

# Primary PTA

Trusted advice for parents & teachers

## MEET THE PARENTS

How to get informed –  
by getting together

Your summer  
survival guide

See page 66

**NICKY MORGAN**

*“PTAs play a really  
important role”*

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION  
ON INVOLVING PARENTS MORE, NOT LESS

THE SAVVY PARENT'S GUIDE TO:

## FUNDRAISING

- ★ BRILLIANT MONEY-SPINNERS
- ★ EASY EVENTS FOR MAX RESULTS
- \* CREATING A COMMUNITY

ALSO INSIDE: REWARD SCHEMES | PACKED LUNCH IDEAS | HOME LEARNING APPS



# Welcome...



...to the first issue of Primary PTA – a magazine that's dedicated to celebrating, supporting and – we hope – inspiring parent-teacher associations across the country.

It's probably fair to say that 'fundraising' is the first thing to come into most people's minds when those three letters are mentioned – and it's certainly true that in these times of stretched budgets and tough demands, many schools are becoming increasingly dependent on the income stream that PTA activity is able to generate. That's why you'll find plenty of ideas here not only for ways to raise money (see Katie Masters' brilliant suggestions on pages 25–27, for example), but also for how that hard-earned cash might be spent to

ensure best value and the greatest educational benefit for pupils.

That's far from being the end of the story, however. Every teacher would agree that a strong relationship between those who work in schools and the families whose children are taught there can have a huge impact on all aspects of young people's education – not only helping them achieve their full potential, academically and socially, but also ensuring that their everyday experience of learning is a happy and positive one.

The PTA can play a significant part in developing that relationship – making connections, sharing advice and information, and providing opportunities for parents and carers to socialise, network and generally feel more comfortable approaching each other, and those in charge of their children's education, with ideas as well as concerns.

We want to explore that aspect of school life in Primary PTA, too, which is why we've included lots of expert advice on all kinds of topics from 'putting together a healthy packed lunch' (p.71) to 'tackling bullying' (p.18), not to mention a 'school holidays survival guide' (p.66) that could prove invaluable!

Of course, it's important to remember that every school is different, and as a result, every PTA is unique – but whether large or small, what they all have in common is the ideal of parents, carers and teachers working together for the good of the children... and that's a goal we reckon everyone can, and should, get behind.

Enjoy!

Helen Mulley  
Editor

## Featured...



## MEET THE EXPERTS



**Gillian Romano-Critchley** is Co-chair, Friends of St Peter's Primary School, Coggeshall, Essex.



**Dr Nicola Davies** is a psychologist and freelance writer with a passion for education.



**Stuart Spendlow** is a primary school teacher and author based in Lincolnshire.



**Victoria Wilcher** is communications and marketing manager at The Council for Learning Outside the Classroom (CLOT).



**Elsie Smart** is a member, and former secretary, of Friends of Marazion School, in Cornwall.



**Madeleine Holt** is a former journalist, founder of Meet the Parents and co-founder of the Rescue Our Schools campaign.



**Tes Macpherson** is the founder of PTASocial.com.



**Sway Grantham** is a primary school teacher, who blogs at [swaygrantham.co.uk](http://swaygrantham.co.uk).



**Lucy Jones** is a volunteer at Sandiway School PTA, in Cheshire.



**Juno Hollyhock** is executive director at Learning Through Landscapes.



**Ruth Sparkes** is managing director at EMPRA PR.



**Claire Wall** is a senior nutritionist at the Children's Food Trust.



**Jeremy Newton** is chief executive of Children & the Arts.



**Lucy Porter** is a comedian, actress and writer.

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**Accounts:** 01206 505995

**Design & reprographics:** Ace Pre-Press 01206 508608

**Subscriptions department:**  
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**Publisher:** Helen Tudor

**Published by:** Maze Media (2000) Ltd, 21 - 23 Phoenix Court, Hawkins Rd, Colchester, Essex, CO2 8JY.  
Tel: 01206 505900

The views in this magazine are not necessarily those of the publisher. Every effort is made to ensure the veracity and integrity of the companies, persons, products and services mentioned in this publication, and the details given are believed to be accurate at the time of going to press. However, no responsibility or liability whatsoever can be accepted for any consequence or repercussion of responding to information or advice given or inferred. Copyright Maze Media (2000) Ltd.

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**school trips**



# “We want parents to be more involved in their child’s education – not less”

Every school an academy? No more parent governors? SATs stress? Primary PTA caught up with the Secretary of State for Education, **Nicky Morgan** herself, to ask for her take on some of this year's headlines

**PRIMARYPTA: DO YOU THINK THAT TEACHERS, ON THE WHOLE, DO A GOOD JOB AT THE MOMENT? COULD YOU BE ONE?**

**NICKY MORGAN:** Yes, absolutely – teachers are doing a fantastic job. I meet regularly with teachers up and down the country and it never ceases to amaze me just how dedicated and passionate they are about their jobs, and more importantly how focused they are on what matters the most – inspiring the next generation to succeed. They are absolutely vital to ensuring our children get the education they deserve. I have the utmost respect for them; I applaud and thank them for all they do.

That’s why teachers are at the very heart of our White Paper proposals, we want to put power back in the hands of those who know their pupils best.

I’m sometimes asked to teach lessons in my local schools about politics which makes me realise even more what a great skill teaching is and why I would need a lot of training!

**HOW IMPORTANT DO YOU THINK IT IS TO LISTEN TO WHAT PARENTS HAVE TO**



**SAY WHEN MAKING DECISIONS THAT AFFECT SCHOOLS?**

It is absolutely vital that schools listen to parents when taking important decisions about their children’s education. We want to make sure that all parents are given the channels to make their voices heard, and I want them to feel confident that where the quality of their child’s education isn’t good enough – they know how to take action.

I think for far too long parents

have been the ignored voice in their children’s education. Our recent White Paper outlines a range of ways we are enabling parents to be more engaged with their children’s education. For the first time we will create an expectation that every academy puts in place arrangements for meaningful engagement with all parents, and to listen to their views and feedback. We will also introduce more regular surveys of parental satisfaction with schools and display this

alongside their examination results in our league tables.

We are also launching a Parent Portal to provide information on school performance, guidance on how the school system works and how to raise complaints. This new website will act as a one stop shop for parents so they know exactly how they can support their child’s education.

**BUT ISN’T IT TRUE THAT THE GOVERNMENT WANTS TO ABOLISH PARENT GOVERNORS?**

That’s absolutely not true. We want parents to be more involved in their child’s education – not less. We are not, and never have suggested parents should no longer sit on governing boards and we know that many parents already play a valuable role in governance, and parents will always be encouraged to be governors or trustees.

Many parents have skills that make them very effective governors. All boards are and will continue to be free to appoint them as they see fit. But we want to enable academies to move from a model where parents are elected to governing

boards simply because they are parents to one where they are chosen for their expertise.

**DOES THE GOVERNMENT WANT ALL SCHOOLS TO BECOME ACADEMIES EVENTUALLY? WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF BECOMING AN ACADEMY FOR SCHOOLS, TEACHERS AND PUPILS?**

Making every school an academy is the best way to ensure every child, regardless of birth or background, has access to a world-class education. Our ambition is to see all schools become academies but we have listened to feedback from the public and the education sector and will change the path to how we get there.

By focusing our efforts on those schools most at risk of failing young people, and encouraging 'good' and 'outstanding' schools to seize the opportunities that academy status provides, we will ensure the continued growth of the academy programme, empowering teachers and transforming even more children's education.

Our education reforms are already raising standards. There are a record number of children in good or outstanding schools – 1.4million more since 2010 with over 30,000 more in the last four months of last year alone.

Becoming an academy gives teachers and leaders much greater freedom to tailor how their school is run to suit the needs of the pupils and local community. For example, making changes to term times and the curriculum, and the ability to recruit, train, and develop better teachers or employ subject experts such as professional musicians or coders who, can add real value to the classroom.

