

eGuide

***TOP 10 TIPS ON HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT
PREP/PRE-PREP SCHOOL FOR YOUR CHILD***

(including 30 point questionnaire for school visit)

Best Preparatory Schools

From

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UK Preparatory and Pre-Prep Schools

This eGuide is divided into 4 parts

- *An introduction*
- *Brief list of Top 10 Tips*
- *Detailed explanation of Top 10 Tips*
- *30 point checklist to take on school visits*

If you are experienced in private education or have little time, you may wish to just consider only the second and fourth sections

An Introduction

Before we get to our top 10 tips, a few words about UK Preparatory Schools.

The word “Preparatory” relates to independent schools whose original purpose was to “prepare” pupils for entry to Public Schools on a competitive basis – by passing the Common Entrance Exam at ages 11, 12 or 13. However, there has been a major expansion of UK independent education and these days the schools are a lot more flexible in meeting the needs of parents and their children. The words “Public School” relate to the old traditional schools like Eton and Harrow. Nowadays there are considerable more private schools in the senior sector and the term “independent senior school” is more generic. Prep schools still prepare children for entry to these schools, but some parents just want to send their children to a good private school before switching them to a state school at 11 – a perfectly reasonable strategy as long as there are good state schools available in the area.

Preps typically cover ages from 7 or 8 to 11 or 13. The words “Pre-Preparatory” relate to schools in the previous age range from 2/3 to 7/8. Some schools call the period before age 5 Nursery or Reception. Thus Prep and Pre-Prep combined are equivalent to the term Primary in the State sector. Up to age 8 children are usually taught by their class teacher. After 8 they may be streamed into subjects according to academic ability.

There are well over 1000 Preps/Pre-Preps in the independent sector of which approximately 500 belong to the Independent Association of Preparatory Schools (IAPS) and/or Independent Schools Council (ISC) We do feel that it is important for a school to have the necessary accreditation, although, if a school is not a member of IAPS or ISC does not necessarily mean it is a bad school. However, you might like to ask questions about its professional status and whether or not it belongs to another recognised schools association.

Most Preps/Pre Preps are day schools, but a small number also offer boarding. Often these are part of a senior boarding school.

Some schools cater for children all the way from 3 to 18. These are known as ‘all through’ schools and they can be attractive to some as they offer a complete education in a well-known and settled environment. It also means that children can maintain their friendships throughout their schooldays, which some may feel is very important.

How can I find out where Prep Schools are situated?

There are Prep Schools situated throughout the UK, and we list most of them in our geographic search engine (<http://www.best-schools.co.uk/find-a-school.aspx>). We tend not to list very small schools of less than 30 pupils. If you are in a heavily populated area, there will be quite a selection and it is then a matter of finding the most suitable at the right price and with vacancies.

How does the Curriculum work?

It must be quite confusing for you to read that Prep Schools are free to decide whether or not they take part in National Curriculum Tests. An increasing number are choosing not to, though the results for those Prep Schools who do take them are 20% better than in state schools.

What this means in reality is that Prep School pupils enjoy a broader, more varied curriculum that is not over-burdened with constant testing and the need to follow rigidly laid courses. Added to this class sizes are much smaller than in state primary schools, typically about 15 pupils in a class, so that teachers can give more time and attention to individual needs. It should also be stated that Prep Schools employ many more specialist teachers than are to be found in the state system. This results in high educational standards and outstanding levels of achievement, which provide the all-round excellence that is the hallmark of Prep Schools.

Common Entrance Examinations

The Common Entrance examinations are used for assessing pupils who transfer from Prep Schools to Independent Senior Schools at ages 11+ and 13+. The Independent Schools Examination Board is the regulatory body for Common Entrance. The exam papers are set by examiners appointed by the Board. The answers are marked by the Independent Senior School for which a candidate is entered.

All candidates must take compulsory papers in the core subjects, English, Mathematics and Science. In addition most Independent Senior Schools expect candidates to also take the exam papers in Geography, History, Religious Studies and a language.

