been through this process before, you'll know that winning a primary school appeal is hard; infant class sizes are limited by law to 30 children, so grounds for a successful appeal are limited. It is a little easier, however, at secondary school, though you still have to make a strong case. Approximately 36% of secondary school appeals are successful. Some people seek legal advice about how to win an appeal; there are a number of law firms that specialise in this area.

There are four questions that can be considered by an appeals panel:

- Have the admissions criteria been drawn up correctly?
- Have the criteria been applied fairly?
- Has the school shown objectively that it is oversubscribed and that a further admission would be prejudicial?
- Can the parents show that there is some overwhelming consideration for their child to attend the particular school while in contest with other parents who are appealing?

Let's look at each of them in turn:

Have the admissions criteria been drawn up correctly?

It's quite unusual for the criteria to have been drawn up incorrectly. If you feel, however, that the admissions criteria break the School Admissions Code (for example, the school has asked you for money or carried out an interview with you or your child), you can make an appeal on this basis.

Have the criteria been applied fairly?

Again, it's unusual for admissions criteria to be applied unfairly, but not impossible. For example, you may have applied for a place under the social/medical rule, but the admission authority has decided that your child does not qualify. You could make a case that this decision is unfair and does not fully take into account the difficulty of your circumstances. Or perhaps your child has a step-sibling or half-sibling at the school with whom they live part-time, and the admission authority has decided that your child does not qualify under the sibling rule.

Has the school shown objectively that it is oversubscribed and that a further admission would be prejudicial?

The school will want to show that admitting extra children will make the school too crowded and therefore 'prejudicial', meaning it will adversely affect the education of the other children. The government has a set of rules stating how many children are permitted in a certain size of building. This is called 'net capacity'. To work it out, the formula takes into account the size of the classrooms and common areas to reach the maximum number of children the school could hold. The local authority can set the net capacity as being slightly less than this maximum.

When it comes to the appeal panel hearing, the school or local authority may argue that admitting an extra child will take the number of children over the school's net capacity. Even if the extra child does not take the school over net capacity, the school may still argue that admitting your child will make it more difficult for teachers to teach effectively, harming the education of the other children. 'Schools sometimes go so far as to say it would mean a strain on resources and it would mean children having to share books,' says Anita Chopra, director of Match Solicitors and a specialist in education law.

You can challenge this when you make your appeal, but you need to do your research first; find out how many children there are in each class, how many classrooms there are and how big they are. Does each classroom operate at capacity? Perhaps the school takes 200 children each year and divides them into eight classes, with 25 children a class. It may be the case that the classrooms can accommodate up to 30 children.

Check if new classrooms have been built recently. You can ask your local authority for the net capacity assessment for the school you are interested in.

Chopra describes how she helps parents conduct a secondary school appeal: 'We look at net capacity reports, request published admission numbers over the last preceding years, and request information to establish whether there are any loopholes. It's up to schools to make their case, and there have been many circumstances where the panel has not been satisfied that the school has made its case out successfully,' she explains. 'They may well have 30 children in a class but that isn't in itself enough to justify prejudice; they have to go beyond that. The school has to make sure that their reasons are more than, "We're simply full". It's the reason why so many appeals are successful.'

Even if admitting your child would take the school over its net capacity, the admissions panel still has the power to decide in favour of your child.

Can the parents show that there is some overwhelming consideration for their child to attend the particular school while in contest with other parents who are appealing?

If you can't prove that the admissions criteria are illegal or have been wrongly applied in your child's case, or that admitting your child won't prejudice the education of other children, then you have to persuade the admissions panel that your child has an overwhelming reason for needing to attend the school.

'If the school is able to successfully demonstrate prejudice, the panel has to go on to weigh up whether any prejudice that might be caused to the child would outweigh any prejudice caused to the children already at the school,' says Chopra.

Here are some examples of reasons why your child might need to attend a particular school:

- Your child has a special need such as dyslexia (but does not have a SEN statement or EHC Plan) and the school specialises in working with dyslexic children.
- Your child has a particular medical condition that requires them to be near home. (Normally this should be mentioned on the application form, but not all parents do.)

- You don't have a car, and your child needs to go to a school they can walk to, or reach by public transport.
- Your child is particularly shy and sensitive, and needs to go to a small, friendly school.
- The school specialises in science, and your child has a particular aptitude for science.

Whether you succeed in your appeal or not depends not just on how well you make your case, but on how many other parents are appealing, and how good their case is. A panel may decide there is room for one extra child, but admitting 20 is another matter.

How to prepare for an appeals panel hearing

Your first step, before you attend the panel hearing, is to fill in the appeal form (this may be an actual form, or you may simply be required to write a letter stating your case). This is your opportunity to make a strong initial case – you don't need to give a great deal of detail at this stage, but you can outline the main grounds for the appeal.

Unless you believe there is a legal problem with the admissions rules, or that there has been a mistake in applying them, you'll probably be appealing on the basis that there is an overwhelming reason why your child should attend this particular school.

The Advisory Centre for Education (ACE) suggests that when you write your appeal case, you divide it into three sections to include:

- A description of your child and why they would be well suited to this school
- Why your child needs to go to this school in particular
- Why it would be detrimental for your child to go to the school that they have been offered.

In the description of your child, you could write about social problems they suffer from – perhaps they are shy or have low self-esteem. Perhaps they have been bullied in the past, or have emotional problems due to a recent bereavement, and need to go to a school where they will be with friends, or alternatively where they can make a fresh start.

In the second section, write about why your child needs this school in particular. Perhaps the school has an excellent anti-bullying policy, or it's a single-sex school and your child is shy with the opposite sex. Perhaps it offers a choice of modern languages and your child has a particular aptitude for languages.

In the third section, which asks why it would be detrimental for your child to go to the school they have been offered, it's important not to write something negative about the school, such as, 'This is a failing school that has terrible results.' It is better to concentrate on the social and practical aspects that you feel will adversely affect your child, so use statements such as: 'The school is a long way from home and my child is too timid to use public transport' or 'The school is very big and intimidating for a shy child.'

You can also focus on specific educational reasons, such as: 'My child is gifted at languages but the school only allows children to take one language at GCSE.'

Finally, it is important to include any relevant supporting documentation with your written appeal – the school prospectus, a map of the school's layout, the most recent Ofsted report, or a letter from your GP or child psychologist supporting the reasons that you have written about in your letter. An example appeal letter is included in Chapter 11 to help you to write your own.

The appeal is heard before an independent panel made up of three to five people. At least one should be a lay member (that is, they have not worked in a school) and at least one other should have experience of education and know about education conditions in the local area. The appeals panel members will have no connection with the school, and all will have received training in conducting appeals. A clerk to the appeals panel will also be present, taking notes.

The prospect of sitting in front of an appeal panel to make your case may feel daunting. Remember, however, that these are just ordinary people hearing your appeal, and they won't be trying to intimidate you. You are allowed to take a representative in with you (some people take a lawyer) or even send a representative to make your case if for some reason you can't attend.

Appeal hearings vary in length, but half an hour is an average length. This is the usual format of a hearing:

- The representative of the admission authority (the school or local authority) will read out a statement to explain why your child has not been offered a place at your preferred school.
- The panel will ask you (or your representative) if you have questions for the admission authority representative.
- The panel will invite you (or your representative) to give a statement explaining your reasons for wanting your child to attend the school.
- The panel may ask questions about your statement.
- The panel will ask if you (or your representative) have anything to add.
- The admission authority representative will sum up.
- You (or your representative) will be invited to sum up.

Here are some tips to prepare for an admissions appeal hearing:

- Do your homework – find out as much as you can about the school you want your child to attend. Research whether the school is full, or whether it could comfortably accommodate an extra child.
- Prepare a written case for why it's important for your child to attend the school, or why you think the admission authority has made a mistake.
- Bring any relevant supporting documentation, for example from your GP, social worker or educational psychologist.
- Dress smartly. It helps to make a good impression and will make you feel more confident.
- Be calm and positive. Don't sound aggrieved or angry. Make the case as reasonably as you can – it's fine to read from notes.
- Do not make critical comments about the school you have been offered, because this will cut no ice with an appeals panel. Focus instead on all the good reasons why your child should attend the school for which you are appealing.

What to do if your appeal is unsuccessful

You will receive a letter telling you whether your appeal has been successful. The letter should be sent within five school days of the appeal.

If your appeal fails, what can you do? Your most realistic option is to accept the decision, put your child's name on the waiting list and to look at other schools. However, if you want to take it further, you can. Jack Rabinowicz, a partner at law firm Teacher Stern and a specialist in education law, says: 'There are three possible routes – but they all require some serious flaw in the process either of the appeal, such as bias by a panel member or the criteria are in error.'

The routes you can take if you don't accept the appeal panel's decision are to:

- Make a complaint to the local government ombudsman, who can overrule appeal panels and order another appeal hearing by a different panel. The ombudsman will only investigate your case if he or she feels that the process has been wrongly carried out. An ombudsman's investigation can take a long time.
- Make a complaint to the Secretary of State for Education to exercise their default powers. This is rarely successful and is not recommended.
- Ask for a judicial review. This is a challenge to the decision in court. It is expensive, and you will probably not be entitled to legal aid. It is probably the quickest method, however, of achieving a result.

It is only worth following any of these routes if you think that a serious error has been made in the appeal process; for example, that a member of the appeal panel was a governor at the school where you are applying for a place (which isn't allowed), or that the admission authority broke the law with its admissions criteria.