And when schools underperform, it is easier to respond swiftly, effectively and with a wider range of solutions to get the school back on track. Schools won't be allowed to stagnate for years as has happened under some local authorities. Academies are actually much more accountable than local-authority schools.



**WHAT IS A 'MULTI ACADEMY TRUST', ANYWAY?**

A multi-academy trust or MAT, for short, is where a group of schools is governed through a single set of members and directors. There are many benefits to being in a MAT. Schools will collaborate and support each other by sharing staff and expertise across multiple schools, and can make savings when buying goods and services collectively. This means more money is spent in the classroom.

**AS A PARENT OF A PRIMARY SCHOOL AGED CHILD YOURSELF, WHAT DO YOU WANT MOST FOR YOUR OWN SON FROM HIS TIME IN EDUCATION?**

Like any parent I want my child to have the best start in life and get the best possible education.

**MANY PARENTS ARE REPORTING THAT THEIR CHILDREN, ESPECIALLY IN Y6, ARE FEELING UNDER TOO MUCH PRESSURE TO PERFORM WELL IN SATS, WHICH THEY SEE AS BECOMING INCREASINGLY CHALLENGING. ARE YOU ABLE TO REASSURE THEM?**

Children should not be stressed about SATs. These tests are intended as a measure of school,

not individual pupil, progress so that we can be sure primary schools are helping young people master the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. Most children won't even know they are taking a test as teachers will incorporate them into everyday lessons. But if parents have concerns that their children are stressed by the tests they should speak to their schools because this absolutely should not be happening.

These tests are vital in helping schools to ensure that young children are learning to read, write and add up well. The truth is if they don't master literacy and numeracy early on, they risk being held back and struggling for the rest of their lives.

To those who say we should let our children be creative, imaginative, and happy – of course I agree, both as a parent and as the Education Secretary. But I would ask them this – how creative can a child be if they struggle to understand the words on the page in front of them – they certainly can't enjoy them? What are the limits placed on a child's imagination, when they cannot write down their ideas for others to read?

**WHAT IS THE ACHIEVEMENT OF WHICH YOU ARE**

**MOST PROUD SINCE BECOMING SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION?**

Having increasing numbers of pupils in schools rated good or outstanding and working with many talented people to produce the White Paper.

**AND WHAT DO YOU HOPE YOUR MAJOR LEGACY WILL BE?**

Well, I hope that people will remember me as the Education Secretary that really cared about ensuring all children got the best possible education wherever they live in the country and encouraged schools to prioritise character development as much as academic attainment.

**DO YOU THINK THAT EVERY SCHOOL COULD BENEFIT FROM A THRIVING PTA? DO YOU EVER GET THE CHANCE TO GET INVOLVED IN YOURS?**

Yes, absolutely. PTAs can play a really important role helping to engage parents, and encouraging them to contribute to the way their child's school is run. Unfortunately diary commitments mean I am often travelling throughout the country but my husband makes up for it and is governor at two local primary schools.



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3



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# PTA Corner

Whether you are looking to fundraise or spend, take in these ideas

## Use your initiative

1 Teachers, headteachers, PTAs and clubs – are you looking to finance your projects? Time is precious, so why not delve into the solutions offered by Initiatives Fundraising? Initiatives Fundraising provides you with a quick, efficient way to create your fundraiser with a guaranteed quality product. It's totally headache free; Initiative Fundraising does the hard work for you! Whether it's a charity cookbook or a self portraits project on tea towels, bags or aprons, let Initiatives Fundraising keep it simple and help you raise the money you need. Visit [www.thecookbookinitiatives.com](http://www.thecookbookinitiatives.com) and [www.initiatives-fundraising.com](http://www.initiatives-fundraising.com) for more information and to request your FREE starter pack and sample.

## Whatever the weather

2 Getting the best from your outdoor space to ensure you have all-year-round play and learning opportunities sometimes needs a little bit of creative thinking, especially so when space and budgets are tight. Playtime by Fawns works in consultation with key school stakeholders to make sure that the environment is designed specifically for the needs of the setting, creating low-maintenance outdoor learning spaces for all weathers that offer a wide variety of challenging play opportunities. [fawns.co.uk](http://fawns.co.uk)

## Festive fundraising

3 Xmas 4 Schools, the schools Christmas fundraising company, has announced the launch of its new website and also a new, simplified system to make using its services even easier for schools and their PTAs all over the UK. "The new system of ordering and re ordering cards, calendars and mugs this year cuts out work for schools and makes turnaround times even faster," says MD Sonja Adams. The Kent based company, which runs the annual Christmas fundraiser in addition to a busy year round print business, has been investing heavily in software development for the project and is confident that its simplified system will attract many new schools this year. See [www.xmas4schools.co.uk](http://www.xmas4schools.co.uk) for yourself!

## Green team

4 Patrick Wenham, headmaster of Bickley Park School in Bromley, and BBC presenter Chris Hollins, have recently opened a new eco-nursery designed and built by TG Escapes. The three A-rated Learning Escape classrooms include decking and canopy for free flow to an outside play area. Eco features include a sedum roof to reduce rainwater run-off, and sun pipes that fill the rooms with natural daylight, minimising the use of artificial lighting, and solar panels. Check out a video about the nursery at [tinyurl.com/TGEScapes](http://tinyurl.com/TGEScapes). [tgescapes.co.uk](http://tgescapes.co.uk)

## Success by design

5 Looking for Christmas fundraising ideas for your school? Let your pupils design their own personalised Christmas cards, gift wrap and labels – it's the perfect project for PTAs, and in fact, not just for Christmas, either! All of IQ Cards' products are diverse; the children can create a design for any occasion and the parents can choose their inside greeting for the cards. IQ Cards bring your pupils' designs to life, turning artwork into beautiful print. It's such a simple project to run, with very low prices, free delivery and collection, and high quality, printed products – you raise funds on every single item. Find out more at [www.iqcards.co.uk](http://www.iqcards.co.uk)

## Great odds

6 Your School Lottery is the UK's only lottery organisation dedicated to helping schools raise money. No fees, no admin, no risk. Lotteries are a fun and very effective way of raising much needed school funding. Your School Lottery has already helped hundreds of schools across the UK set up a school lottery – why not join them? The company knows how busy PTA members are, so it does all of the hard work and admin for you leaving you to spread the word about your campaign to as many people as possible. It only takes you two minutes to enrol your school; Your School Lottery does the rest. Visit [www.yourschoollottery.co.uk](http://www.yourschoollottery.co.uk) to find out more.

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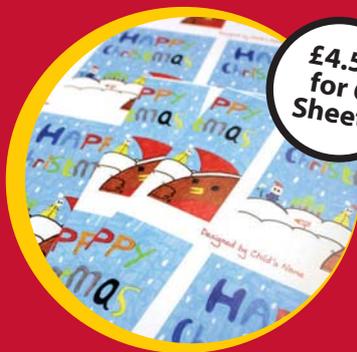
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# BRING ON THE BOOKS!

Few things are more satisfying for a PTA than being able to raise the profile of reading in school – so why not take inspiration from these creative projects and help bring new life to your library?

WORDS: KELLY CLARK

## **SCHOOL**

Rosendale Primary School

## **LIBRARY PROJECT**

A double decker bus has been turned into a library and parked in the playground. Officially opened by much-loved author Michael Morpurgo, its position in the playground shows children that reading is fun. The bus is open every afternoon for parents and children to visit and borrow books.

## **PTA INVOLVEMENT**

Parents were very much involved from the outset, helping with the refurbishment, fundraising, the logging and donation of books. The bus is now run by parent volunteers.

