

Assessing pastoral care

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So you want to choose a school with outstanding pastoral care? Who doesn't? Then again, who seriously asks themselves what outstanding pastoral care looks like before they embark upon that quest? It is an important question to ask because, when push comes to shove, the vast majority of parents, if pressed to choose between the two, would forego the extra few A* grades in favour of a child prepared to lead a fulfilling life in the broader sense. We would opt for one who is well balanced, makes friendships easily, can carry themselves in any company, is independent and comfortable in their own skin. If you, too, are in that boat, then read on.

What outstanding pastoral care is not, is endlessly fluffy. It is not simply smiley, gentle, concerned faces, a metaphorical arm around you, a 'there there' sort of pat on the back. It does employ those techniques lavishly when it needs, but it does not rely on them and it is highly selective in when to use them. It understands that these are not readily available, 'on tap', in the real world. That is not to say that outstanding pastoral care is not endlessly optimistic – it is. It knows that people make mistakes and that teenagers make more than most; but it is also ready to discipline appropriately as a way of teaching. Teenagers more than anyone else require, crave even (though they will not admit it), clear boundaries and will expect a reaction if they transgress – if they do not get one, they will

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simply see how far they can push: this is a right of the teenage passage. Outstanding pastoral care sees everything but also knows what to see and what not to see. It is not short term; it is long term. It is mindful of what that child might become, rather than how to navigate this afternoon – though it also knows when this afternoon might matter.

Outstanding pastoral care is not about systems either, though admittedly I do not know the school which has invented the educational version of the freestyle ‘total’ football the Dutch used to play in the seventies. All schools have systems, the vast majority revolving around housemasters and/or year heads, with tutors as the first port of call for parents and children. Some have vertical tutoring (i.e. your child will be in a group of children from across the whole age range – and therefore will progress up the school with a single tutor, theoretically at least); others have horizontal tutoring (i.e. they will be with a tutor group made up entirely of children of their own age and their tutor is likely to change periodically).

But it is not the system that matters; it is the people. Children copy adults – even teenage ones, though not immediately; they revert – and so the question needs to be ‘are these teachers the sort of role models I would want for my child?’ If they are, then you will probably find that the other children are too. Bear in mind that for those few precious years, the years when a child pulls away from the cradle of home, tests boundaries, asserts character and takes risks, they also watch. You will find that they watch and listen to teachers more than

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they do to you; and they watch and they listen to their peers more than they do to you.

Outstanding pastoral care is all pervasive: it exists inside the classroom and out on the sports field just as much as it does in a tutor group or a boarding house. It is a school attitude and it aims to understand children as people rather than as simply footballers, actors or biologists. So these teachers and peers become crucial in their development. Will your child learn to form positive relationships with people you admire at this school?

Lastly, and I hope (given my earlier words) this does not sound too pessimistic, all of us will come across people in life who are more successful than we are – on any criterion we wish to mention. They will be brighter, more able at sport, a better actor, a funnier teller of jokes, slicker at card tricks, paid more, more popular, a better leader, a finer cook – you name it, it is a sober thought that we are never the very best at anything. At a dinner with about 100 deputy heads a few years ago, a former Bishop of Chichester told the assembled throng to make sure that we taught all of our charges the ‘joy of being an ordinary person’. You can take that word ‘ordinary’ any way you like – maybe ‘individual’ might be apt – but the flavour of what he was saying is wonderful. Will your child leave this school capable of getting joy out of life, whatever that life might bring?

Can the above be distilled into a single two hour visit to a school? Maybe not; you need to feel it. But nevertheless, here are a few possible questions you might consider for starters:

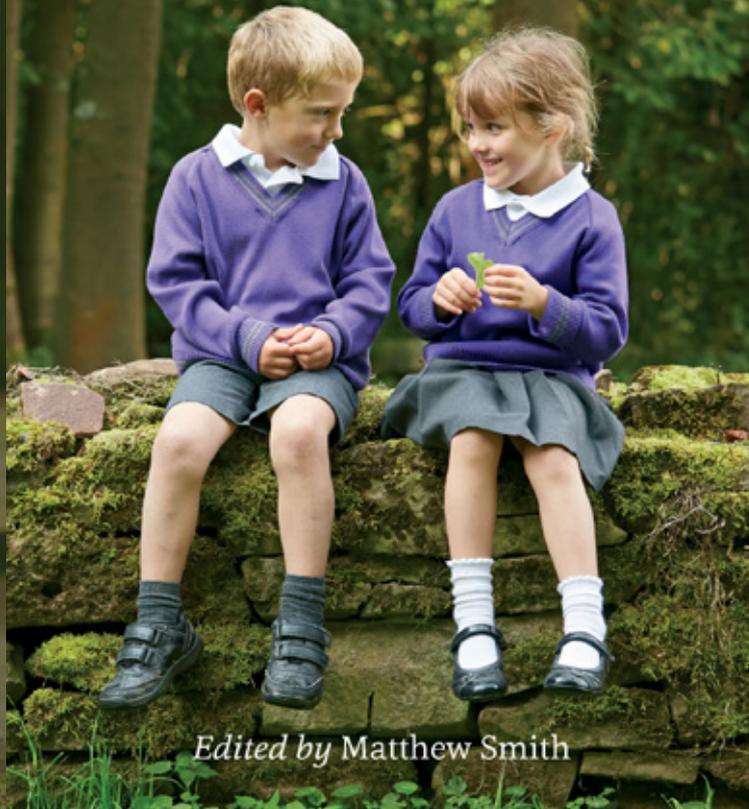
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- Why does academic success matter? *It does, but beware the school that only wants this for its own success – the ‘pastoral school’ will answer that it is for a child’s self-confidence and short-term options.*
- How do you integrate children into the school? *Subtext: friendships – will people accept my child?*
- Who will know my child best? *Back of mind: I need to meet him/her before I accept a place.*
- To whom may I talk about my child? How much should I be in contact? *You want accessibility, but also a confident school.*
- Are the school values compatible with mine? *Become confident in this. The school will sometimes be able to tackle matters more effectively than you will, so let them do so.*
- What at this school is compulsory and what is voluntary – and why? *This will illustrate a school’s values better than most questions.*

To end on a happy note: pastoral care in schools is light years ahead of where it was when you or I were at school. The overwhelming chances are that you will choose a good one. Good luck!

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The Attain guide to
CHOOSING AN
INDEPENDENT SCHOOL
FOR YOUR CHILD



Edited by Matthew Smith

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