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School admissions: 10 questions every parent must ask

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The school is a place where your child will spend the next 14 years of his/her life.

Is the school your child is going to, offering the best of resources?

Is it helping your child learn outside of textbooks?

More important, is it equipped to meet the future? Find out...



It's the season of school admissions.

Nearly 226 million Indian children are enrolled in schools -- 90 million of these children are

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attending 75,000 private schools across the country.

As the months roll towards Christmas and the New Year, these private schools around the country witness large lines of anxious parents outside their admissions office, waiting to get application forms and secure seats for their tiny tots.

For many parents, getting admission in the school with the best facilities and a good transport system is paramount -- after all, passing out from a good school is a ticket to future success.

Parents may not appreciate the gravity of the decision they're making -- after all, the child will spend the fourteen most formative and crucial growth years in a person's life in the institute they select.

For most parents, a choice of school for their children is driven by perception, word of mouth (reference from other parents), and infrastructure provided by the school.

Most of these are shallow criteria, considering how important this decision is.

It's not enough if the school has a great building, play areas, air conditioned classrooms, activity labs and computers or tablets. There is more to learning than just an infrastructure and facilities.

Here are 10 things schools will never tell parents, but which parents are asking of schools --

1. How future ready is the school?

It is more important to know how the school is prepared for the future than its past pedigree.

Most schools also talk about their credentials to prepare children for high stakes competitive examinations like the IIT-JEE and medicine or position themselves as 'focussed on holistic development'.

But the truth is, no one knows what the future holds.

Your child will be in this school possibly for fourteen years.

The world will be a totally different place by the time s/he is ready to go to college.

It is important to equip children with skills in this context -- skills that can help them navigate the uncertain future and succeed in the jobs and workplaces of that era.

- Ask the school how they will teach your child to adapt to uncertainty and change. Crucially, are children learning how to learn?
- Are they being taught to work successfully in groups and think critically to solve problems?
- Are they being taught to tolerate ambiguities? Can they learn, unlearn and then relearn?

2. How skilled are the teachers?

Very rarely do parents who go school hunting ask to meet the teachers of the school.

This is a mistake, because these are the people who will mould your child.

Your son or daughter will spend over one-third of his/her life with them for the next decade and a half.

In addition, how many years of experience do teachers in the school have, on an average?

Does the school encourage teachers to undergo periodic Professional Development to keep themselves abreast of the latest methods of teaching and learning?

Ask to speak to a teacher or two, rather than spending more time with an admission counsellor who typically talks from a 'selling' point of view.

A short conversation can give you tremendous information on the teacher community in the school.

In this age and time, good schools focus on having a good programme for their teachers, and make them learners as well.

Ask the following

- What are the qualifications of the teachers?



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- How much experience do they have?
- Do they get refresher training every year?

3. Does learning happen outside the classroom?

What percentage of the school week is typically spent in the classroom and what percentage in labs and sports?

Do children go on field trips or visits to local museums?

Do they meet achievers in various fields?

Making real world connections to what children learn inside the classrooms are becoming very important.

Classrooms are the most artificial of places in the real world.

Many schools have started designing programs to ensure children see the purpose of their learning, by being exposed to the real world.

Ask

- What is the breakup of learning within the classroom and outside?
- How many field trips/community activities/excursions and visits are scheduled in the school year?

4. Does learning happen outside the textbooks?

We live in era where a typical person is bombarded by information from a variety of sources.

It would be a sad commentary on the school if learning were confined to reciting lessons from textbooks and answering questions from the lesson.

Find out how much of the learning happens outside textbooks -- are children encouraged to look on the Internet and visit the school or local library, and to use the information they find in their learning?

How are questions from children handled?

Are children engaged via hands-on activities or experiential learning methods?

Ask

- What are the sources of information and learning like project work and hands-on activities for the child other than the textbook?

5. How safe are the learning spaces?

Learning spaces have evolved from the old benches in a row, teacher on the dais model.

Children nowadays inhabit bright and cheery spaces with charts, maps, cartoon characters and more.

Desks and benches nowadays come in child-friendly and safe sizes and shapes.

Play zones and jungle gyms have morphed similarly as well.

It is vital that children inhabit learning spaces that deter physical injury.

But ask the school's admission counsellor about the emotional safety and well-being of children in the school.

Are questions encouraged?

Do children learn in a positive atmosphere where no one is humiliated, castigated or belittled?

Are background checks conducted on all employees, including the non-teaching support staff?

Archana Govindrajan, mother of 11-year-old Vipassna and 6-year-old Vedika feels emotional safety is paramount.

"The days of spare the rod and spoil the child are passé now", she says.

"While schools are putting in processes to check the backgrounds of their employees in these times, I also feel it is important that my children learn in a supportive atmosphere of openness and empathy."

Ask

- What is the school's policy on punishment?
- Talk to teachers on how they discipline their students? How do they deal with troublemakers?
- What is the school's system of surveillance, background checks and chaperones to ensure safety of the child?

6. How is technology used in the school?

Most schools have a computer lab at the very least.