### **Parent Sarah Parsons says:**

"The PTA donated a large chunk of money from the Christmas and summer fairs towards a bus shelter, benches and planters around the bus. We held lots of second-hand

book sales and asked parents to donate soft furnishings. Children absolutely adore the bus. It's always busy and has encouraged reluctant readers to pick up a book. The motto of the bus is 'where reading is fun'.

"The PTA likes to provide enrichment items which can be enjoyed by all. The fundraising brings together the whole community; parents, grandparents, children and teachers all get involved. Not only are we providing items

which benefit the school, we have fun and make new friends in the process."

## **SCHOOL**

Cooks Spinney Primary Academy

## **LIBRARY PROJECT**

Unused second school hall has been converted into a brand new library with giant book characters painted on the walls. Corridors leading to the library have become a wondrous



rainforest with bean bags and cosy nooks for children to read in. The school has also formed a partnership with the local community library where children visit termly.

**PTA INVOLVEMENT**

The school's parent group has assisted with providing some of the resources, which now include novels, play scripts, poetry books, picture books, information texts and other reference books to support the curriculum. Money was raised with school discos, non-uniform days and cake sales.

**Assistant head of school Amy Dias says:** "As there is not a book shop in town, the only way we are going to develop a love of books among our young people is to encourage that passion in school. Having the library as an integrated part of school means children will walk past it every day and get used to it featuring in their lives. Each class is

timetabled to spend time in the new library and children are able to visit independently during lunchtimes. We target individuals or groups – such as Pupil Premium or reluctant readers – for library clubs.

"This was all about developing a love of reading. Sometimes, it is the simple things which make the difference, like creating a calm, relaxing environment where children can read a book or do their work. It has also inspired teachers to create even more stimulating reading corners in their rooms and around school.

"We could not have done this without our parents; their support and efforts have been vital in creating our new library."

**SCHOOL**

Dame Bradbury's School

**LIBRARY PROJECT**

A Tree of Knowledge takes pride of place in the centre of the library, converted from an old

classroom, with branches overhanging the whole room. Secreted in the hollow of its trunk, children can snuggle up and read, choosing books from brightly lit shelves around it. Author and illustrator James Mayhew officially opened the new space.

**PTA INVOLVEMENT**

Parents are taking the project one step further, developing a story garden. With the tree and Extreme Reading events showing pupils, parents and teachers enjoy reading outside of the classroom, the new area is being developed to give children and their parents somewhere to go to read together. Parents also spend time in school listening to children read and talking to them about their book or story.

**Head of school Tracy Handford says:** "Our tree is an inviting area where children can relax and read in a way that suits

them. Pupils are encouraged to read for pleasure, whether they enjoy reading a paperback or from a Kindle or iPad. The device doesn't matter, reading is key to our children not only developing the technical skills of literacy, but as a way of accessing the world.

"Children here use libraries in many forms; a surprising number access their local library on a regular basis. We have a strong link with the community library, including a recent joint event to encourage pre-school children and their parents to use the library. The children here also use the library online, borrowing ebooks.

"Reading is the cornerstone of a rich and rewarding education and is to be encouraged whatever media the children want to use."

**SCHOOL**

Steyning CofE Primary School

**LIBRARY PROJECT**

The school teamed up with local businesses, parents and community library to fund a brand new school library. In just one year, the PTA – Friends of Steyning Primary School – raised an impressive £15,000 to make the project possible.

**PTA INVOLVEMENT**

The PTA, made up of every parent and carer, holds a hugely successful annual firework display and Christmas fair to bring in funding, as well as signing up local businesses to become school sponsors. Donations from the sponsors enabled the school to buy shelving and enhance the overall look and aim of the



project. A local book shop is also on board, organising writers to visit and read with the children, including *Gruffalo* writer Julia Donaldson.

**Parent Julie Luckin says:**

"We had been discussing a new library for 18 months. It was then a case of spending a year making sure all parents knew what we were aiming for.

"One of the things which brought in the most money was our fair. We had reindeer, a ski simulator and an ice rink. We also invest heavily in our firework event which has to be the best in the area and encourages the general public to come along

"The smaller events, such as cake sales, really do make a difference to the coffers, too. We have a weekly coffee morning that might only make £30, but it all adds up over time. For a long time, we only had a few grand in

the pot, but it's about having a plan and looking at the year ahead to plan in events and opportunities for sponsors.

"Our library is amazing. Such a restful and exciting place for the children. With so much available on the internet now, it's great to inspire young people to pick up and look at books."

### SCHOOL

Darlinghurst School

### LIBRARY PROJECT

The school has invested £6,000 in stocking relevant, current authors to encourage a love of reading and to raise boys' attainment. Teaming up with their local library service, the school facility is run like a community library, open to children at all times.

### PTA INVOLVEMENT

Parents have become Guardian Angels of Reading, going into

school daily to share books with children and help those who find reading a challenge. It has encouraged pupils to develop confidence and have fun while reading. Parents are also urged to volunteer to run the library before and after school, giving children the maximum opportunity to become bookworms. They also hold regular book sales to raise funds for the library and to stock classroom book corners focusing on individual year group topics.

**English lead teacher Karen**

**Collison says:** "Not only is time within the library a great time to become engrossed in a book, we also see it as a social time where children can meet at playtimes and lunchtimes and talk about their favourite books. Giving the children this choice has enabled them to read a much more varied genre of book and



develop their language skills which definitely has an impact on their writing skills. It has also developed an ownership of learning within the library for the children as some of the Year 5 children have been fully trained to become Junior Librarians and support children to become great readers."



# Chips for **FREE?**

'Money for nothing' schemes accessed by the PTA netted an amazing **£15,000** for one school last year – **Gillian Romano-Critchley** spills the beans...

**A**lthough an important part of the PTA's role is bringing the school community together, it's very satisfying to find ways to bring in some hard cash which don't require an army of volunteers, the stress of whether people are going to remember to donate cakes, and endless checking of the BBC five-day weather forecast. At our medium-sized primary school in north Essex, we managed

to boost our funds to the tune of £15,000 last year through a variety of 'money for nothing' schemes. Here's how we did it:

### **100 Club**

Members of our almost-full 100 Club set up a £2 a month direct debit into the PTA's account, in return for which they are given a regular 'number'. Every month, our treasurers organise a random draw, and the first number out wins £100. It's a really simple lottery which, once the numbers are sold, brings in a steady income for very little effort. As long as you sell tickets only to your PTA members (in



our school that's all the parents and carers of children who attend, plus staff) you can usually run a 100 Club under the terms of a private lottery, which doesn't require a licence or registration – our local council was really helpful when I was checking these details recently.

Writing this has reminded me that it has been ages since we tried to sell numbers, which is why we have some spare. It's time for a recruitment drive to fill our existing club – and maybe even set up a second!

### **The Giving Machine**

This is a no-brainer: donations to your PTA at zero cost to your parents, for something they are already doing – i.e. online shopping. We ask members of the school community to dig into their pockets so often; this money-making scheme appeals to me because the cash comes from retailers, not parents.

All you need to do is set up your PTA as a Giving Machine beneficiary at [thegivingmachine.co.uk](http://thegivingmachine.co.uk), then persuade people who are shopping online to sign up and support you. Shoppers simply click through to retailers from The Giving Machine's site – there's a free app they can install, too, which reminds them to use the service when they're browsing generally. There are over 1,500 retailers involved – including Amazon, Play.com, John Lewis, eBay, Sainsbury's and Next – and every purchase made in this way generates a sales commission which is converted into a donation to your PTA. It costs you nothing, and costs the shoppers nothing. Set it up, tell people about it and the money will start to come in!

And just in case you were wondering, parents won't be bombarded with emails from retailers as a result of signing up. They'll just get an occasional email from The Giving Machine to tell them how much they've helped to raise. Since we signed up in 2007, we've received £1,400 in donations; other sites are available offering a similar service, including [easyfundraising.co.uk](http://easyfundraising.co.uk) and [giveasyoulive.com](http://giveasyoulive.com) – you can choose whichever one seems most suited to your members' needs.

