

Preparing for the 11+ *the interview*

By **Matthew Faulkner**, headmaster at Parsons Green Prep

The 11+ can take quite a hold on parents. They will chat to each other about it, tutoring agencies tout their success rates and even headmasters have been known to recommend a few hours' practice on verbal and non-verbal reasoning platforms every day. Are you brave enough to resist? Are you the sort of parents to send your child into battle unprepared? Surely you should get onto the bandwagon and book in at least a few hours?

Should you tutor?

No, you shouldn't. Firstly, the pressure exerted on children can have significant consequences in terms of mental health. Secondly, endless testing does not actually improve a child's intellectual ability. And thirdly – and the point of this article – is that there is more to the 11+ than proficiency in the battery of tests.

Your school will write a reference about your child and in almost all schools he or she will be asked in for interview. Both elements can be dealbreakers: an academically average child can offset this with a storming reference and interview. By contrast, a stellar reasoning score can count for little if the interviewer sees nothing of interest in the candidate before him or her.

So how do we swing it?

Some of this falls to genetics and parenting, but schools can make a huge difference. Interviewers will be looking for confidence and we start on that in Reception at Parsons Green Prep. From Show-and-Tell to pencil monitoring to class assembly, children will rise to a challenge if given it. Higher up, team captaincy, the school council, the eco-committee and parent tours of the school present opportunities for responsibility and confidence building.

Experiences out of the classroom are vital

Trips and residentials engender confidence and open the eyes. Curiosity can be sparked anywhere, from the Tower of London to the Brecon Beacons. If your child can refer to these excursions with enthusiasm at interview it will be worth every second spent away from school.

But we're not quite there yet. Children still need to talk at interview, to express enthusiasm for all that they have done, to paint the right picture in the interviewer's mind. What about the child with endless interests who fiddles with his hands and talks to the floor?

We can work on that

In addition to partner talk, PGP children are regularly asked to explain back to the teacher what they have learned in class, to ask questions and to justify their opinions. The feedback loop between teacher and pupil not only ensures that the teacher knows how effective the teaching is, but also give the children an opportunity to speak up clearly and thoughtfully.

By Year Six they will have research projects to undertake and report back on, debates to engage in and prospective parents to talk to and enthuse with. We also introduce a critical thinking course where issues of the day are discussed in depth. With no right or wrong

answers, children learn to express their views free from the fear of judgement. Well-chosen topics and texts bring them slowly but surely into the young adult world, one where opinions are valued and debated and where the joy of discussion replaces the pursuit of right answers.

Of course, we give interview practice towards the end, but only a couple of times before they set off to their senior schools. There is little to be said for endless practice if the child has nothing to say in the first place. Like our teaching of maths, which starts in Reception and comes to fruition in Year 6, our preparation for interview starts early and runs through everything we do. Last year our Year 6 children earned on average 3.5 offers per child from some of the most sought-after schools in London and further afield. They were academically fine, but they were exceptional in the chair.

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