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St Catherine's Bramley | The benefits of weekly boarding

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Alice Phillips, Headmistress of St Catherine's Bramley, talks to Absolutely about weekly boarding, extra-curricular activities and banning mobile phones

Modern weekly boarding is a revelation for many of the parents I meet. Gone are the cold showers from their own boarding-school days, and many need little persuasion that it makes perfect sense for their own children.

But there are worries; the girls themselves are usually very eager, but Mum and Dad often need more reassurance. One of the first concerns parents express is that they will lose touch with their daughter. Mobile technology and social media, Facetime, Skype etc. ensure parents and daughters can and do stay in touch regularly. Long gone are the days when parents were kept at arm's length.

Parents ask about the 'right' age to start boarding. Traditionally, 11+ has been the transition stage for girls' schools and I believe that this is the optimum age for the step up to senior school of any kind. So much care and guidance go into the welfare of every single girl during the two vital developmental years, from 11 to 13; watching our younger boarders negotiate their way to becoming confident and considerate young adults is a huge source of satisfaction for my boarding staff. Girls who join us later, at Year 9, benefit from a full three terms of teaching and learning before the onset of GCSEs. The new GCSE syllabuses are far more content-laden; therefore, many departments have begun to teach exam topics in Year 9. As a consequence, we very rarely accept new pupils in Year 10.

Parents' careers are another factor in choosing weekly boarding. Mum or Dad might be looking to return to work or to move from part-time into full-time employment.



St Catherine's Bramley students in a dance show

“Mobile phones and Skype mean the days when parents were kept at arm’s length are long gone”

This usually coincides with the time when their daughters’ extra-curricular activities are beginning to make greater demands on family-time. At a boarding school, extra-curricular activities – orchestra, choirs, dance, netball, tennis, lacrosse, gymnastics, swimming, school productions etc – are all on-site and fully accessible before school and into the evening. Weekly boarding parents certainly do not miss the frantic pick-ups and grid-locked traffic as they juggle competing demands of children’s busy lives with their own career.

One boarding mum recently wrote to me about what weekly boarding has meant to her: “It has made my life less stressful, as we can all manage work commitments and then have quality family life at the weekend, knowing the homework (and laundry) is taken care of.”

The final word goes to one of our Year 7 boarders: “For me, the benefits of boarding are more time for work and play, no travel sickness on the way to school, always having something to do, and lots more time to do more club activities because they are right on my doorstep.” Weekly boarding might just be what you have been looking for.

Alice Phillips