### **Matched funding**

We are incredibly lucky to have a number of parents and carers who work for large corporations with 'matched funding' schemes, meaning they are able to pledge a sum of money when one of their employees is involved in raising money for charity. For example, at our school's performing arts show recently, Barclays matched the £1000 raised through ticket sales, for which one of its employees had been responsible. That's a cheque direct to the PTA – and of course, we also benefited from the help of the employee in the first place!

There's usually an upper limit to the matching, and the schemes are unique to each company. Some, UBS for example, don't match funds their employees raise, but will match personal donations. You might want to do some research to find out what companies near you offer – or better still, ask parents and carers to find out.

We've found it really helps to have one or two people 'championing' these schemes. Some parents were worried that applying to their employer would be time consuming or difficult, and it's great to be able to show them that actually, it's not. We've found the employers to be helpful and accommodating, and terribly generous. Last year we raised £4,000 this way.

### **Green tokens**

This is another shopping one. Some supermarkets – Asda, Waitrose and the East of England Co-Op are three of them – run 'green token' schemes. Shoppers are given a plastic counter at the checkout, which they use to register a vote for a charity to receive a donation, by dropping it into one of three perspex boxes. We were in our local Co-Op and received £300 in 2015.

### **Grants**

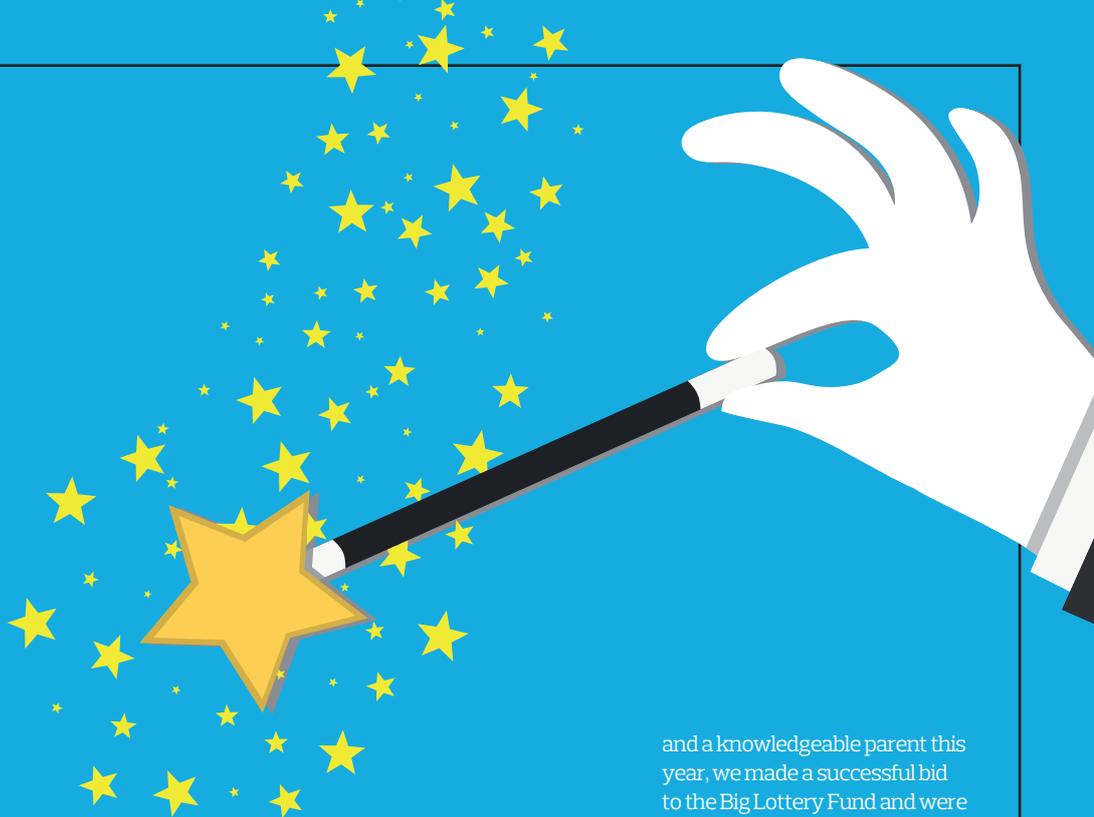
If you have a big project in mind, applying for grants from trusts and foundations might be a good option. According to PTA UK (a network of PTA organisations), there are about 8,800 of these bodies in the UK, and they don't usually advertise or publicise what they do. Word of mouth is a great way to find out what's out there – ask your parents if any of them work in fundraising or have expertise that they are willing to share. How did the school down the road fund its swanky new playground equipment? We've found people really willing to share their expertise and experience when we have specific questions or projects we need help with. PTA UK itself can give its members access to a database of 4,500 trusts and foundations offering charitable grants of £3.9 billion per year. Working with the school

and a knowledgeable parent this year, we made a successful bid to the Big Lottery Fund and were awarded £10,000 to spend on modular play equipment for our KS1 playground.

These are just a few ideas; I'm sure there are plenty of others. £15,000 is a lot of money by any standards – and yet, thinking about it, we could probably have raised even more if, for example, we'd pushed the 100 Club a bit harder, or reminded parents more often about The Giving Machine. Sometimes it's easier to focus on PTA activities that are very visible, have a deadline – and are 'the things we've always done'. But whilst the firework display, Christmas fayre, performing arts show, family fun day, treasure hunt and three discos we organised last year were all hugely successful and enjoyable – as well as profitable – I suspect that, as both parental and school budgets become tighter, less high profile income streams like the ones I've described here are going to become increasingly important for us, and for other PTAs across the country.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Gillian Romano-Critchley is Co-chair of Friends of St. Peter's (FOSP), the PTA for St Peter's Church of England (VC) Primary School in Coggeshall, Essex.**



# The B-WORD

No parent wants their child to be bullied – or be a bully; **Dr Nicola Davies** explains how a strong partnership between home and school can help keep every pupil safe



All parents want their children to be happy and feel secure at school; and of course, that's what teachers want, too. Occasional incidents of unkindness or misbehaviour are to be expected as youngsters learn to coexist with their peers in an environment that is very different from what they are used to at home – but when the 'b-word' is mentioned, things can suddenly, and rightly, get a lot more serious.

A school's culture can contribute much to a child's desire to make friends as well as their ability to perform well academically. Maintaining a positive climate within school grounds encourages healthy interpersonal relationships

among pupils as well as between children and educators, which helps minimise issues such as bullying. Creating an environment that is advantageous for all learners requires a strong partnership between the school and the home. Parents, teachers and administrators must communicate openly and share the same vision of having a culture where children feel safe, respected, accepted, and valued.

So, how can parents work hand in hand with schools to address bullying, and protect the wellbeing of children? First, it is important to understand what we're actually talking about...

## **What is bullying?**

In a school setting, it isn't uncommon for children to

experience stressful situations involving other kids. However, not every negative situation is necessarily bullying and, indeed, certain challenges can help build resilience in young people. Sometimes, kids may only be teasing, but in a playful way where no one is truly getting hurt. At other times, children, just like adults, experience conflict or momentarily react in a rude way at the expense of someone else's feelings as an isolated event.

So, when does behaviour cross over into bullying? The UK government defines bullying as behaviour that is repeated, intended to hurt someone either physically or emotionally, and that is aimed at certain groups (such as those defined by race, religion,

gender, or sexual orientation). The Northern Ireland Anti-Bullying Forum adds that the experience negatively affects the needs and rights of the person being bullied, whilst the Welsh government categorises bullying into three main types:

- > **PHYSICAL** – hitting or taking someone's belongings.
- > **VERBAL** – name-calling or using offensive words.
- > **INDIRECT** – spreading rumours or sending inappropriate messages online. This also covers the growing problem of so-called 'cyber-bullying' – the use of electronic communication to bully someone.