Candidates usually take the Common Entrance examination at their own school in the UK and overseas. If a candidate does not have English as a first language then bilingual dictionaries can be used in Mathematics, Science and Humanities. They are also allowed up to 25% extra time if they have not studied in an English speaking school for more than two years.

Scholarship candidates are selected by the Independent Senior Schools and they are required to sit the Common Entrance Scholarship Examination at the relevant senior school. Schools set differing standards / pass marks for entrance. Some schools use their own test papers. The Head of your Prep School will usually know the requirements for your target Senior School.

If a Prep School is entering a candidate with a specific learning difficulty (SLD) they should contact the relevant Independent Senior School and arrange how much extra time is available to the candidate to complete the Common Entrance papers. They should also send an Educational Psychologists report.

Information, registration forms and Common Entrance subject syllabuses can be downloaded as pdf files at www.iseb.co.uk/schools.htm.

Independent Senior Schools set specific entry levels for Common Entrance and together with the written exam papers also ask for a reference from the Head of the Prep School. Entry levels vary considerably from school to school. You should expect academic schools to set a 65% pass rate for candidates, while schools that place more emphasis on sport or the performing arts may set their pass rate at 40%. You should also bear in mind that the level of Common Entrance is not indicative of the quality of a school.

Top 10 Criteria for Selection

Our website will tell you what schools are available in your area. Here we give you a summary of our Top 10 Tips followed by more detailed comments and then a 30 point questionnaire.

- 1. Does the school fit the basic requirements of you and your child?**
 - Age range, gender, day or boarding, religious denomination, curriculum offered
- 2. Does it meet your education life stage objectives?**
 - Do you want your child to pass the Common Entrance Exam to get to a particular school?
 - Are you “mix ‘n’ matching” with state education?
- 3. Will your child be happy there?**
 - What do other parents/children say about it?
- 4. Does it have a good track record?**
 - SATS results, high or low pressure environment, teaching quality
 - What are leaver destinations?
- 5. Do you like the ethos of school?**
 - Invariably set by the Head
- 6. What is the teaching like?**
 - Quality of teachers, staff turnover
 - Curriculum
 - Class sizes and school overall
 - School discipline and rules
 - School inspection report
- 7. What are the pastoral care facilities like?**

- Care from school staff, medical care, discipline and supervision
- 8. Does it have school facilities your child would use?**
 - School facilities – swimming pool, theatre, music etc.
 - Range of activities, costs
- 9. Is the location optimum for you?**
 - How important is area?
- 10. Does it give YOU value for money for what you want?**
 - Value for service delivered, fit with your budget, extras

1. Your basic requirements

1.1 Starting Age

The main part of the www.best-schools.co.uk website concentrates on senior schools, which take entry from age 11 or 13 (and also at 16) because it is only in this category we can measure exam success. However, we now list most of the schools which have pre-preparatory (ages 2/3 to 7/8) or preparatory (ages 7/8 to 11) entry. If you have a child younger than 11 and you have your sights set on a particular senior school only, you might wish to find a prep school which acts as a feeder school to your chosen senior school. If you need boarding for under age 11 your choice will be more limited.

The advantage of being in an “all through” is that your child tends to progress naturally into the senior school. If you are “on the outside” there might be a waiting list. On the other hand, children can find it stifling being at the same school for 15 years. Will the school that was right for your 3 year old still be right at 16?

1.2 Gender

There are of course girls only and boys only school, but there is a definite trend to go co-ed. The arguments rage about the merits of single sex education with many Heads claiming there is no difference in academic achievement in single sex schools. However, most of these arguments relate to senior stage education. At the end of the day, this is very much down to parent’s preferences. Do not be afraid to discuss the subject with the school on your visit. Many parents feel that a co-ed school is fine at Prep stage, and this is increasingly true at senior school.

1.3 Religious Denomination

Most schools will originally start from one faith – you will find Church of England, Roman Catholic, Quaker, Methodist, Jewish and Muslim etc. You will also find that most schools will accept pupils of any faith. If your views are particularly strong, then discuss them with the school. For example if you are CoE sending your child to a Catholic School, they will likely insist all pupils will attend Mass.

