



Moving up

The transition from junior to senior school is an exciting yet daunting time for pupils and their parents. **Janita Clamp** asks schools how they prepare children for the next stage in their education

Most of us can remember starting at “big school” at the age of 11 or 13. Self-conscious in shiny new shoes and a uniform several sizes too large, armed with a pencil case stocked for every eventuality and feeling that giddy mix of excitement and apprehension. “How will I know where my classroom is? What happens at lunch break? Will I make friends?”

When your 11- or 13-year-old walks into their new school for the first time they will probably feel exactly the same as you did. Whereas in previous generations new pupils were given a quick tour and then largely left to their own devices, schools now understand that those crucial first few days and weeks can be tough – and even lonely. A 2018 survey by the Office for National Statistics reported that just under 15 per cent of children between the ages of 10 and 12 said they “often” feel lonely. This is the age at which most children start at a new school. ▶

Moving up: a Cranleigh Prep pupil negotiates the climbing wall

A huge amount of work is done by teachers and pastoral staff to ensure that everything about the transition from junior to senior school is as smooth and worry-free as possible – not just for children but for their parents too.

“It all starts with getting the choice of senior school right,” says Tom Burden, headmaster of The Pilgrims’ School, a day and boarding school for boys aged four to 13 in Winchester.

As the name implies, the job of a prep school is to prepare children for 11+ and 13+ entrance exams and provide expert advice and guidance to parents about the type of senior school that would best suit their child. At stand-alone preps (those not directly linked to a senior school) a selection of two or three potential senior schools for each child will be made in year 4 or 5 (around the age of eight), partly so that pupils can be entered for any that require pre-tests in year 6. This may seem early to assess suitability for a school they may not be going to until they’re 13 but if a child joined the prep at the age of three or four staff will already have a good idea of their capabilities.

Prep school heads agree that choosing the “right” senior school is about much more than identifying one for which a child can pass the entrance exam. As Simon Barber, headmaster of Ludgrove School, a boarding school for boys aged eight to 13 in Berkshire, says: “The academic threshold [of the senior school] must be right, but it’s not the only consideration. It’s important not to pigeonhole – you have to take character into account too.”

Neil Brooks is headmaster of Cranleigh Preparatory School in Surrey, just a stone’s throw from Cranleigh School. Around three-quarters of pupils progress to the senior school (they have a “holistic” assessment in year 6 rather than the more formal academic pre-test required by some other schools). And as he points out, there are other advantages: “It’s an easier transition if you’re going to the school across the road. There’s the geographical familiarity and we can bring staff over from the senior school to meet pupils and parents.”

Senior boys at The Pilgrims’ School in Winchester



Fun on the river at Moultsford

“We aim to smooth what could be a cliff face into a natural glide”

But he sounds a note of warning. “It’s not a shoe-in. We have a responsibility to fit the child to the right school and we encourage parents to make an informed choice.”

These days most preps that offer boarding have a mixture of day and boarding pupils (boarding can mean anything from occasional “bed and breakfast” to a regular two or three nights a week, weekly boarding or full boarding). “It’s certainly helpful for pupils to board in year 8 if they’re going to board at senior school,” says Mr Burden of The Pilgrims’ School. “We work on building their independence so they have fewer problems with settling in. We aim to smooth what could be a cliff face into a natural glide.” Not all prep

school pupils will go on to boarding schools, but as Ben Beardmore-Gray, headmaster of Moultsford, a boys’ day and boarding prep on the banks of the Thames in Oxfordshire, observes: “Even if you’re going to a day school, boarding teaches lots of very useful skills.”

About half the boys from The Pilgrims’ School go on to Winchester College. But as Mr Burden says, even though Winchester College is only a couple of streets away, “it can seem to the younger boys as though it’s in a completely different orbit. Last year some boys came back from Winchester to talk to year 8; hearing lived experience from someone they recognise and respect has a big impact.” Ludgrove head Simon Barber agrees. “Knowing what to expect really helps,” he says. “We talk to old boys when they visit and feed back to our pupils.”

At Moultsford, Mr Beardmore-Gray believes that schools also need to prepare pupils

properly for another “major shift” at senior school, namely issues around e-safety. “Its importance is underestimated,” he says. “The majority of preps restrict the use of phones and tablets, but at senior school there may be unfettered access. Pupils have to understand how social media works. They need to know how to use technology responsibly and learn to self-regulate.” With that in mind, year 6 to 8 boys at Moultsford follow an ICT programme designed to prepare them for the digital jungle waiting for them once they step outside the safety of the “prep school bubble”.