Perhaps the clearest definition of bullying comes from child development consultant Dr. Robyn Silverman, who provides a simple ABCD acronym:

- > **AGGRESSIVE ATTACK.**
- > **BALANCE OF POWER ISN'T EQUAL** – the one who is stronger, bigger, or older preys on the one who is weaker, smaller, or younger.
- > **CONSISTENT** – repeatedly occurring.
- > **DELIBERATE** – or there is a clear intention to physically or emotionally injure the other person.

## **What does the law say?**

It is required by law that every school has a behaviour policy that includes measures to prevent all forms of bullying (Education and Inspections Act 2006, Section 89). Furthermore, teachers, pupils, and parents must be made aware of this



policy. Ophelia Sedicol, a parent whose four children went to public primary schools in Northern Ireland, says that having a transparent anti-bullying policy helped create a supportive learning environment for her children. "All the schools I know actively make children and parents aware about their protocols with regards to bullying, especially new parents," she says.

The UK Department of Education has guidance on how to tackle and manage bullying, but there are incidences where, if bullying escalates, it can violate certain laws and become a legal issue

that must be reported to the police. For instance, if there is excessive violence and assault, theft of personal belongings, harassment through threats and intimidation, or a clear case of hate crime. In this respect, schools in England and Wales are required to follow anti-discrimination law; simply, they must act to prevent discrimination, harassment and victimisation within the school.

The law is slightly different in Northern Ireland, with an anti-bullying bill being introduced last year. Under this bill, all schools are required to record all incidents of bullying, including why the bullying occurred and

what was done to resolve the problem. The bill also requires schools to make boards of governors responsible for policies. This legal guidance includes bullying in schools, travelling to and from school, when school equipment is being used, and while under the care of any school staff.

**Working together**

Parents and PTAs can play an active role in supporting children who are being bullied and, indeed, who enact bullying behaviour themselves. The best place to start is to review the school's anti-bullying policy. This can arm parents with the knowledge of how to react if a bullying incident arises. The goal should always be to work together with the school in finding a solution. "The school sets up a meeting with the parents of the kids involved in the bullying incident, so they can discuss a solution based on the school's guidelines. When parents are told their kids are bullying, they can become defensive. However, it's more important to work with the teachers to figure out why the child is acting this way in the

first place," advises Sedicol.

If your child describes being bullied – or if the school informs you about bullying behaviour – the following seven-step plan can help you manage your response:

- 1 Take control of your reaction and avoid blaming the school.
- 2 Whether your child is the one being bullied or doing the bullying, ask them to recount the events and record everything.
- 3 If your child is the victim, avoid advising them to hit the bully back.
- 4 Set an appointment with the teacher. Bring your records.
- 5 If your child is the victim, give the teacher appropriate time to investigate the incident, but organise a second meeting. If your child is the bully, listen to the teacher explain the details and their proposed solution.
- 6 If the teacher fails to take action based on the school's anti-bullying policy, bring up the issue with the deputy headteacher or headteacher. You could also contact the chair of governors.
- 7 Due to the emotional nature of bullying, you may need to



remind yourself that the goal is to protect any children involved by coming up with a guidelines-based solution.

## Anti-bullying initiatives

Many schools give punishments for bullying behaviours. However, to prevent bullying in the first place, positive and proactive strategies can work better. Below are some examples of positive initiatives that parents and PTAs can promote:

### THE BUDDY BENCH

This is a bench placed in the playground intended to make play time more inclusive. Elphinstone Primary School introduced such a bench earlier this year. If a child sits on the bench, it signals to other kids that they are having trouble looking for someone to play with. Schools in the US and Canada have adopted this idea with huge success. According to the non-profit organisation, Connecting for Kids, the bench could be more successful with pre-installation training for teachers, parents, and students on how to effectively use it, and supporting materials such as bench stickers, wrist bands, and a monthly award system to reinforce its purpose. The organisation puts the cost of bench installation and its related activities as between £500 and £650.



### KINDNESS ACTIVITIES

PTAs can design and help incorporate activities that encourage children to carry out and reflect on acts of kindness. For example, the Erase Meanness Movement takes place in the classroom with the teacher writing several hurtful words (perhaps those heard in the playground) on the board that, one by one, students erase and replace with a kind word while reflecting on the question, "How do I want to be remembered?" Other schools also dedicate a bulletin board or a large tree outside where teachers and students can place or hang colourful sticky notes about acts of kindness they have observed in the school. A Kindness Bingo game is also fun, where good deeds rather than

numbers are arranged on a card, and the aim is to complete the card over the week.

### BUCKET FILLING

A fun activity for younger children is hanging small colourful buckets along the classroom wall, one for each pupil. If they do – observe – good deeds, they place a token or note in their bucket or the bucket of a classmate. At the end of the week or month, the entire class pools together their tokens and notes, and if the total reaches a certain level, the entire class is rewarded.

### BEING SUPERHEROES

BullyingUK is making it cool to be against bullying by creating superhero masks for anti-bullying week (16th to

20th November). Children can decorate their masks and wear them with pride ([w.ly/UXjY300mzeD](http://w.ly/UXjY300mzeD)). Another superhero activity was introduced by the Parent Teacher Organization of Pillager Elementary School in Minnesota US, which conducted an anti-bullying poster-making contest where students could create their own anti-bullying superhero – might you be able to try something similar in your school?

These initiatives are just a few of the ideas that PTAs can raise funds for and implement in their respective schools; why not add anti-bullying to the agenda at your next meeting, and see what other suggestions arise? There is no one-size-fits-all solution. However, it's important that parents and schools work more closely to promote the school's anti-bullying policies, create open communication with children, and help maintain a positive and safe learning environment for all pupils.

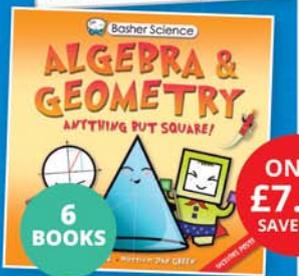
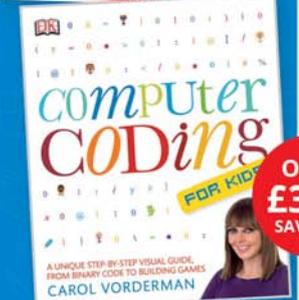
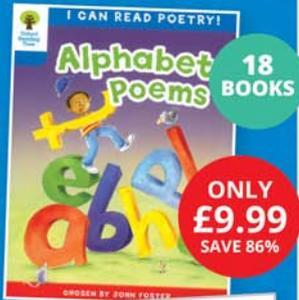


## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicola Davies is a psychologist and freelance writer with a passion for education.



You can follow her on Twitter (@healthpsychuk) or sign up to her free blog: <http://healthpsychologyconsultancy.wordpress.com>



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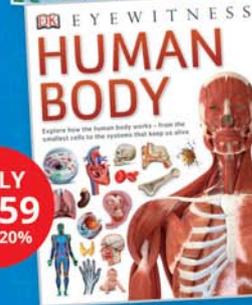
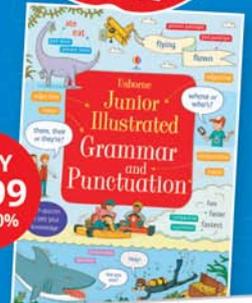
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## SCHOOL TRIPS

**CONTACT:** ENGLISH HERITAGE **VISIT:** ENGLISH-HERITAGE.ORG.UK **CALL:** 0370 333 0606

Learn about the legends surrounding Stonehenge, and create your own mythical tales using LEGO® StoryStarter kits, with **English Heritage**

### What are the Myths and Legends Discovery Visits?

Our Myths and Legends Discovery Visit was set up last January in partnership with LEGO® education to help cover a wide range of cross-curricular subjects through a hands-on, expert-led session at Stonehenge. This is a unique two-hour session that allows the children to really discover the myths and legends surrounding Stonehenge, before re-creating their own tales using the LEGO® StoryStarter kits.

