



Learning for life: group discussions are an important aspect of pastoral care

their teachers outside the classroom also gives pupils a choice of people to talk to about a problem.

>> PREFECTS, MENTORS AND BUDDIES

Many schools involve their pupils in administering their pastoral system. "Peer mentors" are usually older pupils trained to help younger ones: they know what concerns to pass on to a teacher. Prefects tend to help keep order in the school, but may have a pastoral function, too. Check whether prefects are allowed to administer punishment or must ask a teacher first. Some schools give each new pupil a "buddy" to show them the ropes.

All these roles create a hierarchy of problem-solving that helps to keep pupils happy and binds the school community together.

Competitions can also play a vital part in sport, drama and music. "The relationships that develop [through involvement in such activities] create a wonderful atmosphere when there is a strong ethos of older pupils putting something back into the school," says Dunn.

>> VISIT THE SCHOOL

There is only so much you can glean from reading websites and reviews. Always visit the school at least once. Parents

rarely get to sit in on lessons, but you should meet pupils, ideally on a guided tour. Watch how they interact with each other and with staff. Ask teachers questions and assess whether they are happy to answer them. Ask pupils questions, too. Above all, ask yourself if you could picture your child among them.

>> BULLYING

"If a school says it has no bullying, then either it is not seeing it or it is not facing facts," says Janette Wallis, a senior editor at *The Good Schools Guide*. Schools must by law have an anti-bullying policy. Many involve older pupils, for example in the form of anti-bullying councils. Tonbridge School made this system work partly by breaking the taboo against "snitching on your mates".

"Unconditional loyalty is strong in adolescent culture, and can be unhelpful," says headmaster Tim Haynes.

Internet and social networking sites have created new arenas for bullying that have become problematic in many schools. "Pupils need to know that if they send something libellous into the ether, they can never get it back," says Richard Russell, headmaster of Colfe's School in Greenwich, south-east London. "It's vital to help them imagine the repercussions."

>> DRUGS

According to Sandra Hutchinson, another senior editor at *The Good Schools Guide*, it is important to ask how the school deals with drugs. In some schools, drugs-related incidents mean expulsion. Others look at individual circumstances and may give pupils a second chance. Find out about the schools' drugs policies and decide which suits your ethos.

>> FUTURE WELLBEING

Pastoral care is also concerned with educating pupils about healthy living so that problems can be prevented both during and after their time at school. This is PSHE: Personal, Social, Health and Economic education, which means much more than just giving lectures about smoking. "The true definition of PSHE is giving important educational messages outside, as well as in, the classroom," says Patrick Derham, headmaster of Rugby School in Warwickshire.

A strong sporting ethos can help pupils to make wise choices by allowing them to see the connection between how well you treat your body and how well it performs.

This process of making healthy choices is further strengthened by regular discussions, one-to-one or in groups, led by a trained tutor.



Good communication

Effective pastoral care requires easy interaction between you and the school as well as your child and the school. Follow these tips to smooth the process.

● Tell the truth when visiting schools

"Be honest about your child's personality," says Sandra Hutchinson.

● Find out who will look after your child

If he/she will have the same tutor or housemaster for several years, meet them before you accept a place.

● Ask who else your child could go to with a problem

Find out if the school has a nurse, a matron, a chaplain, or all of these. Ask if there are trained sixth-form peer mentors or school counsellors.

● Get involved in activities

Even a one-off contribution such as accompanying a theatre trip can strengthen your relationship with the school.

● Discuss problems face-to-face

Always request a meeting. If you need to arrange it by email, keep the tone factual and polite and save details for the visit.

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