Senior schools work equally hard to help new boarders settle in. Dylan Lloyd, a housemaster at Canford School in Dorset, conducted research with prep schools and his own school’s new year 9 boarders about the pastoral implications of transition to senior school.

“We wanted to understand where they are emotionally and socially as well as academically,” he says. “Children who start school here in year 9 are from a range of quite different backgrounds. Some will have spent the last 11 years at a small rural prep, others come from day schools or from schools abroad.” He says that keeping new boarders busy and organising lots of fun and sociable activities like trips to the beach helps them to settle in and start to bond with each other.

Like Moultsford’s Mr Beardmore-Gray, he identifies social media as a significant issue, especially if the school’s policy differs significantly from what parents allow at home. “Schools and parents have to work together on this, but parents also have to trust the school,” he says.

Parents going to prep school open days are now likely to hear as much about what the

“We have to look after parents too – if parents are confident then children are confident”

school does to help pupils develop qualities such as resilience and kindness as they do about academic results and sports facilities. But how do you teach resilience? “Subtly,” according to Mr Beardmore-Gray. “The prep school bubble is nice, but all kinds of pressures come with adolescence and pupils need to be ready. It’s really important that they have a strong pastoral grounding and moral framework so that when they go to senior school they’ve got the confidence to give everything a go and not worry if they get things wrong. Extra-curricular activities expose boys to so many opportunities in sport, drama and music; they won’t be good at everything, but they learn that it’s OK to make mistakes.”

While some boarding schools don’t start until year 9, the majority of senior schools take pupils from the age of 11, so what is to be gained by staying at prep school for years 7 and 8? Unsurprisingly,



New boarders at Canford enjoy a trip to the New Forest

prep school heads are evangelical about the benefits, especially with regard to moving to senior school. Every year 8 boy at The Pilgrims’ School “has their own position of responsibility,” says Mr Burden. “It’s not just prefects and house captains. They can be boarding house reps, a point of contact between younger boys and staff, and act as ‘uncles’ to ‘nephews’ in year 3. They all have their own areas and can actually get things done. They bring a boy’s eye view to things.”

Neil Brooks at Cranleigh Prep agrees. “It’s essential that pupils develop a sense of belonging, of being able to make a real contribution,” he says. He adds that “the key to a smooth transition to senior school is not to over-complicate things. If you’re positive and open-minded you will get the most from all the opportunities.”

Meanwhile senior schools reap the rewards when new pupils join in year 9, says Canford’s Dylan Lloyd. “It’s good for them to have had a chance to be at the top of their prep school. Younger pupils look forward to the time when they too can go on camping trips, show visitors round the school and speak at events.” He sees the last two years at prep school (years 7 and 8) as an extension of childhood. “There’s no pressure and children can keep hold of their playfulness. There’s plenty of time to grow up when they get to senior school.”

While schools are busy liaising with each other and getting pupils ready for the move from prep to senior, what about parents? In his research into the transition from prep to senior Mr Lloyd found that parents had a host of concerns about how their child would cope with becoming a small fish in a big pond and whether they would make friends. There were worries too about how prep school A team players would handle being put into the B, C or even D team at senior school.

Prep schools hold events at which parents can find out about senior schools and once a place has been confirmed there are lots of opportunities to meet their child’s new tutors, house parents and matrons before they start. Senior schools often get new pupils to come in the day before the official term starts in September. That way they can acclimatise and find their way around before things get busy. Some also organise social events during the summer holidays so that new pupils – and parents – can meet each other.

“We have to look after parents too,” says Ludgrove’s Simon Barber. “If parents are confident then children are confident.”

How can parents help their children?

- Keep things in proportion. Don’t minimise the move to senior school – it’s a big change – but don’t make a mountain out of it either.
- Listen to your child. The things they’re worried about may not have occurred to you.
- Give them space. There’s a lot to take in during the first weeks at a new school so let your child assimilate things at their own pace.
- Discuss the school’s policies on the use of phones and social media with your child and show that you support them, especially if they differ from what goes on at home.
- Take every opportunity to visit and get to know the school – try and attend any pre-term social events.
- If you’re worried, try not to pass your anxiety on to your child.