There are an increasing number of Muslim schools, but still relatively few at the senior school life stages.

In this day and age, most schools are becoming non denominational and respecting all faiths.

1.4 Subjects taught

At the younger life stages, this is not much of an issue, except for those opting for the Primary Years Programme of the International Baccalaureate.

As mentioned earlier some Preps follow the National Curriculum and others don't. Ask the school for the reasons for their own approach and how it benefits their children.

2. Does it meet your education life stage objectives?

2.1. Where do you plan for your child to go next?

If it's a pre-prep, does it have a prep school or does it feed into other prep schools? Have you visited them and satisfied yourself. Are places guaranteed?

If it's a prep, does it feed into senior schools – how? How does the Common Entrance Examination work?

If you are planning to put your child into state education afterwards, what are the ramifications? Are there good state schools available? Will entry be a foregone conclusion? Well education independent school pupils can sometimes end up 12 months ahead of state school pupils? Will your child end up marking time for 6 to 12 months while the rest catch up?

3. Will your child be happy?

3.1 How will you know if your child will be happy?

Of course, it is vital that your child is happy, especially if this is their first experience of school.

Of course, you are not going to know the answer until after they get there – so what can you do?

Your key lines of enquiry could be to

(1) assess the Head who sets the tone of the school

(2) observe and question existing children and parents at the school.

(3) see what your child thinks after the school visit – did the school go out of their way to motivate him or her

4. Track Record

4.1 How do you assess performance?

The bulk of our website concentrates on exam results at 16 or 18, but of course you do not have the same yardsticks at a prep or pre-prep.

Most prep schools cover the National Curriculum and some use the methodology of applying tests known as Standard Assessment Tasks or SATS at the end of Key Stages 1 and 2 (ages 7 and 11). We do show the KS2 results in a separate Best-Prep-Schools league table (<http://www.best-schools.co.uk/league-tables/prep-schools.aspx>) However, we must forewarn you that it is not obligatory on prep schools to publish or supply them.

Unfortunately, something less than half of independent schools are prepared to contribute their results. We do have the scores for the top 250 prep schools, but we only show a table for the Top 100. With schools like Dragon at Oxford, the biggest prep school in the country NOT participating, we concluded that the table becomes less meaningful the further one goes down it.

Thus the table is not comprehensive. Whereas, when a senior school refuses to supply A level results to us, we often think there is an underlying reluctance to publish disappointing results, this is not necessarily the case for prep schools. If a school is not in our table, “don’t write them off” – ask the Head for details of the school’s performance.

Interestingly a lot of the prep schools in the top 100 tables are large schools which also appear in our senior school top 100s – particularly the members of the Girls Day School Trust.

As a generalisation the KS2 scores for independent preps who belonged to IAPS are 20% higher than state schools

4.2. Leaver destinations

In the absence of exam scores, a key measurement is the destination of leavers. If you are selecting a prep to get your child into a specific independent senior school, you want to know what the school’s track record is for getting pupils into their first choice senior schools

5. Ethos of School

5.1 Ethos

Every prep school establishes its own ethos, which can best be evaluated by observing the behaviour of pupils both in and out of class. Are they well behaved in class? Were they working hard? Did they greet you in a polite way? Do they look happy? Are they neat and tidy?

If a school follows a particular religious denomination, that will heavily influence the school ethos. However, the most important factor is the Head, because he or she sets the entire tone for the school. You will only find out by meeting the Head and asking lots of questions, after which you will know if you like the ethos or not!

5.2 School Discipline

Areas such as the school policy on discipline can be an important consideration when you are trying to choose between schools. There can be very big differences between schools with a highly traditional approach and those that put the emphasis on self-development and learning by experience. What you will find is that there is generally a more structured environment in independent schools than in the state sector, but nevertheless quite big differences exist, as for example between modern schools on the one hand, and traditional schools on the other.

Only you can be the judge of what you prefer for your children. You should have that discussion with the Head of the schools you approach.

