

GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE

ENTRY TIPS



TAKING THE STRESS OUT OF ENTRY INTERVIEWS

Applications can be daunting - so **Jacqueline Kot** asks educators for tips and tricks to alleviate the process for families looking to enrol their child in an international school

The journey to seeing your child enrolled in the international primary school of your choice can be overwhelming, especially after the long and tortuous decision-making process that is often required to narrow down the many options available.

To help you on your way, we have spoken with educators from international schools throughout Hong Kong to gain valuable advice for parents navigating the application and interview process, and hopefully ease the load for your whole family.

Proficiency in English

This may seem like an obvious point but proficiency in English is an important, and oftentimes the main, requirement - schools need to be sure that students make the most of their time and experience in the classroom. This is also an important point for parents

who may have chosen the international school route as a way for their child to improve their current English skills.

"Fluency in English is the primary requirement for admission into the English International Stream," says Eva Wagoner, admissions manager lead for German Swiss International School (GSIS).

"Specifically for kindergarten applicants, we also consider their social and emotional development. When evaluating primary and secondary applicants, their past school reports and school references are also taken into consideration."

However, families who wish to speak more than one language at home need not see it as an obstacle. Debbie Sheward, vice principal at ESF Kennedy School, suggests using fun activities and play dates to get children comfortable with English early on, if parents are planning to apply to an international school in the future.

"If English is not one of the child's home languages, encourage them to engage in English experiences such as sports, activities or play dates with English speakers," says Sheward. "This will boost their confidence in interacting in English. It is also important to maintain their home languages, as it can support their learning of English by making connections."

Canadian International School of Hong Kong (CDNIS) is a good option for families who want their children to be exposed to both English and Chinese in an international school environment.

"In the Lower School, we are progressively implementing a fully bilingual programme of English and Chinese, from nursery to Grade 5, in the next five years. Currently from nursery to preparatory programme, we consider the potential interest and skills of the applicants for this programme," says Emily Pong, director of admissions at CDNIS.

English proficiency ensures that students get the most from an international school environment.
Photo: Carmel School Hong Kong

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Know the school

Do thorough research of the school's policies and guidelines around its application process. ESF Schools, for example, schedules interviews according to the status of their waiting list.

"ESF schools are non-selective, meaning we do not interview a lot of children and then select the most academic," explains Sheward. "We stick to priority orders and offer interviews to the child next on the list. The criteria for admission is that students must demonstrate sufficient English language skills so that they can benefit from a mainstream English-medium learning environment."

Sheward also adds that priority is given to children holding a foreign passport because of the quotas set by the Education Bureau (EDB) that apply to local passport holders attending ESF School.

In addition, study up on what the interview process is like by checking the school's website, contacting the admissions team, and attending information sessions and open days hosted by the school.

Rachel Friedmann, principal at Carmel School, says a common mistake is parents assuming that all school interviews are managed in the same way. "In some schools there are teachers involved in interviews, in some there are coordinators or principals which conduct interviews. They may be looking for different things," she says.

While it is common for parents to share information among themselves, remember that the most accurate information comes from the school.

"Some common mistakes in the school admissions process include procrastinating and submitting applications at the eleventh hour, placing excessive pressure on the child, and relying on friends and family for information instead of reaching out to the admissions team directly," Wagoner says.

Don't overemphasise extracurriculars

"One common misconception I often hear from parents is the belief that enrolling their children in a multitude of extracurricular activities will improve their chances of admission," Pong says. "However, it is crucial for parents to understand that what truly matters is for children to demonstrate a genuine interest and enthusiasm in their key areas of interest. It is essential for them to showcase their acquired or potential skills that align with their desired entry level."



Academic performance is only one factor in determining a child's suitability for a curriculum

RACHEL FRIEDMANN, PRINCIPAL AT CARMEL SCHOOL

The same can be said for the academic level of the child at the time of the interview – educators are more nuanced in how they determine whether a child will fit in well in their school.

"It's not all about academics," says Friedmann. "Academic performance is only one factor in determining a child's suitability for a curriculum. International schools want to make sure that a child is well-rounded, mindful, adaptable and resilient – markers of capability to deal with an international curriculum, which goes beyond academic results."

Avoid scripted answers

Before the interview process, parents might be tempted to prepare their children by running through ways to answer questions and participate in the activities. Educators say that is not useful as they want an accurate snapshot of the child's personality.



The admission process can be seen as a learning experience. Photo: ESF Kennedy School

"It does not help your child to have well-rehearsed answers. The school wants to meet your child, to see if the learning environment will be one where they can develop and thrive, and be empowered to reach their ambitions and fullest academic potential. We can gauge this better if the child is being themselves," says Joanne Stanley, director of admissions at French International School (FIS).

"We would also not encourage the use of a tutor or someone trying to prime children with answers or things to say. Allow the child to be as natural as possible. The idea is for us to see the child at their best and not trying to live up to someone else's expectations," Stanley adds.

Friedman's advice to parents is to speak positively to their children and let them prepare for an interview so they can focus on their strengths, rather than telling them what to say. It is also natural for families to put their best foot forward in the interviews. However, Sheward says it is beneficial if parents are upfront and share that their child needs additional learning support, if that is the case.

"Parents are sometimes reluctant to share if their child has received additional support with their learning or behaviour as they think it will have a detrimental effect on the outcome of the interview," she says. "It is, in fact, the opposite. It enables us to ensure that we can meet a child's needs and that all measures and support are put in place for the child from the beginning of their journey with us," Sheward adds.

Learn from the experience

To further alleviate the stress, it helps if the parents do not view the interviews as a test but rather as a way to see whether the school will be suitable for the child.

"Take it easy – admissions processes are designed to ensure a good fit for the student. It is not a sign of failure if the process is not completed," Friedmann says.

"Some children arrive for interviews feeling that they have to succeed and that it would be a failure if they did not succeed in being offered a place," Sheward says.

"This kind of pressure does not enable children to do their best."

Whichever the result from the interviews, seeing it as a learning experience in the journey to finding a suitable school, and not a be-all-end-all scenario, can also lessen the anxiety for the whole family.

"Parents and their children should view the entrance assessments as valuable opportunities for growth and learning," Wagoner says. "It is important to approach the assessments with a relaxed mindset, understanding that if acceptance is not achieved, there is always the possibility of reapplying in subsequent years."

And make it fun, says Melissa Payne, vice principal for Primary, International Stream at FIS: "Be as relaxed as you can, this will rub off on the child. Turn it into a fun adventure and whether the child is successful or not, it is a learning opportunity which can be applied later, somewhere else."