### Where do they take place?

The interactive Discovery Visit takes place on-site at Stonehenge. The session is split into two parts, with the first half including a guided tour of the Stones and the second part taking place in our education room.

### What activities will children find?

The children will be welcomed onto the site by our dedicated and knowledgeable volunteers and taken on an interactive guided tour of the Stones. Our education volunteers will share the different stories that surround Stonehenge with the children, before heading to our education space. Here, children work in groups to create their own myths and legends stories using the LEGO® StoryStarter kits. At the end of the session there is an opportunity to share their stories and creations with the rest of the class.



Images © English Heritage

### What areas of the primary curriculum does it cover?

This Discovery Visit has direct links to the Key Stage 2 curriculum; but it can also be adapted to suit other key stages. The session covers both history and English, with a specific focus on 'Changes in Britain from the Stone Age to the Iron Age' and 'increasing their familiarity with a wide range of books, including fairy stories, myths and legends, and retelling some of these orally'.

### How much does a visit cost, where can you find out more and how do you book?

All of our Discovery Visits cost just £200 per class of 30 students. The sessions can be booked directly through the English Heritage website - ([bookings.english-heritage.org.uk/education](http://bookings.english-heritage.org.uk/education)) or by calling our booking team on 0370 333 0606.

### Can we go to any English Heritage site for a school visit?

We offer free self-led visits at more than 400 English Heritage properties, which can be pre-booked through our website, and we have more than 20 sites that offer expert-led Discovery Visits.

Not far from Stonehenge, Old Sarum offers free self-led visits where students can discover 2,000 years of history covering the Iron Age to Vikings, through Medieval and Victorian eras, and into the 21st century. You can visit Farleigh Hungerford, a Medieval fortified castle in Somerset, or explore one of Henry VIII's finest coastal defensive forts at Portland Castle in Dorset, both of which offer hands-on guided sessions for KS1-3.

**More information about all of our education visits can be found online at [english-heritage.org.uk/learn](http://english-heritage.org.uk/learn)**



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# 12

## WAYS TO GET RICH, QUICK!

You may think you've heard all the fundraising ideas there are – but these clever, quirky suggestions from **Katie Masters** could take your PTA in a whole new direction

**1 Make a Christmas wish list**  
Take shameless advantage of the season of goodwill – in the run up to December 25th, create a 'wish list' of things that your school needs, like art materials, musical instruments, sportswear, books and so on, using Amazon or a similar retail site. Send the link out to parents and suggest choosing something from the list as a Christmas gift for all the children, if they would like to make a festive contribution.

**2 Launch a 'Bring Your Tool to School' day**  
There might be a few sniggers about the name of this event – but it will get people's attention, and that's a good thing. This idea is simple: it's an event where you ask parents to bring a tool they use for work into school and auction themselves, plus their tool, to do a specific job. That might be putting up a shelf or (brace yourself) scraping the hard skin off someone's feet or teaching someone how to fillet a

fish. If you want, you can also invite members of the local community who are keen to flag up their building/ gardening/ catering/ chiropodist/ accountancy skills to contribute their time, too. The job they're offering to carry out shouldn't take longer than an hour, so that this can be a not-too-much-hassle-but-still-worthwhile annual event.

**3 Cash in on foreign coins**  
When people go on holiday, most of them come back

with a few foreign coins that they haven't used up. Organise a collection then send them off to a company like Cash4Coins ([cash4coins.co.uk](http://cash4coins.co.uk)), who'll pay you for them. PS. Cash4Coins has a free fundraising pack that it sends out to schools; see the website for details.

**4 Have a pig parade**  
Cow parades have been staged across the world since 1999. Thousands of fibre glass bovines, painted by different

artists, have taken up residence in different cities and have then been auctioned off. You can do the same thing – on a smaller scale – to raise money for your school. Invite people from across the local community to create (and sponsor) a pig to go into the pig parade. When you have your pig people signed up (and the money is collected in) order a bulk buy of paintable pig figurines. Distribute them to your pig sponsors and make it clear that the pigs have to be returned to you – beautifully painted – within a clear timeframe. Then you can organise your pig parade weekend – the date when you can lay a trail of painted pigs around the school. Make this a big day: invite the local paper; have stalls to raise extra cash; hold a pig auction; get people to vote on the best pigs, have a hog roast...

## 5 Hold a community run

This takes a lot of organisation, but if enough people take part it can turn a good profit. The idea is to hold a running event, which anyone in the local community can enter: from small children (fun runs in the gym) up to adults (10km cross-country runs that start and end in the school). People pay to enter and can also raise sponsorship money. You may well need to pay a sports event company to oversee at least some of this, which is where the

costs come in (start by working out how many people you'll need to enter in order to break even); but they manage issues like marking out the courses and organising entry fees, and you can talk to them about issues like insurance and safety. You raise money through the entry fees, sponsorship (both raised by the runners and sponsorship of the run by local businesses), selling refreshments and commemorative t-shirts.

## 6 Pay to make it stop!

Choose a song – any will probably work, but for this fundraiser, the more annoying the better. Think along the lines of 'Barbie Girl' by Aqua, or 'Baby' by Justin Bieber. The idea is that you tell everyone that this song is going to keep playing, on a loop, until you've raised £100. Then it will stop. Students, teachers, TAs: within three plays of the song they'll all come running to give you the money. Anything to make it end.

## 7 Sponsor my rom-com-a-thon

This is one that may just get your hard-to-reach parents on board. Find couples who hate one another's taste in TV. Then challenge them to raise sponsorship for each romcom/horror show/episode of *The Great British Bake Off* that they watch over the course of a weekend. The thought of forcing

their friends to sit through multiple episodes of *Sex in the City* or *Game of Thrones* may be all it takes to persuade people to dig deep.

## 8 Get grant-savvy

There are various bodies throughout the UK that donate money to schools for different projects. They all have their own criteria for giving; some will give to projects in areas of deprivation; others

to projects that benefit the community; others have links with particular subject areas – like sport or science. To find out the foundations or bodies that might contribute to your school, your best bet is to look at [grants4schools.info](http://grants4schools.info). This site is updated on a daily basis with the grants available to schools – you can either subscribe or have a 28-day free trial. Other options are to subscribe to [trustfinding.org.uk](http://trustfinding.org.uk) or to look at

## CASE STUDY: THE GEORGE ABBOT SCHOOL, GUILDFORD

**Our best earner:**  
Quiz-and-curry nights

**What we make:**  
Around £3000 profit.

**What we charge:**  
£15 a head.

**How many people come along:**  
On average, around 180.

**What parents get:**  
A delicious curry and a fun night out.

**What we do:**  
We flag up the date of the event at the beginning of term. Then we invite people along using our Facebook page and an email message. We keep a database of all the names and emails of people who have attended in the past, so we can email and invite them along again. That database is the best way of keeping in touch with people. We have built up a relationship with an excellent local Indian restaurant (the owners have children at the school) and they do

us a discounted rate on the curries, so that means we make about £10 on each ticket. But we also have extra ways to make money on the night...

### The extras

- We have a licence to run a bar, which makes about £1000 profit.
- The quiz is divided into different rounds. At our last quiz we asked local companies if they would like to sponsor a round, in return for being mentioned.
- We also start the quiz by playing the Heads and Tails game. Everyone puts £1 into a pot, stands up and puts their hands either on their head or on their bottom. A coin is flipped: if it's heads, all the people with their hands on their heads stay standing while everyone else sits down. That goes on until you have a winner, who gets £25 – and the PTA takes the rest.