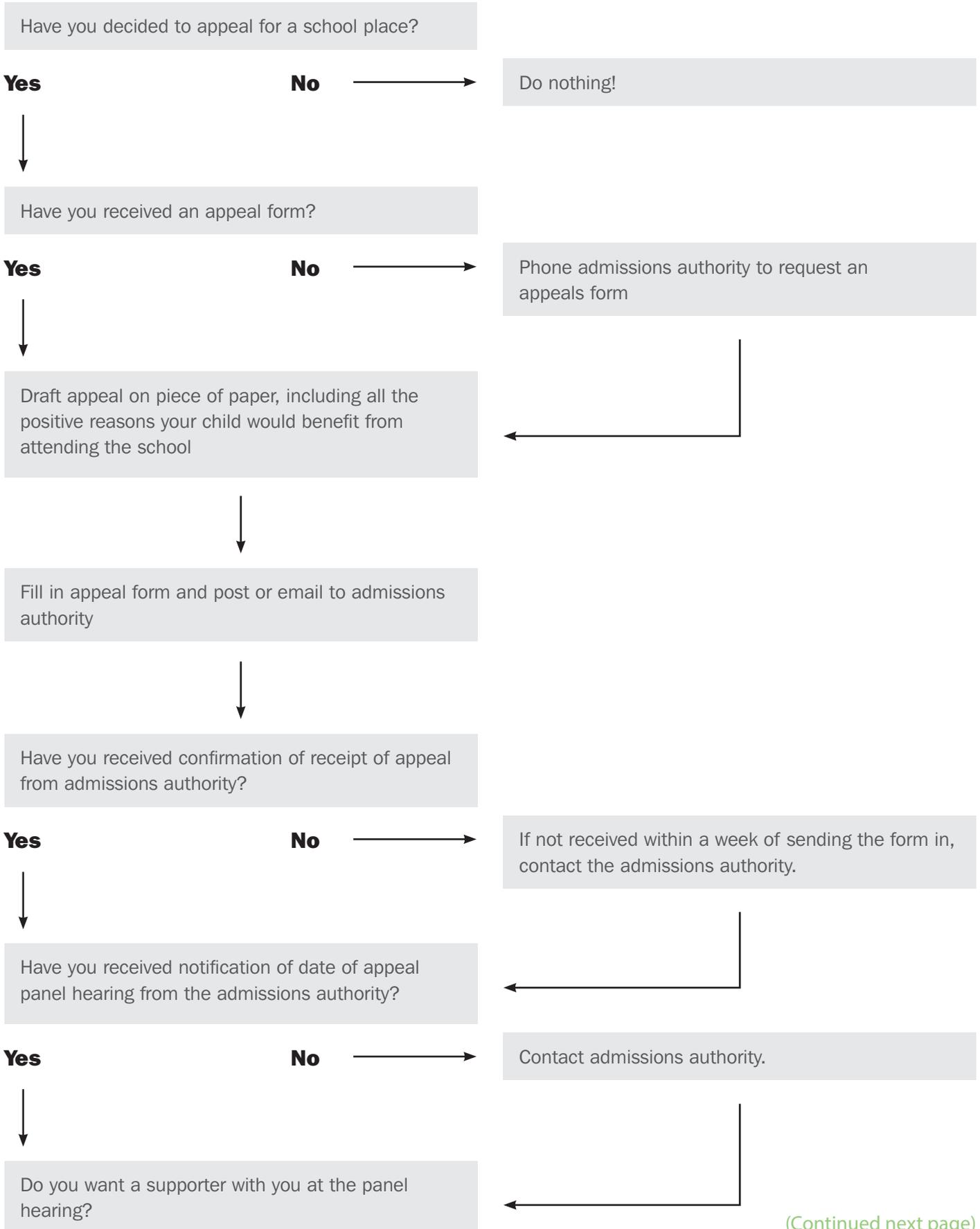
What to do if your child fails the school's entrance exam

If the reason your child has been refused admission to a school is that they have failed the entrance exam, and you think that a mistake has been made, you can usually ask for an examination board review of your child's exam performance. This will normally be built into the procedures of the school or local authority.

If the examination board rejects the review, then you can still appeal against the decision through the normal route. You will have to provide evidence to the appeals panel of your child's academic ability, such as reports from teachers. It is unlikely that you will win an appeal on this basis, however, unless you can show that there were special circumstances to be taken into account, for example, that your child was ill or recently bereaved at the time of the exam. According to education lawyer Anita Chopra, the amount of marks short of passing will be taken into account. She has sometimes helped parents win appeals when their child has missed passing by one or two marks, but it is much harder if they have missed by five or 10 marks.

If the entrance examination is for a private school, you can challenge the result, and ask for a review in the same way as with a state school. If the examination board rejects the review, you cannot appeal, but you can make a complaint through the school's complaints procedure.

Appeals flowchart



(Continued next page)

Yes



Contact supporter (e.g.lawyer, child psychologist, friend)



Do you intend to use any supporting documentation to back up your case?

Yes



Collate supporting evidence, e.g. bus timetables, statement from GP, maps of the school buildings.



Do you want to add anything to the written statement you already submitted?

Yes



Write new statement making your case out in full.

No



No



No

Chapter Four: Before starting

Once you know what school your child will be attending, you can start preparing. This can be an apprehensive time, for both parents and children. Secondary school will probably be much bigger than primary school – maybe five or six times as big. Your child will be the youngest in the school rather than the oldest, and the change from having a single teacher for most of the week to several different teachers and several different subjects in a day can be daunting.

There are things you can do to prepare your child psychologically for starting secondary school, and there are also practical things you will need to do in the term and summer holidays before they start.

Secondary schools are usually keen to help children prepare for secondary school. The school may hold an open evening in the summer holidays where you can meet your child's teachers and talk to other students who already attend the school. Most schools will also send a Year 7 tutor or person responsible for pastoral care to talk to Year 6 children after places have been allocated.

Kim Lumley, vice-principal at Leasowes Community College, a secondary school in Dudley, advises parents to tell their children to ask any questions they want at these sessions. Bullying is a topic that always comes up: 'They know there are going to be bigger children in the school, and they always worry about that,' she says. 'We always say, "Don't worry about that, we'll link you up with good buddies, and if you've got a problem, talk to your form tutor or your buddies."' 'Buddies' are older children who are there to offer support to new children and they are used in many secondary schools to ease the transition.

'Parents need to ensure that their child has been to their secondary school for at least a day's visit and ensure they go into the school when other opportunities arise,' advises Lumley. 'You could get your child involved in any of the summer courses/camps that the secondary school may be hosting. Reassure your children, be honest and say that they may experience some issues but they must let someone know. Encourage them to talk to teachers.'

Lumley says that she welcomes calls from parents about any worries they have about friendship groups. Some parents, for example, may want their child to be kept away from a particular child they had problems with at primary school, or they may want twins to be kept in the same class or put in different classes. Not all secondary schools take such an approach, however, and many schools allocate class places without any input from parents.

Most primary schools arrange visits to the local secondary school to ease them in and they get to meet their form teacher and have a look round. Parents can also visit the school with the child and arrange to speak to some Year 7s about their experience of starting at the school. Alternatively, the primary school may arrange for a group of Year 7s to come and talk to pupils at the primary school itself.

Most schools have a 'moving-up' or transition day in July, where Year 6 children have the opportunity to spend a day at their new secondary school in the form group they'll be joining in September. (Note that some schools expect children to turn up in their new uniform for that day, so it's worth checking.) This day is a good time, says Lumley, for parents to talk to the person responsible for pastoral care at the school about any concerns they have. It's better to deal with any potential problems (such as friendship groups) at that stage than to wait until September when staff are much busier. 'What we're doing all the time is encouraging the parents to make contact with us,' she says. 'If they've got any concerns about the move from primary to secondary school, find the key person at the secondary school and give them a phone call.'

Before starting school: Your essential countdown list

There are a lot of things you'll need to do over the summer holiday before your child starts secondary school to make sure that they are prepared. Here's a checklist:

1. Buy school uniform. The school should have provided you with a uniform list, but if not, it will probably be available on the school's website. You can also call the school and ask for one to be sent to you. Remember that, as well as skirts, trousers, tops and so on, you will need to buy shoes and socks of the right colour. Uniform will also usually include a PE kit of shorts, tops and joggers, and perhaps rugby shirts, football boots, football socks, shin pads, hockey sticks or lacrosse sticks too. Buying the whole kit and

caboodle can be expensive, so if you can't afford it, ask at the school if they have a second-hand sale, or if there's anywhere else where you can buy second-hand uniform. Uniforms can sell out quickly, so it's a good idea to buy everything apart from shoes at the beginning of the summer, because there's every chance that your child will have grown a shoe size by the end of the holidays! Your child will also need a sturdy bag to carry their books and equipment in and a large PE bag for all their kit; some schools might expect a bag with a school logo on it. As you've probably already found at primary school, uniform does have a habit of going missing! Secondary school pupils generally prefer any labelling to be discreet to avoid teasing so try adding name labels to inside hemlines instead of collars.

2. Make sure they know how to wear it. Many school uniforms now consist of polo-neck tops and sweatshirts. But if the uniform requires a tie, says child psychologist Ruth Coppard, make sure your child knows how to do it up and practise during the holidays until they are confident. 'Reduce any anxiety you possibly can by pre-empting it.'

3. Buy stationery. You will probably have a list of required stationery from the school that includes pens, pencils, compasses, rulers and protractors. Your child will probably need a scientific calculator too. You may be able to buy some of the equipment cheaply from the school. If not, some of the bigger supermarkets sell kits of school stationery very cheaply.

4. Fill in relevant forms. The school will send you forms that need to be completed before term starts. These will include fairly routine forms to do with data protection, or whether your child needs a locker, but may also include forms asking about your child's special circumstances (such as whether they have special needs, or whether they've experienced a recent bereavement) and instrument tuition. There's often a waiting list to learn a musical instrument, so if your child wants to take up a new instrument, now is a good time to apply. You may be asked to send a cheque to reserve lockers and music lessons.

5. Apply for a bus pass. If your child is taking public transport, or planning to travel on a school bus, you'll need to apply for a pass or for a place on the school bus. In London, your child will need an 11-15 Zip Oyster card for free or discounted travel (some London schools also use the Oyster card as a cashless system

to pay for meals in school and they will send information on how credit can be uploaded). It's worth applying for any passes early, as forms can take weeks to process.

6. Rehearse bus, train or tube route. If your child is taking public transport to school, it's a good idea to go through the route with them first so that they can get used to it. Travelling by public transport on your own for the first time can be quite daunting, so doing it together will help to ease them in gently and help to make them feel more confident. It also helps you identify any tricky parts of the journey – in a journey that involves changing the mode of transport, there might for example be a long walk from the train station to the bus stop. Talk about what to do if there are any problems en route and how your child can deal with any such occurrences.