6. How Good is the Teaching?

6.1 What is the quality of the teachers and what is the staff turnover

In many Preps and small schools, the Head will also teach and thereby set the standards and tone for his/her staff. Good schools will list their teaching staff and their qualifications. Hopefully you will be allowed to meet a few and form your own impressions. A measure of a good school is low staff turnover. You should be able to get impressions of these factors by looking at the school inspection report, see 6.2 below.

6.2 What do the school inspection reports say?

All schools are subject to regular school inspections, but they are up to 6 years apart. They are carried out by different bodies, depending on a school's affiliation. The majority in England are done by the Independent Schools Inspectorate on much the same principles as OFSTED. In Wales it is usually done by ESTYN. In Scotland it is done by HM Inspectorate of Education working for The Scottish Executive. These reports are usually available online, (see <http://www.isinspect.org.uk/> or http://www.estyn.gov.uk/inspection_arrangements/arr_independent.asp) but since it is sometimes difficult to find them, just ask the school for a copy. Some schools print abbreviated versions, which tend to highlight the good bits. Ask to see the full version even if you do have to wade through 60 pages.

6.3 How big are class sizes and the overall school

You are “buying” small class sizes and individual attention by using private education – so you want to know that there are 20 or less to a class. However, you also want to know that the school is not too small. There are failing schools which can have less than 5 pupils in a year group. Then parents start to withdraw their children, making matters worse

7. Pastoral Care and Guardianship

7.1 Pastoral Arrangements

Pastoral care very naturally follows on from school discipline. The school attitude to boarding organisation or day pupils may be rated by some parents as being paramount and parents should also find out how academic work is monitored, whether or not there is a personal tutor for each pupil and how pupils are assessed during their time in the school. It is helpful to know what support systems are available if your child gets into trouble and who should be contacted if you need help and advice.

Parents also need to know how to get information about their child. Are there regular meetings with pastoral and teaching staff? Are there school functions that parents can attend during the term? Is there an association for parents to join, or a regular newsletter or magazine that tells them what is happening in the school? Parents should enquire about the arrangements for health care such as, how many trained nursing staff are available and how often is there a doctor's surgery?

Lastly, parents need to be assured that if their child is boarding they need to be safe and secure and that the school managers and staff take all reasonable care to see that this is attended to.

7.2 Guardianship

If a parent is outside of the UK, whether they are UK or Foreign Nationals, arrangements must be made for each full boarding child to have a guardian, who can take responsibility for the child, particularly outside of school hours at half term and school exeat. For UK nationals, there is often a relative to undertake the role. For others, the services of a Guardian must be secured. Some schools are prepared to undertake the role themselves. Others will have teamed up with a guardianship services company. Such services are not cheap – so remember to factor in the costs. Also it is vital to ensure that guardianship provider organisations are reputable – such as members of AEGIS (www.aegisuk.net)

8. School Facilities

8.1 School Facilities

Today most schools in the independent sector spend a great deal of their budgets on the fabric of their buildings and in providing outstanding facilities for their pupils. Parents should ask to see the school library and enquire about the sports area and whether or not the school has a sports hall. Most Prep schools today should have well-equipped IT centres. It is no longer surprising that many children of 11 or younger are more adept with computers than their parents! If your child is interested in the creative arts you should ask to see the Art School and find out what different types of materials can pupils use in their studies. However, it should be borne in mind that great facilities do not necessarily make a great school!

Many independent schools offer a huge range of activities – from sports to arts to music to outward bound courses. The point is that that opportunities are invariably extensive – as long as you realise you are going to pay an extra fee for most of them – if not for the teacher, then for the equipment.

Sports and music are always well catered for – in contrast to the diminishing availability in state schools.

A school will always provide you with a list of their activities and for those with a rather anxious child, it is a way of motivating them to overcome their reservations.

8.2 Special facility schools

There are 5 specialist music schools – Chetham’s, Yehudi Menuhin School, Purcell School, Wells Cathedral School and St Mary’s School, Edinburgh – they all run Prep Schools in addition to senior. Wells is the only one which also offers pre-prep.

