

More than once I've heard parents say these words when considering the next school for their son or daughter, expecting me to agree. Having worked in London since the beginning of the 1980s, I am convinced that many of the capital's schools offer outstanding educational opportunities – not least, because of their location. It is certainly a parental fallacy to believe that a rural boarding school will offer no potential for teenage misbehaviour or will somehow prevent a child “growing up too fast”.

Museums, theatres, concert halls, art galleries, exhibitions, royal parks, historic monuments: every possible lesson enhancement is a few of tube stops away for teachers and pupils in London schools. More importantly, education begins before the teacher walks into the classroom. The unique social, cultural and religious diversity which this city embraces, enables many London school children to gain extraordinary educational benefits by understanding at first hand the lives of their peers. Scare stories hit the press. The reality in the best London schools is a thoroughly positive experience, which fosters tolerance and complex understanding in the adults of the future.

However, the expectations placed on the parents of London teenagers are greater than ever before. A strong link is essential between you as a parent and the school you choose for your son or daughter, especially beyond the age of eleven. Try to find a school that as far as possible matches the values that you have established at home. Avoid choosing a school with a strong uniform policy if receiving reminders about ties or skirt length will become irritating! However, do bear in mind, as a former Head Master of Eton once said, “No school is perfect!”

Parents can feel cut adrift from their teenager's school life once the security of meeting other mothers and fathers at the “school gate” diminishes. More than ever during the teenage years, it is essential to know the parents of your son or daughter's best friends. Events organised by Parents' Associations often create valuable and enjoyable opportunities to meet parents in your daughter's year group and compare notes.

Above all, as a parent, you need to feel



# Educating Teenagers in London

“He/she'll be better off in a school out of London...”



words *Vivienne Durham*  
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that an email or phone call will be welcomed by the school if you have concerns about any aspect of your son or daughter's well-being at school. Many schools will host regular events exclusively for parents on issues such as “keeping your daughter safe online”, preventing alcohol and substance abuse and socialising guidelines. Schools which are members of GSA (the Girls' Schools Association) are experts in the education of girls. Parents of teenage girls will find free advice on a huge range of common concerns from professional experts on GSA's excellent website: [www.mydaughter.com](http://www.mydaughter.com).

London parents are often worried about how often their teenagers should be allowed out socially during the week in term time. There are no hard and fast rules, but always trust your parental instincts. “No” should still be a seminal word in the parental repertoire. It is always useful to compare notes with the parents of your son or daughter's friends – or even seek advice directly

from their senior pastoral teachers. Parenting teenagers can demand negotiation skills that would not be out of place at a UN global summit. Whilst teenagers may often not understand, like or agree with parental opinions, they need to learn to respect the right of adults to hold contrasting views. Predictably, the most successful pupils usually prioritise school work and school extra-curricular activities during the week. Communication is key when allowing teenagers to have greater freedom in their social life. Parents have to be able to trust that their teenager is where he/she says she/he will be – and expect that negotiated home-times will be met. Teenagers should be encouraged to plan their time at weekends so that family commitments and homework are accommodated, as well as time for socialising with friends.

Self discipline usually increases with age, for most teenagers. Good organisation comes naturally to many young teenage girls – but not to all.

By sixteen or seventeen, some teenage girls can summon up impressive time-management skills and need no exhortations to meet school assignment deadlines. Parents can promote this level of motivation by establishing a clear routine for homework, well before their daughter enters her teenage years. The well known mantra, “homework time before screen time” (ie before Facebook, ipods, mobile phone, television) has much to recommend it, although homework will often require the use of a computer or iPad.

Teenagers want guidelines and boundaries – if only to test them. From Polonius to The Earl of Chesterfield, literature abounds with examples of parents seeking to advise their children. All too often, pearls of wisdom fall on deaf ears: “advice is seldom welcome; and those who want it the most always want it the least” (The Earl of Chesterfield in a letter to his son 29 Jan 1748.). Example often succeeds better than precept; teenage girls and boys need role models in their real lives, beyond the online celebrity culture. Teachers can play a crucial role in shaping the values and behaviour of teenagers. Even in the 21st century, an inspirational teacher will influence young lives far beyond the classroom. Many schools have a buddy system or some formalised befriending scheme to ensure that younger teenagers are “mentored” by senior students. In boarding schools, the House system also provides invaluable opportunities for younger pupils to learn from the example of older students in their House.

Above all, if teenagers are to be fully prepared for adult life, they occasionally need to get things wrong, to have set-backs, or even to fail outright. The perfectionist teenager, who has known nothing but literal or metaphorical gold stars during his/her school career, is poorly equipped for “the slings and arrows” of adult life. Teenagers need to acquire the resilience to cope with disappointment or heart-break, with parents and teachers on hand, willing to listen and support.

Guiding a teenager into becoming a happy and well balanced adult, who has found his or her place in the world, can sometimes seem an Olympic feat. Most parents and teachers would agree that no gold medal could reflect the achievement.