

# 01

## getting started

**In this chapter you will learn:**

- why secondary transfer is a difficult and confusing time for many parents
- why parents often feel uninformed about their child's academic abilities
- how to use this book to help you through every stage of school transfer.

**Expert opinion: the admissions process**

'The complex process for school admissions is made impenetrable by the tangle of myths that weave themselves around it. As a head teacher, I often find myself working hard to understand every nuance of the process: I can only sympathize with the thousands of parents who try to untangle it every year.'

Martin Post, Headmaster of Watford Grammar School for Boys; a partially selective state secondary school in Hertfordshire

Getting a child into secondary school is the single biggest educational challenge facing most parents of children aged 7–11. It is an incredibly thorny issue – and one that is frequently discussed in playgrounds and dinner parties – often leading to 'chinese whispers' where information is embellished, exaggerated or simply incorrect by the time it gets to your ears.

Our school system is incredibly confusing. The choice is potentially wide – state or independent, mixed or single sex, local or in another borough, grammar, crammer, faith, boarding, special needs... Parents are required to visit many of these, fill in a multitude of confusing forms, navigate the 'catchment areas *vs* house price' dilemma, supervise practice papers with their child, and stay sane. Parents often feel 'overwhelmed' by the process – from knowing what is available, to finding the most appropriate school for their particular child, to supporting their child through the process. During this anxious time when children need encouragement, help and extra confidence, they also need calm parents who have done their homework too.

**Parent case study**

'I found the whole process of transferring my daughter to secondary school overwhelming. Other parents told me that if my child was to stand any chance of getting into the local selective state school she should have been seeing a tutor since at least Year 4. Her class teacher has told me she is bright, but is she bright enough?'

Holly, mother of Kate (Year 6)

**When does the secondary school worry begin?**

From the very first educational stepping stones, parents often fret about their child's abilities and future. Confusion first sets in around the time of playgroups and nursery where emotions take control and the desire to have your child be the first (or at least not the last) to reach each significant developmental milestone sets in. How soon it seems that Reception, the introductory year at school, is upon you. Does your child play appropriately in the sand pit? Did they change into their PE kit independently without bursting into tears? Was it unrealistic to try to teach them to tie their shoelaces? Then onto Year 1, when the education of our darlings begins for real – this is the big time; at the tender age of five things get serious. Your child can continue their gymnastics, ballet, swimming, violin, football, cooking and drama clubs but now they need to concentrate on writing, reading and counting as well. Pressure, pressure, pressure!

**Expert opinion: secondary school transfer**

'I am always surprised how early worry over secondary schools comes – worry over secondary transfer can start even before a child starts infant school. It is very common for parents to ask me about local secondary schools when they visit my school for the first time prior to application for Reception or Nursery places. They even start to ask about the best time to start tutoring.'

Although I advise against tutoring as I feel it is inappropriate for such young children, some parents employ private tutors for their children as early as Year 1 or send them to 'reading clubs' or Kumon. Parents do this for a variety of reasons; one of these is concern about future secondary transfer and the availability of places. This concern leads some parents to apply to the private sector at the transition to key stage 2, in order to secure a place early and avoid the "11+ rush". The numbers who do so varies from year to year. However since summer 2008, parents are obliged to apply for entry to the junior school for their children, as transfer is not now automatic. This causes concern for many parents who, on applying to the infant school, expected a smooth transition to the junior school. This is, in itself, unsettling and may well affect parents' future decisions about transfer to key stage 2 and this will impact on their secondary school choices.'

Head teacher of a state community school in London

## No one tells you what you need to know

By Year 3 your child is in junior school, following the key stage 2 curriculum. It is no longer enough just to know if your child is happy and sociable. You also want to know if they are academic. Unfortunately, this information is not always easily available. At parents' evenings it is easy to hear that your child is delightful. It comes as no surprise that they are kind. The knowledge that they are chatty in class, easily distracted and daydream occasionally may also not be a shock. You already know this! What becomes frustrating is that the teachers won't answer the important questions, such as: Is your child clever? If so, how clever?

You may also want to know how your child is performing compared with the rest of the class. Of course the teachers would never divulge such information, and nor should they. Nonetheless, it can be frustrating not knowing exactly how your child is doing against the pack of wolves she calls her friends! If you are considering sitting your child for entrance exams you need to know if this is a worthwhile exercise or completely unrealistic. No matter how relaxed you are, no matter how keen you are to allow your child to develop at her own pace, you can't help but be influenced by the growing climate of competitiveness at school.