Many schools offer the Performing Arts but the only specialist school which takes pupils into its prep school is the Arts Educational School in Tring.

Many boarding schools will cater for children with special needs (such as dyslexia). However, there is a difference between those which accept wholly special needs pupils and those who accept a minority of say 10% of total pupils.

9. Location

9.1 Where to choose?

With 2,300+ independent schools of which more than 1000 are prep/pre-prep schools, there are choices in every county. Most parents will be looking for a school within a 10 mile radius or less, whereas they become more flexible when their children get to 11. Therefore location will likely be a key consideration.

Many International parents will begin their search in London (as the place they know best) but you should be aware that there are very few boarding schools in London itself and No Prep boarding schools!. However there are several in the Home Counties within a 50 mile radius of London. If in doubt, fill in the consultancy enquiry form on www.best-schools.co.uk

10. Value for Money

UK Prep/Pre-Pre Schools can cost anywhere from £3,500 to £9,000 per annum.

We have included school fees in the league table, but only for the top ranked senior schools.

Parents should also take into account the other costs, or ‘extras’, that can add a substantial amount to your bill.

School uniform and kit for school games is probably the first of these extras that you will encounter, and this is usually an unavoidable cost. However, you should ask how inclusive the fees are and what extra costs are likely to be incurred. For example

music lessons and school trips are not usually included in the fees, neither are school textbooks and essential stationery.

It has been estimated that extras can add between 5% and 15% to the school fees you are paying, so it is always wise to ask for a complete breakdown of fees and extras when considering a particular school.

If you are a non UK resident, you also have travel costs home during the holidays or extra accommodation and guardianship fees.

Whilst you can be surprised by the size of boarding fees, do not forget to take into account the other costs you are saving – the daily home taxi service ferrying children to and from school, meals at home, heating, light or telephone bills!

It is wise to check out costs **before** you visit any school.

Most schools offer a limited number of bursaries and scholarships. However, beware that most schools are oversubscribed with applications for admission and always receive more requests for such discounts than they have places available. Also there are very few scholarships at Prep level because children have had insufficient time to display academic merit.

For UK residents who are higher rate taxpayers, please check out www.education-fees.co.uk for ways to reduce your cost.

Most interested parents are committed to an independent education as long as it fits their budget. However, we all want to feel we are getting value for money. Part of this evaluation is to compare what one school provides against another in relation to cost.

So, how do you decide? What next?

After researching the school profiles, forming a short list and requesting brochures, get yourself a questionnaire to evaluate your shortlist during school visits. We give you our own free questionnaire in the appendix to this eGuide.

If you are a UK resident seeking a Prep School, never forget to ask the Head of your child's existing school. He or she will likely know the local schools which will suit both your child's academic progress and temperament.

There is absolutely no substitute for a personal visit – did you like the school, the premises, the facilities, the atmosphere, the headmaster, the teachers and the manner of the pupils? You will be invited to attend on an Open Day, but is it possible to visit on a normal school day, when you can experience the daily routine?

Lastly, after doing all of your research, go back to basics. The real starting point for choosing a school has to begin with you and your hopes and aspirations for your children. You know them better than anyone else and can best judge their strengths and weaknesses. You are in the best position to know what type of school will work

best for them. Although your schooldays were some time ago, the essentials in the 21st Century remain the same as when you were at school. Literacy and numeracy plus knowing the difference between right and wrong count for as much in the modern world as they did when you were a schoolchild. You need to match the qualities you consider right for education with those offered by the *right school*.