7. Make a decision about school dinners. Decide whether your child is going to have packed lunches or school dinners. Remember that at secondary school they will probably be paying for their dinner each day rather than at the beginning of the week, so if you opt for dinners, you will have to make sure they have enough dinner money every day. Some schools operate a 'cashless' payment system where you pay a lump sum into an 'account' which your child can use to buy their lunch, with a PIN number which they enter at the cashier's desk. This means that your child doesn't have to carry cash around with them every day. Your child's school will let you know which system they use, but if in doubt, just ask the school office. Make sure your child has a little extra money for the first few days while they get accustomed to their new independence.

8. Buy a mobile phone. Some parents have concerns about mobile phones, but they can be a very handy way for your child to get in touch if they miss their bus or if they decide to go home with a friend after school. It is better to get a cheap phone rather than the latest smart phone or Android, to minimise the risk of it being stolen. Some schools don't allow children to carry phones during the school day, but they will usually allow children to hand their phones into the office. Teach your child how to turn the phone to silent so it doesn't draw attention to them in school or on the street and how to charge it up. Some phone operators have an 'emergency fund' so your child can make a call even if they run out of credit and 999 is always free if it is a real emergency.

9. Finally... The day before school starts, do a final run down: have you got all the uniform for the first day? Is the book bag packed? Have you checked what time school starts and finishes? Have you packed a lunch or given your child money for school dinner? Have you put out bus money for them? Being well-prepared will help your child to feel more confident about that daunting first day, and it will give you peace of mind too.

Psychological preparation

Remembering all the practical things can take time and a bit of getting used to, but the psychological preparation is a tougher challenge for your child. A lot of things may be making your child anxious, including the thought of being away from primary school friends and not making new ones; finding their way around the school; worries about schoolwork; having to take lots of different subjects or travelling independently for the first time.

Child psychologist Pat Spungin says that you can help by talking to your child about their anxieties and reassuring them. 'Explain, "This is what it will be like. Instead of being in one class, you will have many teachers, and it will be much bigger." Just let them unload, because they might be worried that they'll be learning a foreign language, and they might be confused about how to plan their homework, so make sure that if they've got any anxieties, they'll be able to talk to you about it.'

Spungin says that many children will be worried about making friends and, more particularly, they may worry about not having anyone to talk in the first few days and that they'll be left hanging around on their own. She says that children from the same primary school will often stick together in the first days, but that it can be harder if your child is the only child from their primary school attending the secondary school: 'If they're going to a school where nobody else is going, it's a good idea to ask around. You may have friends who will know somebody who's going to that school, and you can get the children together beforehand, so that on the first day they can at least have the security of knowing somebody.'

Cultivating independence

You can use the summer holidays to help your child to become more independent and to take responsibility for their own actions. Whereas primary school is usually a supportive, gentle environment, secondary

school demands a certain degree of self-reliance from children. They'll be expected to organise their own homework, and perhaps to make their own way to and from school: bad behaviour may result in detention after school.

Anna Kerry, subject leader for German at Prince Henry's Grammar School in Otley, says that Year 7 children are often timid: 'We find that when they join us in Year 7, they have to be told everything – they're very scared of doing something by themselves. Little things like how to lay out work, putting a title, putting a date, knowing they can turn over the page without asking. A lot of them will sit there in silence scared because they think they're not allowed to ask questions.'

Here are some suggestions to help your child practise being independent before they start Y7. Let them:

- Walk into town on their own, or with friends.
- Take responsibility for particular household chores, such as tidying their room, unloading the dishwasher, making their own breakfast.
- Take care of their own personal finances (such as buying particular items out of pocket money rather than asking you for more money).
- Take the bus on their own, or with friends, to build up confidence. You can alleviate anxiety by making sure that someone is waiting in town to meet them.

Suzanne, whose son now takes a public bus to secondary school, says: 'In the final year of primary school, I began encouraging my son to have a little more independence, which included sending him to the shops on his own, down to the village or to see friends on his bike. Before starting school we did the school run on the bus. He also did the school bus run with friends but without parents on the moving-up day.'

Is your child ready for secondary school? Take this quiz to find out:**1 Does your child settle down to do homework without making a fuss?**

- a) Yes, always.
- b) Sometimes, but usually needs a bit of persuasion.
- c) Never, I always have to make bribes or threats.

2 Does your child ever walk into town or take public transport on their own?

- a) Yes, frequently, they are very responsible.
- b) Occasionally, but I always make sure they have a mobile phone with them and ring them at regular intervals.
- c) Never, I couldn't let my baby out alone!

3 Does your child tidy their own room?

- a) Yes, every week, and they don't have to be asked.
- b) Now and again, and only if I nag.
- c) Of course not, that's what I'm there for.

4 Does your child go to other people's houses for sleepovers?

- a) Yes, all the time, and they love it.
- b) Sometimes, but only if I know the parents well and I've vetted the arrangements.
- c) Never, who knows what might happen?

5 Can your child cook?

- a) Yes, of course. They cook dinner for the whole family at least once a week.
- b) They can make cookies and fairy cakes under close supervision from me.
- c) Absolutely not. Most household accidents happen in the kitchen!

6 Does your child use the phone on their own?

- a) Yes, it's a handy way of making arrangements with friends.
- b) Sometimes, but they have to ask me first.
- c) No, I'm in charge of my child's social arrangements.

7 What does your child do with their clothes at the end of the day?

- a) They put them away in the wardrobe if they're clean, or in the laundry basket if they're dirty.
- b) They fold them on a chair or radiator.
- c) They throw them on the floor for me to sort out.

8 Does your child have pocket money?

- a) Yes, and they have to budget themselves, so comics, snacks and treats come only out of pocket money.
- b) Yes, but I'll occasionally fork out for extra treats if they've run out.
- c) No, I buy everything they need.

9 How does your child wake up in the morning?

- a) They have an alarm clock and get up by themselves.
- b) I shout from the bottom of the stairs.
- c) I go in every morning and wake them up.

10 Can your child use kitchen domestic appliances, like the toaster, washing machine and dishwasher?

- a) Yes, they can take care of themselves.
- b) They can use the toaster, but I wouldn't expect them to do laundry or washing up.
- c) Absolutely not. I cater for all my child's needs.

Answers:

Mostly As – Your child is ready for secondary school and should adjust without too many problems.

Mostly Bs – Your child is getting there. You may need to give an extra nudge or two in the right direction.

Mostly Cs – Have you ever thought that you might be mollycoddling your child? It's time to let go a bit and let them start fending for themselves to increase their independence. Start by encouraging them to tidy their room, do simple household tasks (such as unloading the dishwasher) and cook simple recipes.

Chapter Five: Settling in – children

So you've bought the uniform, studied the bus timetable and sorted out the dinner money. Your child is ready to start secondary school. What now?

Don't expect your child to settle in instantly. If they do, that's great, but there may still be bumps further down the road. For most children, the first few weeks can be a challenge. One mum, Suzanne, says: 'Expect it to be very different, a steep learning curve for you and your child and something of a step into the unknown. I was very surprised that I'd never heard from other parents about how hard it was!'

There is so much for the new secondary school starter to take in: learning the names of different subject teachers, finding their way around a big school, managing their time and organising themselves, making new friends, and being the youngest once again surrounded by much older (and frequently scary) children. Child psychologist Pat Spungin says that it can be a difficult time for boys in particular: 'They're the runts of the school; at 11 they're still little boys. They've gone from being the biggest fish in a small pool to being the tiddlers in an enormous pool.'

Adjusting to a new school environment

It may not be easy at first for your child to work out where they're supposed to be and at what time or what they're supposed to do in breaks or at lunchtime.

Mum Linda, whose two sons have both been through the transition to secondary school, says that the sheer scale of a new school can be a problem at first: 'Getting lost was a problem for both children initially but that didn't last long. Moving between classes and running the gauntlet of much bigger children in the corridors was daunting but again something they quickly became used to.'

Most schools try to make the transition process easier for children. Vice-principal Kim Lumley says that at Leasowes Community College, for the first week of the new school year, Year 7 children are joined by a teaching assistant who accompanies them from classroom to classroom so they don't get lost. Because

lunchtime is a worry for many children, Leasowes and many other schools allow the Year 7 children to go to lunch half an hour earlier so they can familiarise themselves with the canteen layout and the lunchtime procedures. Some schools also operate a 'mentor' scheme, which means that young people in the higher school years will help your child to find their way around, and help them with any problems that they may have during their first year.

Coping with tiredness

Most parents find that their children are now much more tired, particularly if they now have a longer journey. Even if they don't, the challenge of working out where they're supposed to be at a given time and remembering all the new information they're being given is exhausting in itself. 'Expect them to be tired and a little overwhelmed,' says Suzanne. 'Even though I thought my son was coping really well, I later realised that he wasn't eating or going to the loo at school. Keep a close eye on them.'

Another mum, Melanie, agrees: 'Tiredness was major because the journey to school is long. He leaves the house at 7.10am and arrives back at 4.40pm, if the bus is on time. He is now used to it, but it took some adjusting. The trick was to make sure he could relax and have a snack before anything else!'

Allow your child to take it easy outside of school. This probably isn't the time to be joining new clubs or starting new out-of-school activities. In fact, they may even want to give up some activities they already do. The chances are that by the end of the first term, they will be coping much better and they'll want to get more involved.

Personal organisation

At primary school, the question of good personal organisation is not central to school life. Children take their book bags in every day with perhaps a couple of books, a reading journal and a planner. At secondary school, it's very different: children need different books every day, and sometimes need extra equipment, such as aprons, ingredients for food tech, or particular materials for design and technology. They will also need to remember PE kit and extras such as hockey sticks. The extra load of homework can also be difficult to adjust to.

Louise says of her daughter Olivia: 'It took several weeks for Olivia to get used to remembering all that she needed each day and for her to decide on which activities she could comfortably cope with on top of everything else. We made sure that she was well-organised at home with her own desk space and that she got into a routine of coming home and doing that day's homework immediately and getting it out of the way.'

Year 7 students will be given a student planner full of information they need to know to organise themselves. This could include school rules, details about fire drills, subject information such as the periodic table and common spellings, and a place to record deadlines for homework and dates of tests. Teachers will sometimes use the planner to communicate with parents, so make a point of checking the planner each week. It's also a place you can communicate with teachers, recording any concerns you might have, such as if your child doesn't understand the homework they've been set.

