

# A series of damaging admissions

One message that will emerge from the 2014 Good Schools Guide is that too many admissions offices remain tight-lipped and inaccessible, finds **Janette Wallis**

**S**o arrogant!" "Defaults to brusque." "So aggressively rude I had to lie down in a darkened room."

Who could this possibly be describing? Is it: (a) bouncers at a premium London night spot? (b) the GP's receptionist on the Monday morning after Christmas? (c) Justin Bieber's minders? (d) the admissions assistant at a £30,000 per year public school?

The answer is (d) – all the above are genuine comments made to us at *The Good Schools Guide (GSG)* about school admissions staff. For 28 years, the industrious team who put together our guide, and the crack troops of our advice service consultancy, have been making daily, sometimes hourly telephone calls to admissions officers at independent schools.

Of course, things have improved vastly over that quarter-century. The "amazed snort" has gone by the wayside. As has the "mocking

*If a school becomes fashionable, I would say that the admissions office style defaults to the brusque'*

laugh". The great majority of admissions staff are, in fact, efficient, warm and very helpful. We have even exchanged jokes with registrars about the deputy head, and shared other such bonding experiences.

But there is still, if not a mountain, then at least a substantial cairn or crag to climb. "In my 30 years of experience I find that many parents are anxious when they make this initial call and a friendly voice and a helpful attitude really, really makes a difference," said one of our battle-scarred writers.

First impressions – this part is for the eyes of any admissions staff member who happens to take this newspaper – count. One frustrated parent summed it up: "My point is if you cannot be friendly and helpful at this point of contact which is like the 'getting engaged stage'... well then, what will it be like later when you're further down the line and

those parents, still at the "long list stage", who demand a private audience with the head.

But gone are the days when the admissions department can stand as gatekeepers, protecting the head from all comers (whether he or she wants it or not – we usually find the head gobsmacked when we relate an unfortunate story). "I am hard pushed to think of any business that more rarely monitors or checks how their front-line staff are behaving," commented GSG school-visit veteran Fiona Robinson.

At other times the rot runs clean to the head: "One famous public school had the head of admissions practically in tears when she had to tell me that she could do nothing to arrange my visit, soon after half-term, as the head had requested that all the staff be put on email silence 'so that they can have a real rest'! How long ago were the nine-week summer holidays?"

"I rang... a popular Berkshire boarding school... recently for a client," remembers one of our advice service consultants. "The admissions office was so unfriendly that I immediately struck it from my list of possibles. I can remember phrases such as, 'No, we wouldn't be interested in that sort of student,' 'No, that's not what we do,' and 'No, that isn't the kind of family we're looking for.'"

Further happy comments from satisfied customers: "Admissions never answers the phone; I have emailed twice and left a message once over the past two weeks, but no response" and "The classic one for me was, when I called to ask a few questions, being told 'I have absolutely no idea – nobody around here tells me anything.'"

Other sins and heresies we have encountered include charging parents for a prospectus or to attend a school open day; and showing parents around in groups of 20 or so, "led", if you can call it that, by taciturn sixth-form students. Marlborough College in Wiltshire has introduced an interesting policy of never dealing with third parties. "You're going to have to pretend to be parents," a member of the school's staff informed us apologetically.

There is a strong, but inexact, inverse correlation between how fashionable a school becomes and the niceness of the admissions



Your name's not on the list: getting your foot in the door is often the hardest

I would say that, in general, the admissions office style defaults to brusque," said a GSG writer.

All that said, there is beauty to celebrate in the world of admissions. So let's hand out a few gold stars.

"The admissions office at Garden House School in London has a young woman who has the most brilliantly sympathetic ear and voice, and I know that even when the school is totally full up and no chance of a place, she listens and makes very understanding noises to desperate parents," said one grateful writer.

Other schools said to deserve stars include Charterhouse in London, Sutton Valence in Kent, Lambrook Prep in Berkshire, Fulham Prep in London, Cheltenham College and Gresham's in Norfolk.

A few go far beyond the call of duty. "Shindon College [in West Sussex] has the mobile number of the admissions lady on their web

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site, and she 'mans' this phone – even when she is on holiday."

"Shiplake [in Oxfordshire] has a customer-friendly head who even came back early from holiday to show clients around himself."

"I emailed Cranleigh Prep [in Surrey] at 9pm on Sunday evening with a tricky question relating to Special Educational Needs, and the head called me to answer the query at 9.20pm. I am so impressed by this."

"The registrar at Bedales [in Hampshire] really understands the word 'empathy' and cares hugely about each visitor: she should be mentioned as exceptional."

One last thing, as you are bound to ask. The admissions departments aren't any more user-friendly in the state schools we visit. But we shall save those stories up for another time.

© Janette Wallis is a senior editor of *The Good Schools Guide*. The guide's 2014

## How to phone an independent school admissions office

1. Cast aside any terrifying childhood memories of being sent to the school office.
2. Make sure the school you are phoning educates children of the right sex and age. This is not as easy to check as you might expect as a surprising number of schools' home pages fail to tell you. *The Good Schools Guide* may come in handy at this point.
3. Prime yourself mentally, or write a list, with key facts (any subject preferences, special needs etc)
4. Phone.
5. Leave message.
6. Phone.
7. Leave message.
8. Miss return call that will come at 4.55 – when you are out collecting your children from school.
9. Go back to point 3 and repeat.
10. Eventually you will make contact. School may say it is full, or almost full. Don't necessarily believe them.
11. Do not get shirty if you are offered an open day instead of a tête à tête with the headmaster or headmistress. Open days can be revealing and you can always come back later if you like what you see. And there's usually free food.
12. Don't offer to pay cash.
13. Do not lose your temper and threaten to report them to *The Daily Telegraph*. Maintain your dignity throughout.
14. If bodyguards are essential for your offspring it is worth checking at an early stage whether the school can accommodate them. Also bear in mind that arriving in a helicopter may nudge you to the top of the waiting list.
15. If you are truly keen on the school, and your child meets its academic criteria, persevere unto the very end... places have a habit of becoming available at the last minute.