The Directory of Grant Making Trusts 2016/17, which has details of around 2000 grant-making trusts. Be warned: these options are pricey. Once you do sign up, you need to start on the time-consuming (but potentially lucrative) process of contacting those bodies, detailing what you hope to achieve and why your project meets their criteria.

### 9 **Bring on the buskers**

At your next fair or fete, ask any talented musicians amongst your pupils, parents and staff if they would be willing to spend an hour or so entertaining visitors – and have a couple of your most charming and confident young people on hand to pass a hat around as they perform. If it's a big enough 'do', you could have two or three busking stations running simultaneously!

### 10 **Go for the burn**

This idea relies on convincing the long-suffering teaching staff to suffer yet again... but only the men. If you have some heroes in the staffroom,

ask them if they are willing to have their legs waxed, live during an assembly, on condition that a certain amount of money is raised for the PTA. If they take you up on it, we're betting that the donations will start rolling in...

### 11 **Harness your pupils' entrepreneurial spirit**

Use the 'real world' problems of how to raise funds as a project for junior entrepreneurs. Encourage them to form teams, identify solutions and find realistic ways to raise money. If they create viable projects, let them carry them out. The group that raises the most money, wins.

### 12 **Have a pampering evening**

Invite local therapists to come and run a stall showcasing what they offer – manicures/ massage/ aromatherapy/ reiki/ crystal healing. You can charge them for their stall and also a small amount for parents to come to the event. Sell refreshments, of course – and raffle off a selection of treatments, too.

## CASE STUDY: APPLETON C OF E PRIMARY SCHOOL, OXFORDSHIRE

**What we needed to raise:** £50,000 to provide an astro-turf outdoor playing field.

**What we did:** We formed a key committee of 15 PTA members, set a date we wanted to raise the money by and threw everything at achieving this one clear target.

**Our approach**  
We took a three-pronged approach to the fundraising:

1. Applying for grants
2. Approaching local businesses and organisations for donations.
3. Doing conventional 'in-school' fundraising: fetes; cake sales etc.

**Our best tips:**

- ▶ When you're approaching local businesses, focus on ones that have a connection with the school or on companies that have a legal duty to provide something back to the community, like housing developers or landfill companies. They are the most likely to be responsive.

- ▶ Get the local paper involved. We invited our local paper along to all our events and at the bottom of each article they flagged up the link to a donation page. We received about £1,500 in donations from people who had read the article and knew what we were trying to do.

- ▶ Make fundraising visual. We held an Open Evening to talk about what we wanted to do and created a video showing the horrible state of the back field in winter (sombre music playing) along with interviews with the students talking about why they wanted somewhere to run and exercise. We also created a huge map of the field we wanted, divided up into squares. We asked people to "sponsor" a square – they chose their square, paid a donation and had their name written up on the map for everyone to see. It gave people a bit of ownership over the project.

PTA UK suggest contacting ProHelp – a group of firms that have committed to helping their local community by offering their services for free. That might be offering legal or fundraising expertise, or helping to run events. To see if there is a ProHelp group in your area look at: [bitc.org.uk/programmes/prohelp](http://bitc.org.uk/programmes/prohelp)



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katie Masters is a freelance journalist who saw the dark side of PTA fundraising when she ran a primary school's Soft Toy Tombola at the Christmas Fair. There was sweat and tears... and blood was only just avoided.



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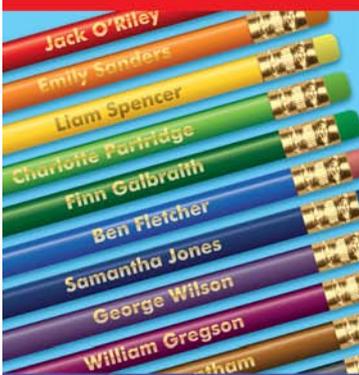
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# SOMETHING TO *CELEBRATE*

Next time your PTA is asked to foot the bill for 'rewards' for pupils, it might be worth having a conversation about the thinking behind them, suggests **Stuart Spendlow**



**A**s I placed my knife and fork together, mopped up the stray gravy splodges, took my tray to the 'tray holding bay' and put my napkin in the bin, a sudden sense of disappointment began to envelop my soul. I realised that no one was marching over with a beaming grin from ear-to-ear to slap a sticker on my t-shirt or hand me a novelty pencil. I'd consciously avoided throwing the tray over my shoulder and smearing rude words on the table with the gravy because I knew that was very much an unacceptable thing to do. There

were no rewards. No thanks or praise. Just the satisfaction that I had done the 'right' thing after my meal.

You've probably figured out that I wasn't genuinely too gutted at the lack of reward for my perfectly normal behaviour. You've maybe also gathered that I'm being quite cynical in order to labour a point. But let me start with a confession that takes some admission – I used to be a grumpy teacher. A proper miserable one who saved a small fortune from not buying stickers, stamps or animal-shaped rubbers. My attitude was that pupils would behave and work hard in my

classroom because it was the right thing to do, not because they'd be showered with 'marbles in a jar' that would lead them to the ultimate 8-year-olds' haven of Golden Time. I wanted the pupils in my class to be intrinsically motivated learners with a passion to be the best that they could be.

### **Getting the point**

This worked. Mostly. Once the pupils were tuned into the idea that they wouldn't be rewarded with anything beyond words of encouragement or the occasional smile (as much as a

grumpy teacher can muster up), they were fine with it and went about their daily business with good behaviour and attitudes. To me, rewards were pointless deliverers of false hope and they certainly had no place in my classroom, thank you very much. I'd never really bought the argument that pupils would learn to listen, behave and push themselves through the motivation of rewards. Then I saw the light. Hallelujah!

The truth is, since the disappearance of the cane in 1987, rewards have crept into schools as a powerful tool; and they can be exceptionally



impactful when an appropriate reward is chosen and used effectively. Schools each use them differently; for different things, at different times and for different purposes – there's no main right answer. There are, however, some major wrong ones.

I still remember fondly that beautiful mid-June morning when I received not just an ordinary sticker, but a scented one, at the age of eight. The supposed aroma of ice cream was just indescribable and I was, without a doubt, the coolest kid on the playground that day. The trouble is, I can't remember for the life of me

what the damned thing was for! I just remember the sickly vanilla smell of success lingering around me like an aura of cleverness, intellect and all other false illusions. The reward was great – but it didn't really encourage much (especially as it ended up going through the washing machine, resulting in a major ear-bashing from my mum). I was soon 'over' the sticker and didn't really fancy another. So what does make a good reward in schools?

### **The long game**

Time. The one thing humans seem to struggle to ever find. Time makes a great reward in school – just as it does at home, in fact. Although we're battling enough as it is in the classroom to fit in all of the demands of a 'tougher' curriculum, making small slots of time for pupils to pursue their own interests within the classroom can be miraculous. I recently spoke to a teacher who allows her pupils to earn up to 60 minutes every fortnight in order to develop a desired skill further. She explained that one pupil, a very able writer, used the time to read more in order to inspire her writing, and appealed to the PTA to help buy newer books for the school. She also told me about how another boy had asked to use his time managing and maintaining the school's flower beds, and had written a letter to the PTA asking for some money to spend on seeds and watering cans and other garden-related stuff (is it obvious that I'm not a keen gardener?) These pupils appreciate stuff. They care.

PTAs can play a key role in working with schools to find out how they can provide or support rewards that will make a difference and be highly effective, that might otherwise be difficult or too costly to achieve, or that will remain in place for a long time and make the school environment a nicer place. If a school needs some new outdoor furniture or some equipment for playtimes, for example, could the pupils collaboratively 'earn' them through their efforts? It would certainly breathe new life into the concepts of reward charts,



## REWARDS THEY'LL REMEMBER

- ▶ Time to use freely
- ▶ A class visit
- ▶ Beanbags for the reading corner
- ▶ Skipping the lunch queue
- ▶ Extra access to technology
- ▶ Recognition by the headteacher
- ▶ Letters to parents
- ▶ Whole-school equipment earned through a points system

stamp books and marble jars – and whilst actual funding might come from the PTA, what matters is that pupils fully realise that their own hard work, efforts and behaviour have resulted in the contribution.