As termly or annual parents' evenings became increasingly woolly, additional information is given to parents in the shape of end of year reports. These are often full of information about what your child *can* do: '... she can round two-digit or three-digit numbers to the nearest 10 or 100; ... he can order dates in chronological order; ...she can explain why it is important to look after her teeth.' They will also be saturated with comments about what your child *enjoyed*: '... she enjoyed learning about the Tudors; '... he enjoyed his trip to the Hindu Mandir.' Nonetheless, these reports still do not give the concrete information you need in order to make an informed decision about the correct secondary school for your child.

As my daughter neared Year 7 it was clear I needed to start asking questions about life beyond the comfortable existence of junior school. Where should I start? Was it already too late? Where would be the best place to send her? I knew a little about the supposed reputations of some of the schools nearby – at least, I knew what my friends and acquaintances told me – but

I quickly became aware that I knew very little about this big event fast approaching us. I had no idea what to do, where to start, where to go for advice; most importantly I really didn't know what school would best suit my child's abilities and personality. This is important, and a decision you have to get right as it will shape your child's future.

I searched – but failed – to find some materials to help me, so I set about researching the 'whats, wheres and hows' of secondary school transfer; first of all for my own child and our particular situation, then to help other friends and parents at school. I realised that the bank of information I was acquiring could be put to good use, so I set up a secondary school consultancy to give structured advice to parents. And so it led to this book: a book I would have given my right arm for when my first child was approaching the end of primary school.

### Did you know?

- Over half a million children transfer to secondary schools each year, of which 40,000 go into the independent sector.
- 15% of parents do not gain their first-choice school; in London this figure rises to 28%.
- 20% of parents are not satisfied with the choice of schools in their area. This figure is higher in London even though there are more schools to choose from.

Figures from research commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (February 2008)

## How this book can help

We all want our children to thrive and be happy in the right school environment. We also want our children to get into the schools we feel are right for them. The aim of this book is to ease the panic, to deal with the scaremongering, to keep parents calm and grounded in a mad school system and to provide you with tools and information. You are not alone; there are thousands of parents who feel just as confused and anxious as you do. Emotions – particularly those concerning your children – are very powerful and can potentially cloud good judgement. This book will allow you to rise above the trauma and perhaps even enjoy this next stage in your child's school career.

It turns out there is no mystique to the secondary transfer success when you know how to play the game. The fact is there are not many people around who can offer the support or guidance that parents require during these painful months. Whether transferring to comprehensive, selective or private schools there are set procedures to follow, hoops to jump, forms to fill in and deadlines to meet. Whilst these can change slightly from year to year, the process fundamentally remains the same ... except it seems that every year it gets ever more competitive.

This book is packed with clever hints and tips to steer you through the whole process with relative ease. It includes:

- advice on how to prepare your child academically for success in secondary school tests and interviews
- tips for helping you and your child cope with exam-day nerves
- an overview of all the different types of schools available and how to apply
- a checklist of things to do and think about in each school year so that you are ahead of the game
- a guide to assessing the academic ability of your child compared to the national average
- how to work out which school will suit your child on both an academic and pastoral level
- how to draw up a short list – where to research schools and what information you should count and discount
- how to fill in the local authority and individual school forms – does ranking really count?
- advice for children with special needs and statements
- information and guidance about the dreaded appeal process
- practical tips in helping your child get ready for the changes at secondary school in terms of both organization and confidence.

In short, it will tell you everything you need to know about the secondary transfer process. You should use this book as an essential read to dip in and out of whenever you feel the need. Whether you carry it around for a quick glance when you are sitting on a train or waiting to pick up the kids from school, or whether you study it in those few stolen moments in the bath or in bed, secondary transfer is not something you can deal with quickly in its entirety; you need to revisit this book as each new question arises or you move onto a new stage of the transition journey.

There is nothing better in life than feeling in control. It is my hope that once you have read this book you will feel confident and ready to conquer the educational maelstrom known as secondary transfer.

Good luck, and remember: it *is* rocket science – don't trust anyone who tells you otherwise!

#### **Expert opinion: remain positive**

'As the head teacher of a thriving and successful girls' school in north London, and also the mother of four sons, I feel well placed to offer advice on the sometimes very stressful process that is the 11+ transfer. I want to emphasize that in all likelihood your son or daughter will sit down in September of Year 7 at a wonderful school! Secondary schools are all on the same journey, that is, to make sure that all pupils fulfil their potential and take their place as happy, contributing citizens. Your attitude to schools will inevitably colour your child's view, so it is important not to set your heart on one school alone. If you are reading this book, you have shown you are committed to doing the best for your child: he or she is very lucky, as you are their most important educators. Wherever they go, you will need to support them, nurture them, and reassure them that they are in a great environment that is right for them.'

Barbara Elliott, Head teacher of Channing School, a private girls' secondary school in London