It's a huge decision. If you need help, then avail yourself of our bespoke consultancy service at <http://www.best-schools.co.uk/expert-assistance.aspx>

APPENDIX



The Education Advisers 30 Point Check List

**Questions and Points to consider
for Parents
in choosing an Independent Prep/Pre-Prep School**

**A Check-List of Recommended Questions from the Parent's Perspective
Note – this is an *aide-memoire* to help you to remember what to ask.**

1. Is this school ideally suited to the aspirations and life stages, which you have for your child?
 - Access to a Prep School from a Pre-Prep?
 - Common Entrance Exam to gain access to Senior School?
 - Transfer to a good state school at 11?
 - An all round quality education?
 - Development of special talents such as music?
2. What are the entrance criteria? Will your child have to sit tests?
3. In later years, would your child be better suited to an academic environment (with emphasis on traditional subject tuition in a disciplined environment) or a less academic approach (with opportunity to excel in skilled crafts, sports or the performing arts)?
4. What is the School Curriculum after 7? Is it the National Curriculum or wider – if so, how? Does it offer your child a sufficiently wide and balanced choice? If you are contemplating switching you child back to the State sector later, what are the implications?
5. *For boarding* - Make sure you visit the dormitories or boarding bedrooms and the common areas? Are the facilities modern and comfortable or spartan like an outward bound course? Can the children personalise their space with their own mementos?
6. *For boarding* - Make sure you meet the Housemaster/mistress. How do they get on with the pupils? What arrangements are made for boarders at weekends? What are the activities? Are children allowed into the local town- accompanied or unaccompanied?
7. *For boarding* - Would you consider weekday boarding and weekends at home? Does the school offer taster day boarding for your child to find out? **Does the school offer flexi-boarding or home stay?**
8. Do you need guardianship – will the school provide/arrange for this?
9. What are meals like? Do they adopt a well balanced and healthy diet?
10. Do you and your child want single sex or co educational schooling? If co-ed, what is the male:female ratio? Is the smaller gender group well integrated into the activities of the whole school?

11. What are the costs (compare them with your short list)?
 - Per term
 - Boarding
 - Meals
 - Extra curricular subject charges
 - Uniform – what is compulsory?
 - Kit
 - Musical instruments
 - Books
 - Other typical extras
12. Are there bursaries or scholarships which might be applicable to you? What are the criteria? Is there published information?
13. What are the qualifications and experience of teachers? What is the turnover of teaching staff?
14. What are the KS1 and 2 track records?
15. Will your child have to sit an entrance examination? Is there a waiting list? Is it first come – first served?
16. If you are considering a prep school from which your child will switch to senior elsewhere, what is the success record on Common Entrance exams. What proportion of children get their first choice senior school?
17. Did you like the Head? Did you feel you received straight answers to your questions? What are his/her principles, policies and obsessions? How do the pupils react to the Head – respect? warmth? fear? Did the Head take an interest in YOUR child?
18. Did you like the other staff you met?
19. What is the school attitude to parental contact, especially in Boarding School? How often are parent's meetings? Is there a Parents' Association? Is there a regular newsletter? How are the parents advised or consulted with on disciplinary matters?
20. What is the typical class size for the various age ranges?
21. Ask to see some of the children's current workbooks.
22. How much has the school invested in technology? What are its ICT facilities? Does it teach pupils how to use up to date software? What does its own website look like? Does it communicate with parents by email?
23. What quality of facilities does the school have?

- Main buildings
 - Classrooms
 - Hall
 - Accommodation
 - Sports
 - Arts
 - Drama
 - Computing
 - Media
24. What is the school approach to discipline? Is it published? Will it suit your child's temperament? Does it match your own views?
25. Are there sets of published Rules – e.g discipline, bullying, drug abuse, dress code?
26. Is religious affiliation important? Are aspects of religion compulsory?
27. Ask to see the Regulator's school inspection reports
28. Ask to see the latest annual financial report (is it adequately funded to attract quality teachers and expand facilities if necessary?)
29. What was your gut feeling on a personal visit on a normal school day?
- The staff
 - The premises
 - The facilities
 - The atmosphere
 - The pupils
30. What did you think of the children? Were they happy? Were they well mannered? Did they rush about ? Were they neatly dressed in school uniform? Were they polite to teachers and visitors alike?

Les – you make no mention of the school contract that all parents are required to sign. This can often be an important document, especially if a dispute arises over due notice, etc. It should be incorporated, possibly under 2 above?