Children who are not used to organising themselves into a routine will probably need some help from you. Linda says: 'My elder son was very vague and I had to keep a close watch on him, checking his school planner every day for homework, letters from the school, etc. His younger brother is more organised but still occasionally forgets his homework.'

The trick is not to push too hard in these early weeks. Settling in and finding a routine takes time. Friendships formed on the first day of school may have disappeared and been replaced by new ones a few weeks later.

Addressing problems with settling in

There are some children who will find it all too much: the work is too hard, they don't make any friends, they feel exhausted, the older children are being mean to them... any or all of these problems can cause concern. The good thing about secondary schools these days is that most have a staff that is responsible for pastoral care, and there will usually be a Year 7 tutor whose job it is to make sure that the transfer from primary to secondary school is as smooth as possible.

If your child is having problems, whether it's coping with workload or settling in socially, then it's worth talking to the Year 7 tutor, so that they can address the problem early. 'If there is an issue at school and they're not

happy with what somebody said to them and they feel they're being bullied, it's better to deal with that straight away and let somebody know,' says Lumley. 'If you leave it for 12 or 24 hours or longer, it's very hard to find out exactly what did happen. We'd always encourage parents to contact us if there are any concerns.'

Be prepared for a difficult few weeks at the start, but take heart from the fact that, despite the challenges of the first term, most children do eventually settle in. Melanie, whose son Adam struggled with tiredness at the beginning, was able to say after one term: 'My child is much happier going to secondary school than he ever was at primary school. His comments have been: "Now I remember why I once loved science" and "I love maths again!"'

Case study – Michael

Michael enjoyed playing rugby for a local under-12s side. When he started at secondary school, his PE teacher decided to change the position he played, putting him, on the grounds of his build, in the front row – a much more physical position than the one he'd been used to. Michael was upset, both by having to play in an unfamiliar and more demanding position, and by the teacher's implication that he was too large to play in his traditional position. His mother, Sally, spoke to the PE teacher and persuaded him to let Michael play in the position he was used to.

Case study – Alice

A few weeks after starting secondary school, Alice was kicked, unprovoked, by a boy in another class. A week later, the boy hit her hard on the head, again for no reason. Alice's mum, Katherine, emailed Alice's form teacher, who contacted the Year 7 tutor. The Year 7 tutor asked Alice to fill out a form explaining what had happened and naming witnesses. The tutor then spoke to the other children who had witnessed the attack and reprimanded the boy concerned. He was made to apologise to Alice and has not bothered her since.

In conclusion, if you have a concern about your child, don't keep it to yourself. Communicating your concerns to the staff will help them to tackle and resolve any problems before they get any bigger.

Chapter Six: Settling in – parents

How to adjust to the transition from primary to secondary school

It's not just your child who needs to adjust to secondary school – you do too.

Secondary school is different to your child's early school years. At primary school, you may have been used to waiting around on the school playground at drop-off or pick-up time, and you may have had your playground friends in other mums or dads – if you've got younger children, you probably still do. If there was a problem with the teacher, you could just pop into the classroom at the end of the day and have a quick word. It's very likely that you knew the names of every teacher in the school.

At secondary school, chances are you won't be doing drop-off and pick-up any more, but even if you are, you'll be sitting in your car rather than standing on the school playground. There'll be dozens of teachers, and you won't know who most of them are; you may have two short scheduled meetings with your child's form tutor over the course of a year. Finding out what your child is doing and how the school approaches fundamentals like learning and discipline is much harder.

One mum, Rachael, says that she was not expecting the change from primary to secondary school to be hard for her as well as her son: 'The adjustment for us as parents to Daniel starting secondary school was enormous! We didn't really know what to expect and we found the transition as hard as, if not harder than, Daniel himself,' she says. 'The main issue was of course letting go. Suddenly this darling child of mine who I had taken to school every day and dropped off outside his classroom was travelling to a strange town on a public bus all by himself, and it was all out of my control, especially when the bus didn't turn up or was late.' Rachael admits that she could have done more to help Daniel (and herself) prepare for the new level of independence he would need at secondary school: 'It did help buying him a mobile phone, but looking back we should perhaps have given him a bit more independence in Years 5 and 6 to prepare him – and ourselves – for what was to come. It is also difficult not having the direct contact with teachers at the school, especially when things go wrong, but we have found the school very supportive and quick to try to sort out problems when they arise.'

In short, you need to adapt to a different rhythm and a different way of doing things once your child is at secondary school. If you've still got younger children at primary school, you may find your time and attention torn between the eldest and the younger children; you'll still be doing the school run with the younger ones while worrying about what's happening to the eldest when you're not around.

How to become involved in school life

If you're the sort of person who likes to get involved in school life and who misses the sense of belonging that is part of the primary school experience, then there are things you can do at secondary school to become part of school life again. There may be fewer opportunities for helping out, but some secondaries do welcome volunteers, particularly in the library. If you've got the time to spare, volunteering can be a good way of getting to know how the school works and who the teachers are.

The other two tried-and-tested ways of getting involved in school life are to join the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) or to become a school governor. They can both be valuable, if sometimes time-consuming, things to do. They're an excellent way of meeting people, getting your name known among staff and having a say in the life of the school.

Joining the Parent Teacher Association (PTA)

PTAs tend to get a bad press. They're often described as cliquy or exclusive or as being run by some very pushy people with too much time on their hands. Not all PTAs are like that, and if they are, there's no reason why they have to be. Many people have made new friends through getting involved in a PTA and they present a great opportunity for meeting staff, hearing the gossip, finding out what's happening in school and practising your organisational skills (very useful for your CV if you're on a career break). Above all, of course, they give you the chance to fundraise for the school and therefore improve the quality of school life. In 2014, PTAs in the UK collectively raised over £120 million.

What does it involve?

The bulk of PTA work centres around planning fundraising activities, though some PTA members also help out with school outings or run after-school clubs. Your level of involvement depends on you – you may

simply want to take tickets on the door at the school disco or you may want to organise a large quiz evening for 200 parents. If you become a committee member, you will have a greater degree of involvement, whether it's as Chair, Secretary, Treasurer or something else. It depends on your skills, what you feel comfortable doing and how much time you have to offer.

What is the time commitment?

Expect the PTA to meet anything from monthly to once or twice a term, with more frequent meetings in the run up to a fundraising event. The more sociable PTAs may hold their meetings in a pub. Here are some typical fundraising initiatives that PTAs are likely to come up with:

- Quiz night – for parents or children
- Summer fete or Christmas fete
- Fashion show
- Barn dance
- Disco (for children)
- 500 club – a simple lottery: parents donate a sum of money each month, and there's a small prize for the names drawn out of the hat. A good way of ensuring regular donations rather than one-offs
- Cake sale
- Bingo night
- Non-uniform day – children pay £1 to come to school in ordinary clothes
- Auctions – companies or celebrities are persuaded to donate items, possessions or creative works (such as drawings) which are then auctioned
- Second-hand sale – the items could be books, clothing, DVDs or uniform (always useful at the start of term)
- Recycling clothes – asking parents to donate old clothes and then selling them by the tonne to a recycling company
- Car boot sale
- Talent competition
- Race night – parents bet on the outcome of pre-recorded horse races.

Obviously some of these take more organisation than others. Cake sales are fairly straightforward, for example, and, if you make them a termly event, can be a good way of ensuring a regular income stream. Non-uniform days take next to no organisation, but use them sparingly; you don't want to impose too much on the goodwill of the parent body.

The events that tend to bring in a lot of money are big ones such as fetes and quiz evenings, but they require a lot of organisation in terms of selling tickets, organising stalls and insurance (in the case of fetes) and working out questions, scoring systems, and providing prizes (in the case of quizzes). Selling food and alcohol at events such as quiz evenings and barn dances can bring in a lot of extra money and make the events a more attractive proposition to parents – though you will need to get a licence to sell alcohol.

As a PTA member, you can play to your strengths. You might be good at persuading people to buy raffle tickets, or you might be good at thinking up quiz questions. Whatever your talents or connections, there could be a role in the PTA for you.

How does the PTA's fundraising benefit the school?

The average PTA raises about £9,000 a year, though it is possible to raise much more. PTAs usually consult with the school about where the money is most needed. Typically it could go to:

- The school library for re-stocking books
- Buying new ICT equipment
- Paying for school trips or end-of-term treats
- Buying sports equipment
- Buying instruments for the music department or costumes for the drama department.

How to become a school governor

School governors help with the running of the school. While the head and senior management team make most of the decisions, school governors have to set the budget, set strategic direction, review progress against objectives and play a part in appointing teaching staff. Governors in voluntary-aided schools, foundation schools and academies have more influence than schools that are controlled by local authorities.

What is the governing body?

There is some variation between different types of school, but broadly speaking, governing bodies are made up of:

- Parent governors (elected by parents)
- Staff representatives (elected by school staff)
- Local authority governors (appointed by the local authority)
- Community governors (members of the local community appointed by the governing body)
- Governors appointed by the relevant religious body or foundation (in a faith school)
- Up to two sponsor governors (appointed by the governing body).

How do you become a governor?

The number of governors will vary depending on the size of the school, but will normally be between nine and 20. Parent governors are elected for terms of four years, and elections are held when a governor's term comes to an end or they have resigned. To stand as a governor, you will need to prepare a short written election address, which will be sent to parents at the school, along with voting papers.

What are the advantages?

There are two big advantages to becoming a governor. One is that you get to have a say in important decisions about how the school is run: what the budget is spent on, what strategies are used in teaching and learning and the appointment of staff. If a vacancy for a headship comes up, you'll have a say in the process of appointing a new one. It's an ideal opportunity to understand more about how your child's school works, how decisions are made about teaching and learning and how the operation of the school is influenced by educational policy.

Ralph, who was a governor at his son's comprehensive school, says that the role offers a great opportunity to observe lessons and make constructive suggestions: 'The governors who made the greatest contribution were those who visited school regularly, attended lessons and gave feedback, partly informally and partly by a one-page summary report in agreed standard format to the head of faculty.'

If the school doesn't currently offer the option to attend lessons, Ralph advises suggesting it to the chair of governors, who can put the arrangements in place. It gives you a unique opportunity to influence teaching at the school, he says: 'Give feedback to the head of faculty after lessons – if you think that a teacher is struggling, your instincts may well be right.'

