

# Empty nest



Leaving your child on their first day at boarding school can be full of mixed emotions, says **Glynis Kozma**

It can be a hard decision to opt for full boarding for your child, especially if you have no experience of boarding. Katy and Andrew chose boarding at Taunton Prep School, Somerset, because of Andrew's employment as an Army Officer. Katy explains, "By the time our eldest son George was ten he had been to three schools. Although we didn't originally plan for him to board, we knew it was the best option for him."

Leaving your child on their first day as a boarder can be a time of mixed emotions. How much contact you should have with them and how you will adapt to a quieter home during the term are common concerns. Katy admitted, "As I drove away, I was tearful and felt an overwhelming desire to turn round and tell the school I'd made a mistake."

However, full-time boarding is no longer a case of waving goodbye to your child for weeks with little contact. Tim Harnett, Head of Boarding at Taunton Prep, explained, "Children are allowed to use their mobile phones in the evening but we would never refuse a child in need who wants to call their parents at any time."

Katy acknowledged, "George settled in really well, apart from a bout of homesickness on day five. This upset me terribly but I knew I had to keep strong and cheerful for his sake. During the early days there is the temptation to see them every weekend, but this can be unsettling for both parties. I did miss him – and his twin brothers when they

joined the school two years later – but they are all happy and thriving."

Mel's son is also a boarder at the school. "I found the transition harder than James, as the school keeps him constantly occupied he doesn't have time to miss us! It was a struggle to get James to ring us at all. The house parents gently encouraged him to let us know he was alright!"

At the Leys School, Cambridge, Headmaster Mark Slater is keen to emphasise that the school wants parents to be involved. "We certainly don't advise parents to keep away on the basis that this will be character building, although we suggest they keep contact low-key during the first two weeks. We encourage pupils to contact their parents daily in the evening."

"Being able to visualise where your child is living helps parents hugely," says Jane Grubb, Head of Dunhurst, the junior boarding house at Bedales School. "We invite parents to help their daughters set up their beds with duvets and posters from home."

On the first day, when the parents have left, we play games or do some cookery to help the girls settle." Girls are encouraged to phone home but only have access to their phones between 7-8.30pm. "They can email their families and we are currently discussing the use of Skype." And parents can call the school at any time. "But we do ask that parents leave out their personal anxieties and share these with other parents, not their child, because it's not a child's role

to comfort their parent."

Emma's 11-year-old daughter Harriet is in her first term at Bedales, Hampshire. "I did find the first week agony," she revealed. "We didn't have any experience of boarding; both our children were at London prep schools. We looked at Bedales partly out of curiosity; Harriet loved it which made the decision easier." How much contact does Emma have with Harriet? "She phones every evening and speaks to me and her father. In many ways, we talk more now that she boards! I also write her a letter during the week and she writes back, as well as emailing us. These letters go in my keepsake box."

Bedales pupils over 11-years-old have Wednesday afternoons free. Many parents, including Emma, use this as an opportunity to meet their child. "I arrange my work so I can visit Harriet. We go out for tea or a pizza, then there are only two more days before she comes home at the weekend."

Most parents agree that keeping busy during the first few weeks when your child starts boarding is the answer. And as Katy explained, "Sometimes they are too busy to phone me and when I don't hear from them for a few days I feel redundant, but what matters is that they are happy." ☺