

# ASK THE EXPERTS

*We put your schooling questions to four headteachers*

## How can I be sure I'm choosing the right nursery and pre-prep?

Choosing a nursery and pre-prep for your child can be a daunting experience. Parents have a bewildering selection to choose from in London and for some the process is inherently fraught – many are entrusting their child to carers outside the home for the first time.

The first piece of advice I give is to look around. Don't fixate on one school to the exclusion of all others. You may have an initial preference but you will lose nothing by comparing several options. Inspection reports, The Good Schools Guide and talking to other parents are useful starting points. But there is no substitute for visiting in person.

The most obvious question is, do the children appear happy and engaged? Children who are engaged, motivated and playing well together will be happy and will learn. There will be occasional tears, especially in the first few days, but children should rapidly settle down and look forward to going.

Equally important is the attitude of staff. Do they celebrate and nurture the individual child, or are they more concerned to boast about the academic performance of the school? Ultimately, it's a question of trust: are the staff caring enough to do the best for your child? I would also urge parents to look beyond pre-prep to any related prep school. Often pre-prep to prep is a natural progression. Look at the school's prep offering – is the same ethos applied here and what are the senior school outcomes for the children?

Finally, look at the facilities. Is the equipment well maintained? What are the play areas like? A word of warning, though: do not be distracted by state-of-the-art classrooms and piles of iPads. Technology is not a proxy for excellent teaching and shiny new buildings are no substitute for a great education. A school is made by the people in it, and parents would be wise to look to them first and last!

**Christine McLelland, head of North Bridge House Nursery and Pre-Prep Schools in Hampstead**



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## What are the benefits of co-educational learning at pre-prep level?

The discourse around the benefits of single-sex and co-educational learning can leave many parents confused as to which choice is most beneficial for their child. As the first step of their educational journey, the pre-prep years should be a time for children to explore, socialise and learn, in a setting that offers security, nurture and challenge and where children are excited to come into school but most of all, happy to be there.

While we know that young children recognise that there are boys and girls in their class, daily interactions in a co-educational setting at this age enables children to interact, play and co-operate across a spectrum of activities. In nursery and reception at Berkhamsted, our responsive daily planning takes into consideration the interests of the children who are leaders of their own learning. Such diversity of ideas within a co-educational setting allows children to experience the intrinsic elements of play that can be very different for boys and girls.

As they move into Key Stage One (five to seven years) continuing to develop secure relationships based on excellent personal, social, emotional needs that promote acceptance and equality from everyone, helps to teach children about the importance of kindness and respect. Promoting opportunities across the curriculum that encourages them to collaborate in their learning equally and to value the contributions of their peers regardless of gender stereotypes.

Pre-prep education is key to securing the foundations of learning that will develop the basic skills and learning dispositions, enabling children to go on to be successful at GCSE and A-level and beyond. It seems that to isolate them by gender at such an early informative stage would perhaps halve the possible learning opportunities and socialisation experiences that are evident daily in our school, and which make it such an exciting, vibrant setting for children to learn and play together. This, with an exceptional environment that meets the development needs of both girls and boys, gives children the very best start for life-long learning that will inevitably be across the gender divide in the real world.

**Karen O'Connor, head of Berkhamsted Pre-Prep and Berkhamsted Day Nursery in Hertfordshire**

*THIS CAN BE A TIRING TIME AS CHILDREN SETTLE AND UNDERSTAND NEW ROUTINES*

## What do you see as the benefits of creating your own curriculum?

Being able to create a curriculum that will inspire all my pupils and develop their enquiring minds is a real privilege. At Heatherton, our planning is based on the National Curriculum, but we are able to go beyond the constraints many teachers experience, such as time, lack of resources or expertise and fixed testing. With subject specialist teaching available from nursery, alongside class teachers until Year 4, our children experience high quality lessons and nurturing pastoral care.

With less time restrictions, we have been able to introduce a programme which allows our girls to work in small, mixed-age groups, experiencing activities such as mindfulness, chemistry and team-building. Our curriculum is based around the principles of 'Building Learning Power', where we actually teach our pupils how to learn. We take the time to individualise targets so pupils know the skills they need to develop. Our Year 6 girls spend the last half term of their school year involved in a bespoke leavers' programme, which is an excellent preparation for senior school. This is another advantage of creating your own curriculum, as we are not confined to preparing pupils for SATS.

Our curriculum at Heatherton caters for all and is personalised and varied, giving them wonderful opportunities and, I hope, instilling in them a love of learning that will continue throughout their lives.

**Debbie Isaachsen, head of Heatherton School, Amersham, Buckinghamshire**

## What are your tips for settling a child into a new school term?

The start of the new academic year is always an exciting one and one that brings new resolutions, targets for the coming term and a great deal of anticipation. As they begin at nursery or reception classes they will then be clocking each event and interaction to work out how it feels to be a part of their new class. This is can be a tiring time as the children settle, negotiate new relationships and understand new routines. It may also be a tiring time for you too, as parents, possibly figuring out a new route for the school run, or dropping siblings off elsewhere, understanding new routines yourself, perhaps even returning to work now that your child has settled into a certain age or stage.

I include some tips here which might help:

- Talk positively about going to school.
- Help your child to get into the routine of managing their own clothing, encouraging independence with daily changing.
- Encourage your child to learn good habits and feel comfortable about going to school by arriving in good time for the start of the school day.
- Make sure your child gets a good night's sleep and expect tiredness in the first months.
- Trust the staff and talk openly about any concerns, however small.
- Let your child tell you about their day in their own time – avoid 20 questions about the school day.

**Naomi Bartholomew, head of St Catherine's Prep School in Bramley**



**Christine McLelland**  
North Bridge House



**Debbie Isaachsen**  
Heatherton



**Naomi Bartholomew**  
St Catherine's



**Karen O'Connor**  
Berkhamsted Pre-Prep