Classrooms fitted with digital and ICT aids (smart classes) are fast becoming the norm.

In these classrooms, teachers use a variety of digital aids -- images, video, and PPT presentations to augment their teaching.

This kind of usage just normalises teacher inefficiency by masking the bad teaching styles and methods with bright pictures and flashy videos.

How are children using this tech? Usually, children are taught to learn usage of tech tools and answering questions about them in a Computers paper, while they should be guided to use the

Internet as a source of research, create content for the web via blogs and videos and use technology as a tool for learning and creating.

Are children being exposed to application of technology as opposed to just being taught features and functions?

How a school uses technology and involves your child in this realm can be a big differentiator for life and careers in the 21st century.

Divya Reddy, mother of 11-year old Jashith feels frustrated with the Computers curriculum in her son's school.

"Computers have become another subject where children are dumped with a lot of note-taking and rote learning.

Shouldn't a new topic like ICT be taught and learnt in a new way, instead of the same old?" she questions.

Ask

- Request to have a look at the Computers textbook.
- How are children being taught about computers -- to use features of applications or to create with computers?

7. How are children assessed?

Ask to look through a few textbooks. What will children learn in the different subjects?

How are they assessed for what they are learning?

Do assessments consist of observations, interviews, journals and anecdotes beyond the usual battery of pen and paper tests?

Are guidelines for assessment still mired in marks for different subject silos?

Usually learning within schools focuses on subjects (90 per cent or more) and every other element of reporting consists of cursory reporting of several 'co-scholastic' parameters.

Next time as a parent you are at the Parents Teachers Association meeting, ask your school, how they scored your child on co-scholastics.

What are the means of assessment?

Schools have evolved their assessment systems, making observations and feedback to parents an integral part of assessment.

"My child's school gives me a very detailed report on what Vipassna's participation and progress in co-scholastics. It helps me have a conversation with her teachers on what she has an aptitude for and interest in, and how to help her improve", says Govindrajan.

ASK

- How are the children assessed for what they learn in the classroom?
- How are co-scholastics encouraged and assessed?

8. Different learning speeds

Most schools usually have counsellors to address learning disabilities.

How are slow learners taught to cope with the curriculum?

Does the learning slow down to suit the pace of such students and is it individualised to cater to their needs?

On the flip side, how does the school cater to gifted children?

How are gifted children identified, engaged and assessed?

All classrooms have 2 to 3 students who are learning at a faster pace than the rest of the class.

Unless such children are engaged and their needs addressed, they display problem behaviours inside and outside class.

Very few schools address gifted children and if you believe that your child is one, you should be proactive in addressing your child's needs.

Ask

- How much of teaching is personalised to cater to different learners -- slow or the gifted ones?
- What kind of engaging learning activities exist which allow for diversity of speed and skills?

9. Are involvements and achievements outside academics encouraged and supported?

Children who participate in tournaments and competitions outside school -- especially children who are gifted in sports or performing arts -- often miss school regularly.

While schools are willing to give them 'attendance' credit, the children are still expected to play catch-up with their peers upon their return and ace the required tests and exams.

This can be demoralising for a child excelling in a sport or art that has to always play catch-up and rarely manages to.

Can the school individualise academics (differentiated instruction) for such students so that their calendar is not as full as a child who attends school regularly?

Ask

- If my child takes part in activities outside school regularly, how does the school tailor academics for him/her?

10. What is the value system of the school?

Many schools incorporate orphanage visits or community drives or a weekly 'Value education' or 'Moral science' class to help children imbibe a good value system.

Values must be practiced day in and day out within the school -- from the management and principal who address the children at the podium, to the teachers who interact with the children for one-third of the child's day, to even the support staff.

Unless value education is driven in a well-structured programme in a consistent manner, values will not become integral to the character of the student.

"The time my children spend in school is very important", observes Divya Reddy.

"As we live in a nuclear family, children don't get the regular guidance of elders like grandparents.

Parents look for schools to provide moral guidance to children, in addition to education."

Some preparation beforehand and due diligence with the admission counsellor can go a long

way in ensuring the school is the best fit for your child.

Children will inhabit a world that we all know nothing about -- the best we can do is to ensure they are ready take on whatever comes their way.

Ask

- How values such as kindness, politeness and giving are practiced at school?
- Are children encouraged to help those who need it?
- Are children taught the values you as a parent, deem important?

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The author of the piece is CEO and co-founder, Creya Learning, an experiential learning company.

Hari Verma

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Situation in India is parents should not rise any questions, If by mistake any body ask no admission to school even if they agree to pay huge money, believe it is fact. now a days schools are day looters, like tax free black money

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Meaningless article...

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It's all about need to have and nice to have. The details consists of very useful info for each and every parent to know about. I do agree that most of the schools do not comply with all norms as specified in their brochure, but it's good as a parent to analyze and decide before we admit our child to the school.

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I agree to your point. Parents can take positive cues from the article and take a much more informed decision while selecting schools for their kids.

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After doing all this assessment you will end up with zero schools that meet the criteria or one that is 100 kms away from your home. The author needs to be practical and not write criteria for A grade US schools!

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