The second advantage is that you will have regular contact with the headteacher and other teaching staff. In a large secondary school, it is impossible for senior managers to know every parent, but as a governor, if you have a particular concern about your child, then it can help if you already know the headteacher. You'll also have a chance to meet other parents with whom you can share your ideas, and other governors from all walks of life, all of whom may have valuable experience that you can learn from.

Training to become a school governor

A lot of people worry, with some justification, that they won't understand what's going on at school governor meetings. The education system has a lot of jargon, and teaching staff can forget that the layperson won't be familiar with the numerous acronyms that litter the educational landscape. Don't be afraid to ask questions if there's something you don't understand – the chances are that others don't understand them either.

You'll be offered training – every governor is expected to take an induction course, but you will also have the opportunity to take training courses on topics such as exclusions, appeals, special educational needs and recruitment. It will give you an insight into how education works, and it will look good on your CV too.

What is the time commitment?

Being a school governor can be time-consuming, but it partly depends on how much time you're willing to put in – not every governor attends every meeting but some governor duties may require you to be at the

school during the working day. At Ralph's school, there were six full governing body meetings every year, each lasting three to four hours, and always held in the evening. He adds: 'The advance reading would take about 30 minutes to an hour (longer if you were keen to correct details of prior meetings' minutes). In addition, each committee held approximately four to six evening committee meetings per year and each governor was expected to be on at least one committee.'

There were also voluntary commitments to take into consideration: 'We were invited to the annual exam results explanations by teaching staff and their heads of faculty. These took up two consecutive mornings. About a third to half of the governors attended over the two mornings.'

A term in the life of a school governor

Here's what a school governor's diary for the autumn term might look like:

Tuesday, September 13, 7pm: Full meeting of the governing body.

This will usually last about three hours. You may need to prepare by reading documents (minutes, policies or proposals) beforehand.

Wednesday, September 28, 7pm: Health & Safety sub-committee meeting

This will probably last about two hours, and will need some preparation beforehand.

Monday, October 10, 7pm: Curriculum subcommittee meeting

This will probably last about two hours, and will need some preparation beforehand.

Friday, November 11, 10am: Observe class being taught

If you are on the curriculum subcommittee, you may be invited in to see how a particular subject is taught at school.

Thursday, December 8, 7pm: Full meeting of the governing body

This will usually last about three hours. You may need to prepare by reading documents (minutes, policies or proposals) beforehand.

Friday, December 16, 2pm: Attend school Christmas concert

Governors are usually invited to school events. You're not obliged to attend, but, as a parent, there's a good chance you'd be turning up anyway.

Quiz: Are you cut out to be a member of the PTA?

1. The last time you did a sponsored activity, how many people did you persuade to sponsor you?

- a) Loads, I have no qualms about asking for money.
- b) About 10, all close family and friends.
- c) None, I made up some names and addresses and donated all the money myself.

2. What's the biggest thing you've ever had to organise?

- a) I regularly organised conferences for over 100 people in my last job.
- b) Cheese and wine evenings for one of the clubs I was in at university.
- c) My five-year-old's birthday party. It was a nightmare.

3. How much do you love meetings?

- a) I adore meetings, try getting me to shut up...
- b) They're OK now and again, if they're focused on the task in hand.
- c) I would fake my own death to avoid them.

4. How successful are you at getting people to do what you tell them?

- a) I command respect, people listen to what I say.
- b) People will do what I say as long as I ask nicely.
- c) I can't even get my 10-year-old to do her homework.

5. How do you feel about social occasions involving lots of children and teenagers?

- a) Great, the more the merrier.

- b) Fine, as long as I take tranquillisers first.

- c) Social occasions involving my own children are bad enough.

6. What's your attitude towards fetes?

- a) Love 'em, especially the tombola.
- b) I don't mind taking my child along, but wouldn't choose to go otherwise.
- c) Fate worse than death.

7. Do barn dances fill you with delight or horror?

- a) Delight, I know my Gay Gordons from my Strip the Willow.
- b) Three glasses of wine and I can't stop do-se-do'ing.
- c) Can I sit in a corner and read a book?

8. How good are you at mingling with total strangers?

- a) Great, a stranger is just a friend you haven't met yet.
- b) As long as someone else introduces us, I'm OK.
- c) Not at all, I do my shopping on the internet to avoid having to talk to the checkout person.

Answers:

Mostly As – You were born to lead the PTA.

Mostly Bs – Join the PTA, but don't stand for Chair unless forced.

Mostly Cs – Better stick to the day job.

Chapter Seven: What your child will be learning

The national curriculum is compulsory in most state secondary schools. Academies and free schools are the exception – they are only required to teach a ‘broad and balanced’ curriculum. Private schools are not obliged to teach the national curriculum, but many choose to do so.

A guide to the subjects included in the secondary national curriculum

The national curriculum makes some subjects compulsory through to Year 11, when children are aged 16, while other subjects are compulsory only in Key Stage 3, which includes Years 7 to 9, or ages 11 to 14. The contents of the national curriculum have changed many times over the years; the curriculum currently being taught was published in 2014, and aims to be more flexible than the previously rather rigid curriculum.

Currently, in KS3 (Years 7, 8 and 9), the following 12 subjects are statutory (that is, required by law) and have statutory programmes of study (a set curriculum that students must follow):

- Art & Design
- Citizenship
- Design & Technology
- English
- Geography
- History
- Computing
- Mathematics
- Modern foreign languages
- Music
- Physical Education
- Science

In addition, there are three statutory subjects that have non-statutory programmes of study – in other words, schools must teach these subjects, but they don't have to follow a nationally set curriculum:

Religious education (RE): Schools have a degree of freedom about how to teach RE. Usually they will follow a curriculum developed by the local authority or by the school itself. As a parent, you have the right to remove your child from RE lessons.

Sex and Relationships Education (SRE): SRE aims to teach children about sex, sexuality and sexual health and the importance of stable and loving relationships. Schools can choose how to teach SRE, but there are some statutory elements. You can choose to remove your child from some SRE classes if you wish, but they must attend for the statutory parts of SRE, because these form part of the science curriculum.

Careers education: Schools must provide careers education to pupils in years 8 to 13. They must make sure that pupils have access to up-to-date information and materials about career choices.

There is also one non-statutory subject:

Personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE): Schools are not obliged to teach PSHE, but most do. It covers topics such as leading a healthier lifestyle, avoiding harm from alcohol and drugs, and managing personal finances. Sometimes schools incorporate SRE and careers education into PSHE lessons.

Six subjects are currently compulsory in KS4 (Years 10 and 11):

- Citizenship
- English
- Computing
- Mathematics
- Physical Education
- Science

Schools must also continue to provide lessons in RE, SRE and careers education.

As in KS3, PSHE remains optional.

Your child will also have the option to choose other subjects to take to GCSE. The number of GCSEs your child takes will partly depend on the school and partly on your child's ability. There is no set upper level, but around 12 tends to be the maximum.

What is covered in each subject?

You can find details of what the curriculum covers in each subject at National Curriculum online.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-secondary-curriculum>

Much of what is covered in the national curriculum will be familiar from your own time at school, but note that:

Science covers the disciplines of biology, chemistry and physics. Some schools give pupils the opportunity to study these subjects separately at GCSE, while some schools offer only a more general GCSE in science, which pupils take in conjunction with an applied science GCSE (which has a vocational focus) or an additional science GCSE (which has an academic focus).

Citizenship involves learning how to become a good citizen, teaching children some basic information about how the law works, how a democratic society functions and how they can participate usefully in society, perhaps through volunteering or joining a campaign group.

Design & technology (D&T) is about learning to design and create things. According to the national curriculum programme of study, 'using creativity and imagination, pupils design and make products that solve real and relevant problems within a variety of contexts, considering their own and others' needs, wants and values.' Generic skills of understanding materials, carrying out research and designing solutions are

applied in specific contexts, such as cooking and woodwork.

Schools are free to choose which modern language or languages they teach: French, German and Spanish are all popular. Schools differ in their approach to modern languages. Some offer only one language in Year 7, but allow children to choose a second language later on; others offer two languages from Year 7 onwards. Some schools allow children to take only one language at GCSE.

The amount of time that should be allocated to each subject is not specified in the national curriculum.

The majority of subjects will usually be allocated one or two hours a week. You can expect more time to be allocated to maths, English and science, however.

Statutory requirements

There are also statutory requirements (things that schools must do) throughout the secondary curriculum:

- ✓ Setting suitable challenges.
- ✓ Responding to pupils' needs and overcoming potential for individuals and groups of pupils.
- ✓ Using every relevant subject to develop pupils' mathematical fluency.
- ✓ Developing pupils' spoken language, reading, writing and vocabulary as integral aspects of the teaching of every subject.

The way that subjects are taught at secondary school represents a big change from primary school. Children will have different teachers for different subjects, and will be expected to move from classroom to classroom during the school day. It can be tiring and confusing at first. Allow your child time to settle in and don't expect too much at first. Most children seem to get the hang of it within the first few weeks.

Helping your child to manage their homework

One of the things you will notice is a big increase in the amount of homework your child receives; half an hour every evening is typical in Year 7. If your child is given homework in half a dozen subjects a week, this can prove a major organisational challenge.

Homework can be a battleground in many families, so it is wise to get your child into good habits from the start. This includes setting a regular time for doing it, which according to child psychologist Pat Spungin is not necessarily as soon as your child gets home from school: 'It's a good lesson for life to do homework at a regular time, because then you can have leisure time and TV time around it, so you could possibly do your homework after you've come home and had a bit to eat and a little bit of television. I think a "slot" is a very good habit.'

If your child has a tendency to get too absorbed in TV, you could do what mum Suzanne does: 'I'd always struggled at primary school with the dilemma that often they are tired and want a break, but once they start watching TV, you can't get them away from it. So I give them a short break, a snack and a drink – they don't have to start immediately but there's no TV until homework's done.'

According to Vice-principal Kim Lumley, as well as a regular time slot, children need a suitable environment in which to do homework, 'They need space on their own and they need a quiet place, not with the TV or the radio blasting away, and the MP3 player in their ears.'

At one time, that quiet place would have been their bedroom, although given that many bedrooms now have televisions and electronic gadgets, they are not guaranteed to be free from distraction. It's useful, nonetheless, to make sure that your child has a proper desk in their room or in another quiet room at which they can work, so that they can sit up properly and concentrate on what they're doing rather than lolling about on their bed.

These days, schools try to make it as easy as possible to organise homework routines, and most now issue planners or homework diaries to remind children what homework they have, and when it's due in. 'There's a very solid structure in place for homework, including a homework timetable advising parents how long it should take to do something,' says Kerry.

It's worth checking that your child keeps their planner up to date, and if they don't have one, to make sure they keep a homework timetable. The common temptation, to which almost all of us have succumbed, is to do homework the evening before it's due in. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but try to help your child plan

realistically. If homework is due in on a Tuesday, but on Monday evening they have their ballet class followed by Guides, then suggest they do it earlier. Some children, of course, need more nagging than others.

What to do if your child is finding homework difficult

Sometimes your child will find homework difficult and ask for your help. Spungin says that it's fine to lend a hand: 'If you're a parent who is interested in history or knows a little bit about another country, taking an interest when you can add something is a good thing.'

On the other hand, says teacher Anna Kerry, helping with homework doesn't mean you should do it yourself. 'Never ever do the homework for a child. If the child can't do homework for themselves, then they won't be able to do the assessment. It does not help the child if the parent does it for them.'

As a parent, you have a huge influence on how your child learns: learning how to study effectively is one of the most crucial skills your child needs. Help your child to develop their own study skills by showing them how they can find information for themselves and apply themselves to problems. Most of us find it hard to settle down and tackle a piece of work, but it's absolutely essential if your child wants to do well academically. Helping your child to learn good study skills will also help them to be more confident in their learning.

Child psychologist Ruth Coppard suggests it's a good idea to alert the school to the problem early on. 'Most schools would rather know [if a child is having difficulty with homework]. If a child is spending two hours on homework that is supposed to take 20 minutes, then something is wrong. They need to know so they can modify it,' she advises. 'Either the child is finding it too hard, or the child isn't getting the right end of the stick and trying to do something considerably more than needs to be done.'

Some schools operate homework clubs immediately after school. Run by teachers, these hour-long after-school clubs give children a place to work on their homework and access to a teacher who can help with any tricky questions. Homework clubs are particularly good for children who have trouble understanding why they have to do schoolwork after school has finished.

Using a computer

Many schools now give children homework that requires them to use a computer, usually to carry out internet-based research, and sometimes to access the school's virtual learning environment (VLE) which is a secure website that houses the school's learning resources. Some schools also expect children to type their homework using word processor software and email it in.

This can prove something of a conundrum for parents. Most of us want to limit the amount of time our children spend surfing the web, messing about on social media or engaged in instant messaging. However, if your child has to use a computer to do their homework, this becomes harder to manage. 'Parents need to be very aware of what children are doing on things like social networking sites,' says Kerry. 'A lot of cyberbullying goes on in Year 7.'

To add to the difficulty, although children need a quiet place to do their homework, experts tend to advise that computers should be in a place where parents can see them, to make sure they use it appropriately. It's rarely easy to find a place in the house that is both quiet and public. It may also be the case that your household has only one computer and it needs to be in a place that is convenient for the adults rather than the children.

So how can you find a compromise that works for everyone? Here are some suggestions:

- If your child has their own computer, make sure that parental control software is installed. This means that even if you can't see your child using their computer, you can block inappropriate sites, and receive a warning if your child tries to access a site that you are unhappy with. If you have a single family computer, create a separate login for your child, so that you can install parental control software.
- Create a set of rules for the use of social media, such as not befriending anyone you don't know in real life, and making sure that the most stringent privacy settings are used. Ask your child to tell you if they receive unwelcome contact from strangers, and tell them that it is extremely important that they never give any of their personal details out online, such as their address or phone number. Chapter 11 has links to websites that contain good practice for managing internet use.
- Set a screen-time limit. If your child has homework that needs to be done on the computer, give them

(for example) half an hour in which to do it, so that they can't spend 45 minutes on Instagram and 10 minutes doing their homework.

Kerry believes that it's a good idea to exert tight control over computer use: 'It comes down to checking the homework diary – do they actually need to use the computer? If not, the computer shouldn't be on when they're doing their homework. If they do want to use social networking sites, it should be used as a reward when their homework is completed.'

Chapter Eight: Assessment

Approaches to assessment have changed in recent years. In this chapter, we'll look at how assessment works at secondary school, and what you can expect to learn about your child's progress from teachers.

Streaming

Some secondary schools stream children from Year 7; some do not. Some stream in maths and English but not other subjects. Some choose to stream them later on, from Year 8 or 9. It varies from school to school, and schools often change their own policies on streaming.

It is unusual for children to be streamed as soon as they start school, however. Teachers like to have the opportunity to observe pupils first and identify any problems. When the school does start streaming, it will usually do so on the basis of one or more of the following:

SATs results: Your child's KS2 SATs results can be a good rough indicator of their ability. 'Rough' is the key word here; some secondary schools distrust SATs results because they believe that primary schools have developed ways of nudging less-able children to achieve higher marks.

Other information: Supplied by the primary school about children's abilities.

CAT results: CAT stands for Cognitive Abilities Test. These tests, which are set nationally, are usually taken in the first term of Year 7, though not all schools choose to use them. They resemble 11+ tests, in that they include a test of verbal reasoning, a test of non-verbal reasoning, and a test of quantitative reasoning. The results, which usually arrive early in the second term, are thought to be a good predictor of children's later performance. Marks range from 60 to 140, and the average CAT result is 100. As well as being used to stream children, these tests are also used to identify children who are struggling or who have special needs, and those who are very able.

Performance in school: Teachers will observe children in class and the quality of their written work.

School tests: Some schools administer their own tests to children to make decisions about streaming.

Even if the school does not stream, these sources of information will be used to identify children with particular needs and to set targets for individual children.

Assessment and grading

As part of the introduction of the 2014 curriculum the government has announced radical changes to the structure and assessment of GCSEs. The system of A*-G grades most parents are familiar with, having experienced it themselves, is being replaced by a new system of grading with numbers. In addition to the changes to the structure of GCSEs, the government is also raising the expectation of the standard of GCSE that will be considered as 'good pass' from a C to a new grade 5.

Part of the new assessment approach is the fact that all students will be required to reach an 'expected standard'. For example, a student in Year 7 or Year 8 will be considered to have met the expected standard in a particular subject at the end of the academic year if they are on track to achieve at least a Grade 5 in their GCSE.

Many secondary schools report student progress to parents via half-termly progress reports.

Under the new system Y7 and Y8 pupils might be given levels (part of old-curriculum assessment, now being phased out) or new-style grades.

Pupils in Years 9, 10 and 11 will probably be given a report with target grades to reflect the new GCSE grades. KS4 students might also receive:

- An indication of their attitude to learning
- An indication of their GCSE target grade (1-9)
- An indication of whether the student is on track to gain their GCSE target grade
- An indication of their current attainment as a GCSE grade

How your child's progress is measured

In a modern secondary school, you can expect children to spend much more time doing group work, working in pairs or giving oral presentations. Teachers are expected to be 'facilitators' – guiding children to find out for themselves rather than simply standing at the front of the class and imparting information.

Teachers also gather information on how well children understand the lesson. 'We sometimes assess children by giving them lots of little tasks, so we constantly get feedback of their progress in one lesson,' says teacher Anna Kerry. Teachers are encouraged to find out how much pupils have understood, so they may use a 'traffic light system', in which children can hold up a red, amber or green card to show that they haven't understood at all, they've understood a little or understood completely. After a few lessons, teachers have a good idea of which children are following the lesson and which ones are having difficulties.

The need for secondary teachers to keep track of pupils' progress towards meeting targets means that pupils are assessed frequently. Kerry says: 'We assess our pupils about every half term, which is when we finish a unit. These days we tend to give them a revision list so they know what they've got to revise.'

Throughout the school year you can expect to be kept informed of your child's progress in different subjects. Check your child's planner regularly for information about targets and homework, and any messages from teachers. You will also be sent regular assessment sheets detailing your child's progress in different subjects.

Some schools are also introducing web portals. Each parent is given a unique username, enabling them to log on and look at assessment information relating to their child, including both the targets they're working to and the progress they're making.

If you are concerned that your child isn't being assessed frequently enough, or that the assessments don't accurately reflect your child's ability, then contact the relevant subject teacher. You can do this in a number of ways, but the easiest way is simply to email the teacher. Schools are usually keen these days to maintain a close relationship with parents, so if there is a problem, then it's better to deal with it straight away by talking to the teacher than by letting the problem worsen.

Chapter Nine: If things go wrong

Secondary schools are very different from primary schools. They're bigger and less cosy, and children are expected to work harder and be more independent. At the same time, children are starting to go through adolescence, a time when they may be very susceptible to peer group pressure. It can be a combustible mix. This chapter looks at some of the problems children can face at secondary school, such as bullying, falling behind with schoolwork and mixing with other children who may have a negative influence on your child.

Bullying

All parents dread the possibility that their children will be bullied. 'An awful lot of parents are worried about bullying, and those who were bullied themselves are terrified it will happen to their children,' says child psychologist Ruth Coppard.

Coppard says that if your child says that they are being bullied, it's worth checking what's really happened so that you don't jump to the worst conclusion. 'Sometimes a child will come home full of, "Oh, it's awful," when quite a lot of the time it's all right. You need to be prepared for that,' she says.

Begin by asking for the facts: 'It's a good idea to start with, "Tell me what happened" rather than picking on the first sentence and responding to it.'

There are of course two sides to every story, and it's possible that what has happened is not bullying, but simply an argument that has got out of hand. Sometimes children need to resolve things between themselves, and intervention from an adult can make things worse. You will need to use your judgement to assess the situation.

Not everything that is perceived as 'bullying' is necessarily serious. Child psychologist Pat Spungin says when it comes to things like low-level teasing (about things like freckles or wearing glasses), you can teach your child strategies for coping with it. The aim of the person doing the teasing is to embarrass or humiliate the child, but Spungin says that children can defuse the teasing by taking ownership of it: 'If it's just teasing, you

make a bigger thing of it yourself. If someone teases you about your curly hair, say “Yes, it’s the curliest hair in the world, no one else has hair this curly”, because a bully thrives on their sense of power over you. If you show that they don’t have that effect, then they don’t get what they’re looking for.’

On the other hand, if your child is genuinely being bullied, they won’t always tell you about it. Some children go to great lengths to disguise the fact they are being bullied, often out of fear that telling an adult will lead to greater recrimination from the perpetrators. You may need to look out for the signs of bullying, says Spungin, such as, ‘if you give them money, and then they’re asking you for money when you think they should have had enough’ or ‘if they’re a little bit low, and you think, “This is not my perky primary school child”’ or, ‘if they’re reluctant to even go to school’. In severe cases, she says, you might see torn clothing or bruises. ‘But you’re mostly looking for a change in mood.’

If you suspect something is wrong, you need to take a gentle approach, says Spungin: ‘You could say things like, “You don’t seem to be yourself, is something bothering you?” If it got to be really bad, I would ask the parent of a child in the same school or class if they know anything.’

Another tactic, says Coppard, is to find the right time when your children are more willing to talk: ‘I think it is brilliant to tuck your kids in at bedtime, because that’s when they go soft and little. If you say, “I’ll come up in a bit and make sure you’ve turned off your light”, and sit with them and chat, they’ll talk then.’

The next approach is to talk to the school, though Spungin points out that most children will try to stop you: ‘There’s a shame associated with it: “Why me? Why did someone pick on me? There must be something wrong with me”. They don’t want to be overt.’

All schools these days have anti-bullying policies and should be able to deal with the problem swiftly and firmly. If they don’t, then it becomes a case of complaining persistently until they do. Don’t be afraid of complaining to the school; it’s your child that you’re trying to protect and you shouldn’t be fobbed off by suggestions that it’s your child’s fault or that the problem has been resolved if it hasn’t.

Linda says that her son had problems with one boy in particular: 'We have had one instance of bullying – a boy in my son's class who was fairly indiscriminate in his, mostly verbal, aggression. When he eventually turned it on my son we wrote to his form teacher and the boy was spoken to. Fortunately he left Sam alone after that.'

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying is when a child or young person is threatened, harassed, humiliated, or embarrassed by another child or young person through the internet (for example on social networking sites) or mobile phones.

According to recent research figures, one in three children and young people may have been victims of cyberbullying. Friendship groups tend to get bigger at secondary school, and there's more opportunity for friction and hostility, which can easily be expressed on online social networking sites such as Facebook, instant messaging services such as WhatsApp or by sending threatening texts or images by mobile phone. Bullying online can get out of hand very quickly, because it's easy for other children to join in and begin victimising a single child. If this happens, you can take a screen shot of the offensive material to use as evidence later.

One solution is to ban your child from using social networking sites, instant messaging services, or mobile phones, but this can be hard if all their friends are using them.

A note about social media: although there are age restrictions on a number of sites including Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp (and under-13s should not have their own account), in practice, children often join much younger. There can be some social pressure on your child to join if all their friends are already using the site. If you do choose to let your child use social media, you can put various agreements in place with your child such as joining the sites yourself and 'friending' or 'following' your child, so that you can see what comments are being made. It is wise to set all privacy levels to the highest settings and your child should be aware that they should never post personal information or pictures that could identify them or their location (such as school uniform). You can also report abuse to each site's administrators.

Getting help

Knowing when to get involved and when to stand back is never easy for parents, and it's easy to make the wrong call. If you're concerned or unsure about what to do, sites such as www.bullying.co.uk can help. It's always a good idea, if your child is having problems at school, to make sure they have a life outside school where they can mix with other children with similar interests, whether it's a drama group, Guides or a football club.

Sometimes bullying can get out-of-hand, particularly if there is a group of children, rather than one child, doing the bullying. If this happens, you need to take a policy of escalation: complain first to the form teacher, and if that doesn't get you a satisfactory response, complain to the headteacher. If that doesn't work, then complain to the governing body. If you still don't have success, you may need to go to the local authority (assuming it's a local authority school).

Education lawyer Anita Chopra advises parents to keep a record of all instances of bullying: what happened, who was involved, and the date and time it happened.

If your child falls behind with school work

Schoolwork at secondary school can be challenging, even for able children. Few children are good at every single subject, and the problem is that once a child starts falling behind, they carry on falling further and further behind unless they receive help.

It's always worth talking to your child's teachers if you think your child is having difficulties. Nobody wants to be the pushy parent who is always complaining to the school, but if your child is having difficulties with their homework, then you need to talk to the school to see if they can provide additional help. You may not even have to make an appointment – most teachers these days will respond to queries by email.

You can also help your own child. Sometimes it's just a case of clarifying one maths topic that was causing difficulty, and then the rest falls into place. Sometimes it's about helping your child find the answer they're looking for on the internet, or sitting down with your child and testing them on their spellings, or their French verbs.

Children have frequent tests at secondary school, so you can do a lot to support them by helping them revise. 'It's very important for parents to get involved,' says Kerry. 'If parents don't see a revision list, or the children don't know what they've got to revise, the parents should be confident enough to send an email to the school saying, "My son is concerned – he hasn't got a revision list, what does he need to learn?"'

It's also about encouraging your child to apply themselves – with the competing attractions of the internet and electronic games, the temptation to give up on a problem straight away has never been greater. Many parents resort to private tuition, but very often there's no need to do that – as an adult who has been through secondary school yourself, you are in a good position to help your child when they are having difficulties.

Problems at home

Sometimes events that happen at home can affect school life. Perhaps a grandparent has died, or you and your partner have separated, or one of you has lost your job. These will almost certainly affect your child, even if they don't show it at home. If something like this happens, do tell the school, because it will help them understand why your child might be unusually subdued or behaving badly or falling behind with school work.

Vice-principal Kim Lumley says that it's best to inform one of the people responsible for pastoral care at the school, because they can let form and subject teachers know, and they can then keep an eye on your child for any signs of unhappiness or unusual behaviour. 'If parents don't let us know, and the child develops a behaviour problem, they'll get disciplined for the wrong thing. Communication between school and home is vital,' she says.

Peer pressure

One of the hardest things to deal with is if your child starts to mix with other children who want to smoke, drink, take drugs or skip school: in short, those who are a bad influence. It's not easy to prevent, and it's not easy to put a stop to either.

Peer pressure can be an extremely powerful influence, sometimes more powerful than the influence you have as a parent. Ruth Coppard says that the best thing you can do is to try to get the right messages across early

on. If you are firm with your child at 11, there is less chance of them going astray when they are 13 or 14. 'I tend to insist that people make their children say where they're going and come home when they're supposed to. This is when you start practising things like, "I don't care what everybody else's mum does, I'm your mum and you're not doing it." If you start at 10 or 11 you're probably in with a chance; if you leave it till much later, it's quite hard to suddenly invent that.'

Spungin agrees on the importance of taking a firm line early on: 'Most of the battles between parents and children come up with the 14- and 15-year-olds, but they show signs of independence much earlier than that. Recognise that and give a little,' she explains. 'Don't allow them to stay out until ridiculously late hours and hang around in places you don't like the look of, but just listen to their opinions and recognise that they are growing apart, that they have their own views, and their peer group is becoming really important.' Be aware of who your child is hanging around with. 'The most important thing is the peer group; keep your eyes on the kind of child your child is friendly with,' Spungin advises.

Setting boundaries

If you allow your child independence in some areas, for example by listening to their opinions, and by letting them create their own image with clothes, then it's easier to take a firm stance on the really important issues, according to Spungin: 'If you recognise early on that they are becoming different people and you can give them some freedom, you'll be building a good ground for talking about things without fighting about them.'

In these days of more relaxed parenting, it's not easy to stand firm against the general grain. Almost all children will try the 'Everyone else's parents let them do it' line. But this probably isn't true, and even if it is true, there is no reason why you should be the same as every other parent. There are some things for which it is worth setting clear boundaries:

- Make clear your feelings about drinking, smoking and illegal drug-taking early on.
- Limit the number of times your child can go out on weekday evenings.
- Make sure you know where your child is going and who they're going to be with and be prepared to enforce a forfeit if your child comes home later than agreed.
- Insist on regular times for doing homework.

- You can also enlist the school's help, and that of other parents, if necessary. Try steering your child in a different direction, by encouraging them to become involved in out-of-school activities, such as an orchestra or football team.
- Above all, stand your ground. This will make it easier for your child to understand that they can't change your mind about things, however much they pester.

Chapter Ten: Everything you've always wanted to know about secondary school but were afraid to ask

Our expert panel answers your questions. The panel consists of:

Anita Chopra, education lawyer

Ruth Coppard, child psychologist

Anna Kerry, teacher

Kim Lumley, vice-principal

Pat Spungin, child psychologist

Q. If I lose a school-place appeal, can I challenge it legally?

A. Anita Chopra: You could complain to the local government ombudsman for maladministration. That is quite difficult, because if you've had a fair hearing, it will be harder to prove that there has been any maladministration. It is not appropriate to complain simply because you disagree with the decision of the panel. It's got to be a lot more than that; you've got to scrutinise the procedure and look at whether there were any procedural irregularities and whether all the evidence presented was taken into account.

There's also the option of a judicial review – again, the judge will consider procedural errors, and will only consider whether the panel afforded the parent a fair hearing. What I tell parents is that the appeal is the last chance to ensure that all their facts are presented to the panel in order to optimise their chance of success.

Q. There's a boy who made my son's life difficult at primary school. I don't want them to be in the same class at secondary. What should I do?

A. Kim Lumley: We encourage parents to make contact with us. If you've got any concerns about the move to primary to secondary, find the key person at the secondary school and give them a call. If there's a

falling out with friendship groups, or two children really don't work well together, then we would rather know that and address that problem straight away.

Q. Should I make my child do schoolwork in the summer holidays before secondary school?

A. Anna Kerry: They're exhausted enough when a holiday comes up, and they just want to forget it. I think the more you push kids to do things over a holiday, the more you put them off doing it later.

A. Pat Spungin: If you think your child will not be able to keep up or there will be other children who, because of the primary schools they have attended, will be ahead of your child, then it would be a good idea to make sure that your child's basic literacy and numeracy skills are up to speed, so a limited amount of preparation would be in order. Try to make it fun; provide interesting books to read and puzzles to encourage numeracy.

Q. My child is frightened of going to secondary school because older children have told him that new children have their head flushed down the toilet. What can I do to reassure him?

A. Ruth Coppard: Children are often told that somebody will flush their head down the toilet. It's worth telling them that people say that but it's never happened. Tell them that if someone threatens them with something and it happens, they must always tell an adult, ideally a teacher.

A. Pat Spungin: However much you reassure him he will think that you don't know, so find someone who does know! Introduce him to someone who is one year or so ahead of him to disabuse him of these misconceptions.

Q. If my child is being bullied and the school is refusing to take action, what are my options?

A. Anita Chopra: Bullying is a very grey area. Parents are entitled to go through a complaints procedure, and to correspond with the headteacher or the governors of the school. A child can sue for damage, but you

have to be able to quantify long-term damage and that can only be done when the child's 18. For example, you don't know when the child is 13 how badly psychologically damaged that child is going to be once he or she is an adult.

Q. Is it a good idea to offer rewards for passing exams?

A. Kim Lumley: Parents should try and encourage and support their children throughout their time at school. It can be difficult if a parent goes down the line of saying, 'I will give you X amount for passing your exams.' This may only encourage a child to achieve for the wrong reasons. Treats and rewards should be given on the occasions where they really have worked hard to recognise the effort they've put in, rather than it being dependent on the result. The whole family can then celebrate and share in their success with a treat, such as a day out, or a special meal together.

Q. My child is spending hours every night doing her homework. What can I do?

A. Anna Kerry: Parents need to be very aware of when their child's homework is and how long they're supposed to be spending on it. When we say, 'Write a small paragraph about your family and draw a picture,' it can take some children an hour and a half, so sometimes parents should sit down with them and make them realise that they don't need to do too much.

Q. My child goes into his bedroom to do his homework on the computer, but when I look in on him, he's chatting to his friends on Facebook or Messenger. What should I do?

A. Anna Kerry: Children shouldn't have a computer in the bedroom – it should be in a central place, where parents can see what they're up to. It comes down to checking their homework diary; do they actually need to use the computer? If not, the computer shouldn't be on when they're doing their homework. If they do want to use social media, it should be used as a reward when the homework is completed.

Q. I have a problem with the private school my child attends, and attempts to resolve it have been unsuccessful. Can I withdraw my child without paying a full term's fees?

A. Anita Chopra: Once you withdraw your child without giving notice, that is a breach of contract. If the

reasons for taking the child out are serious enough to warrant the parent breaching the contract, you may have a case in law. With independent schools, it's important to document problems first. Parents would have to demonstrate that they did raise the problem with the school internally – courts like to see that they've tried to deal with it at local level. Litigation should be a last resort – the courts tend to err in favour of schools if a parent is sued by the school for non-payment of fees without justifiable cause.

Chapter Eleven: Resources

This chapter contains useful resources to help you and your child as you prepare for secondary school.

Making an appeal: a sample letter

Grounds for making an appeal will differ from child to child: the Advisory Centre for Education's booklet, *Appealing for a school*, suggests different ways of phrasing the appeal letter, depending on the particular grounds on which you are appealing. Some general rules apply, however:

- Be positive
- Be polite
- Be specific (include details about your own child's requirements if you can)
- Include supporting documentation if necessary
- Don't moan!

Here's a suggested sample letter, based on a belief that the school you want is more suitable for your child, and that sending her elsewhere would be detrimental for her:

Appeal for admission to Fairhill Comprehensive School for Isobel James, born May 1st, 2005

It's very important for me that Isobel attends Fairhill – I am sure it will be best for her both educationally and socially.

Isobel is a shy, quiet child and finds it hard to make new friends. Her closest friends from primary school will be attending Fairhill, and I am sure she will flourish if she can be with them. Fairhill is a specialist music college, and would suit Isobel perfectly, as music is her passion and she recently passed grade 4 on the violin.

Fairhill says that it does not have enough space for an extra pupil. However, I believe the school could take an extra pupil. Currently each of the five classes in Year 7 has 28 pupils, but the classrooms are big enough to accommodate 30 children.

The school Isobel has been offered is twice the size of Fairhill and would require her to travel on a public bus. Because she is a timid child, I am worried that she would be overwhelmed by the size of the school, and she would also be anxious about travelling on her own on a bus. She needs to be in a nurturing environment where she is accepted for who she is.

In support of my appeal, I am attaching two documents: one shows the layout of Fairhill, including the size of the classrooms; the other is a letter from Dr Jane Smith, a child psychologist, explaining why Isobel would benefit from being in a smaller school.

Finding 11+ test papers

A number of publishers publish sample 11+ papers that you can buy – many are available in WH Smiths or other newsagents or online. These are generic papers of the kind set by the main local authorities that still have an 11+ exam. They also include a handful of free sample papers you can use for practice.

TheSchoolRun also offers an 11+ learning programme for parents who are interested in tutoring their child themselves in the run-up to the exam.

You may prefer to see past papers set by the particular school you are applying to; the best option is to go to the school's website and order past papers from there.

How to find admissions rules for different local authorities

All local authorities publish their secondary admissions rules on their website. If you don't know the website address for your local authority, entering the name of your local authority (for example, East Sussex) and the word 'admissions' into your search engine will usually find it quickly. Directgov also has a list of local councils: <http://local.direct.gov.uk/LDGRedirect/Start.do?mode=1>

Your local authority will send you a booklet containing the rules concerning when it is time for you to apply for a secondary school place. If the school sets its own admissions rules, these may be available on the school's website; if not, they may be on the local authority website, or alternatively, you can phone the school for a copy.

Sample sets of admissions rules

Admissions rules vary from local authority to local authority, and from school to school. The two sample sets given below are for guidance only, to give you an idea of what to expect. They are based on real examples, but the rules for your local schools will almost certainly be different.

Children with a statement of educational needs that names the school will be admitted automatically.

Comprehensive schools - Admissions rules vary, of course, between local authorities. Some give greater priority to children living nearer the school than to siblings; some give priority to children in defined catchment areas. Some don't have a social/medical rule.

The following priorities are fairly typical, however:

1. Looked-after children
2. Children with an elder sibling already at the school, who will still be at the school in the following academic year
3. Children who have a social or medical reason for attending the school
4. Children who live nearest to the school.

Faith schools - Admissions rules will vary between faith schools. Typically, a voluntary-aided school (which is run by the faith organisation) will put more emphasis on adherence to the religious faith of the school than a voluntary-controlled school (which is run by the local authority).

Below is a sample set of admissions rules for a voluntary-aided Catholic school:

1. Looked-after Catholic children or looked-after children in the care of Catholic families.
2. Other looked-after children.
3. Children who, together with one or both parents, are baptised, practising members of the Catholic Church and who attend a local Catholic feeder primary school.
4. Children who, together with one or both parents, are baptised, practising members of the Catholic Church and are resident in a local parish.
5. Siblings of children already at the school.
6. Children who are baptised members of the Catholic Church.
7. Any other applicants.

Usually, you will be expected to provide proof both that your child has been baptised a Catholic and that your child attends church regularly. This will normally be in the form of a letter from your priest.

Useful websites and support on legal and social issues

Advisory Centre for Education: www.ace-ed.org.uk

ACE provides advice to parents on school-related issues such as appeals. You can download a free booklet entitled *Appealing for a School: a practical guide to parents' rights*.

British Dyslexia Association: www.bdadyslexia.org.uk

Supports people with dyslexia.

Bullying UK: www.bullying.co.uk

Anti-bullying charity that gives advice and support to both parents and children about bullying.

Children's Legal Centre: www.childrenslegalcentre.com

A charity providing free legal advice to children, parents, carers and professionals.

Dyspraxia Foundation: www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk

Supports children, families and adults with dyspraxia.

Local government ombudsman: www.lgo.org.uk

The ombudsman may be able to help if you have a problem with admissions.

School appeals: www.schoolappeals.org.uk

This is an independent website offering advice on school appeals.

Match Solicitors, specialists in education law:

www.matchesolicitors.com

Teacher Stern, specialists in education law:

www.teacherstern.com

Other useful websites

Department for Education: www.education.gov.uk

Information about education and children's services.

TheSchoolRun 11+ section:

www.theschoolrun.com/year-6/eleven-plus-11

Offers advice about preparing for the 11+ exam.

TheSchoolRun transition to secondary school section:

www.theschoolrun.com/school-life/transition-secondary-school

Information about moving up to Year 7 for children and parents.

Governornet:

www.governornet.co.uk

Information for school governors.

Independent Schools Inspectorate:

www.isi.net

The national organisation responsible for inspecting schools in the private sector.

Independent Schools Examination Board:

www.iseb.co.uk

The organisation responsible for setting and administering entrance examinations to independent schools at age 11 and 13.

Potential Plus:

www.potentialplusuk.org

Charity that offers support to parents and teachers of very able children.

Ofsted:

www.ofsted.gov.uk

National organisation responsible for inspecting schools in the state sector.

Pan London e-admissions System:

www.eadmissions.org.uk

School admissions code and School admissions appeals code:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-admissions-code--2>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-admissions-appeals-code>

Internet safety websites

NSPCC advice:

www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/

BBC advice:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc/curations/stay-safe>

www.thinkuknow.co.uk

<https://www.getsafeonline.org>

Glossary of terms

Acronyms, abbreviations and specialist educational terms explained

CAT	Cognitive Abilities Test
DfE	Department for Education
G&T	Gifted and talented
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
INSET	In-service training (teacher training days)
ISA	Independent Schools Association
ISI	Independent Schools Inspectorate
KS3	Key Stage 3 (children in Years 7 to 9)
KS4	Key Stage 4 (children in Years 10 and 11)
LA	Local authority (a county-wide or city-wide body that funds schools in the area)
MFL	Modern foreign language
NQT	Newly qualified teacher
Ofsted	Office of Standards in Education: responsible for inspecting schools
NAHT	National Association of Headteachers
NGA	National Governors' Association
PSHE	Personal, social, health and economic education
SAC	School Admissions Code (a framework for how admissions should be carried out, created by central government)
SATs	Statutory Assessment Tests (tests given to children at Key Stage 1 (age 7) and Key Stage 2 (age 11) to assess progress)
SEN	Special educational needs
VA	Voluntary-aided
VC	Voluntary-controlled
VLE	Virtual Learning Environment