Whilst I'll not preach too much about giving out animal-shaped rubbers, fluffy flamingo pencils or bendy rulers – and there is certainly a place in a school's behavioural management system for stickers and stamps that have been specifically designed to recognise and celebrate effort and achievement in a consistent and clearly understood way – I am a major fan of rewards that enrich and broaden experience. Rewards that, despite taking some persistent earning, are worth every sweat bead of effort. They're what will be remembered long after the novelty stationery has been lost; and they'll have a greater impact on behaviour and general well-roundedness as a result.

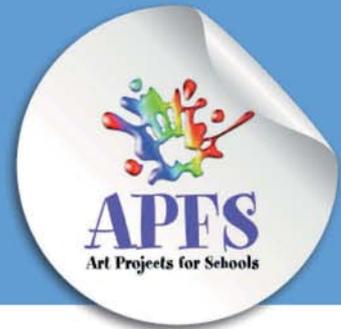


### **i** ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Stuart Spendlow** is a primary school teacher and author based in Lincolnshire. His number one bestselling children's book, *PENGUINPIG*, is currently touring the UK as a stage show. He is also working as a literacy coordinator and regularly writes articles on e-safety for parents. Stuart's new book, *The Art of Being a Brilliant Primary Teacher*, is now available from [www.crownhouse.co.uk](http://www.crownhouse.co.uk).



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# Who, **me?**

After a first year that's been eventful in more ways than one, accidental volunteer **Jess**, from Suffolk, considers what it really means to be 'on the PTA'...

**A** pleasant scene: a Teddy Bear's Picnic in the sun with a handful of nursery teachers, pre-schoolers, their mothers and some random women whom I didn't recognise. Mrs S, who falls under the first of those category headings, introduced these randoms to us sandwich-scoffing mums as being part of a fundraising group, 'Friends Of [OurSchool]' – or, for the purpose of this page, at least, FOOS. I hadn't heard of it, but it was drilled into us by Mrs S, in a rather unsubtle fashion, that these noble souls in front of us were coming to the end of their responsibilities (with children shortly leaving for high school), and they were therefore looking for new recruits.

For the record, I didn't really nominate myself. Typical for these sorts of 'not-for-profit' arrangements, I was 'volunteered' by Mrs S on the basis that I "had my own business" and "knew about marketing". This could perhaps have been interpreted by some, less dedicated mortals, as meaning I was really rather busy already and therefore had little extra time to commit to FOOS. However, Mrs S decided that I was clearly the sort of chap who liked her plate crowded to the point of overflowing – and so she put my name forward.

## **Down to business**

Groovy. The first three meetings were, of course, on dates that I could not make due to being away on business trips. However, I was sent the minutes and it appeared that FOOS had a decent events calendar booked, a fairish pot of cash and a handful of parent and teacher members. I offered to create a flyer for the Year 6



disco and my affirmed status as marketer, PR guru, social media strategist, graphic designer and sponsorship coordinator was born.

A year on and a handful of events under our belt, I feel in a position to reflect realistically on the rewards and tribulations of being part of a voluntary school fundraising group; a role I never planned on filling. It's certainly been an eye opener. The overall impression is positive – pulling a wobbly outdoor event out of the bag on a revoltingly wet day was a pinnacle and the unpredicted £1700 it raised for the children's play area replacement was the cherry on the icing on the soggy sponge. The community support received from cake-bakers, marshals and tuck shop helpers proved vital – a lovely representative from the WI

provided two trays of scones for our refreshments bar when she had no ties with the school whatsoever, for example. One of the most established (it doesn't seem prudent to say 'oldest') of teachers carried several large urns of boiling water back and forth between the playground and the canteen in the pouring rain to keep parents topped up with caffeine whilst her husband held the Fun Run finishing line ribbon aloft for two hours during an icy gale. It seems that if the ultimate goal is the educational welfare of children, folk roll up their sleeves. Perhaps the Downing Street boys in blue could learn a lesson here.

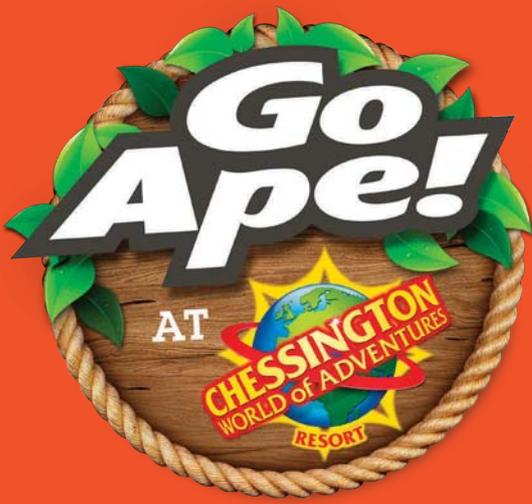
## **Invisible touch**

It hasn't been without gripes, though. The support from the school has been sporadic. When FOOS spent several weekends

organising a Summer Fayre with bold fundraising objectives and a to-do list as long as your arm, the office saw fit to put the advertising flyer somewhere and forget about it – resulting in the event receiving no actual publicity from the school despite promises of distribution, and the Big Day inevitably approaching with only a small percentage of the parents aware it was even happening. It's also hard to ignore the lack of any interaction from an overwhelming majority of parents – especially as, naturally, the people who complain most relentlessly and audibly about the school and its dwindling resources are the same culprits who are never anywhere to be seen when volunteers are sought. Don't even think about asking them to join FOOS – apparently it's 'just not their thing', even when their youngest is in school and they definitely have a few spare hours a week which they could give us.

Is it my 'thing'? Yes, of course it is. I like helping people out and my kids' school is as good a place as any to do that. The children enjoy the scrap of kudos attached to having a mummy who is always behind the desk on event days – and who actually gets to go into the staff room. I know how to communicate stuff to people – and, truth be told, the beauty of social media in a community environment has made cause promotion relatively simple. We've made some money. The pupils got their new play area and a few boxes of reading books. And I have a couple of real allies on the FOOS team who are as committed as I am.

Funnily enough, they all have day jobs, too.



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### **What activities do children talk about most when returning from a PGL trip?**

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### **What are some of parents' top concerns when sending their child on a school trip, and how do you help schools to address these?**

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# Out and ABOUT

School trips should be a part of every child's experience, says **Victoria Wilcher**, and here's how parents – and the PTA – can help

**W**hat do you think of when someone mentions 'school trips'? A fun day out in the summer when the weather is nice and the real work of the academic year is finished, perhaps? A chance for children to get away from fronted adverbials and the pressures of SATs? Or could it be that, as a parent, the idea raises concerns about letting your child out of the protective confines of school – are they at risk from strangers; will they cope in unfamiliar environments without you? What about the cost? And anyway, at a time when families are being penalised for taking their offspring on holiday during termtime, is there not

something rather hypocritical about schools asking the PTA and individual parents to pay for teachers and their pupils to nip off to the coast or the capital for the day?

School trips – or educational visits, as they are more usefully called – can seem like a lot of extra work for teachers. They have to choose a place to go, book a coach, fill in the risk management paperwork, and collect consent forms. Yet thousands of children go on them every year, so schools must think it is worth the effort. And the truth is, although that trip to the seaside or a theme park might seem like it's just an excuse for a jolly during which teachers are temporarily abandoning their commitment to your child's education, some of the deepest learning

and greatest opportunities for development happen on educational visits.

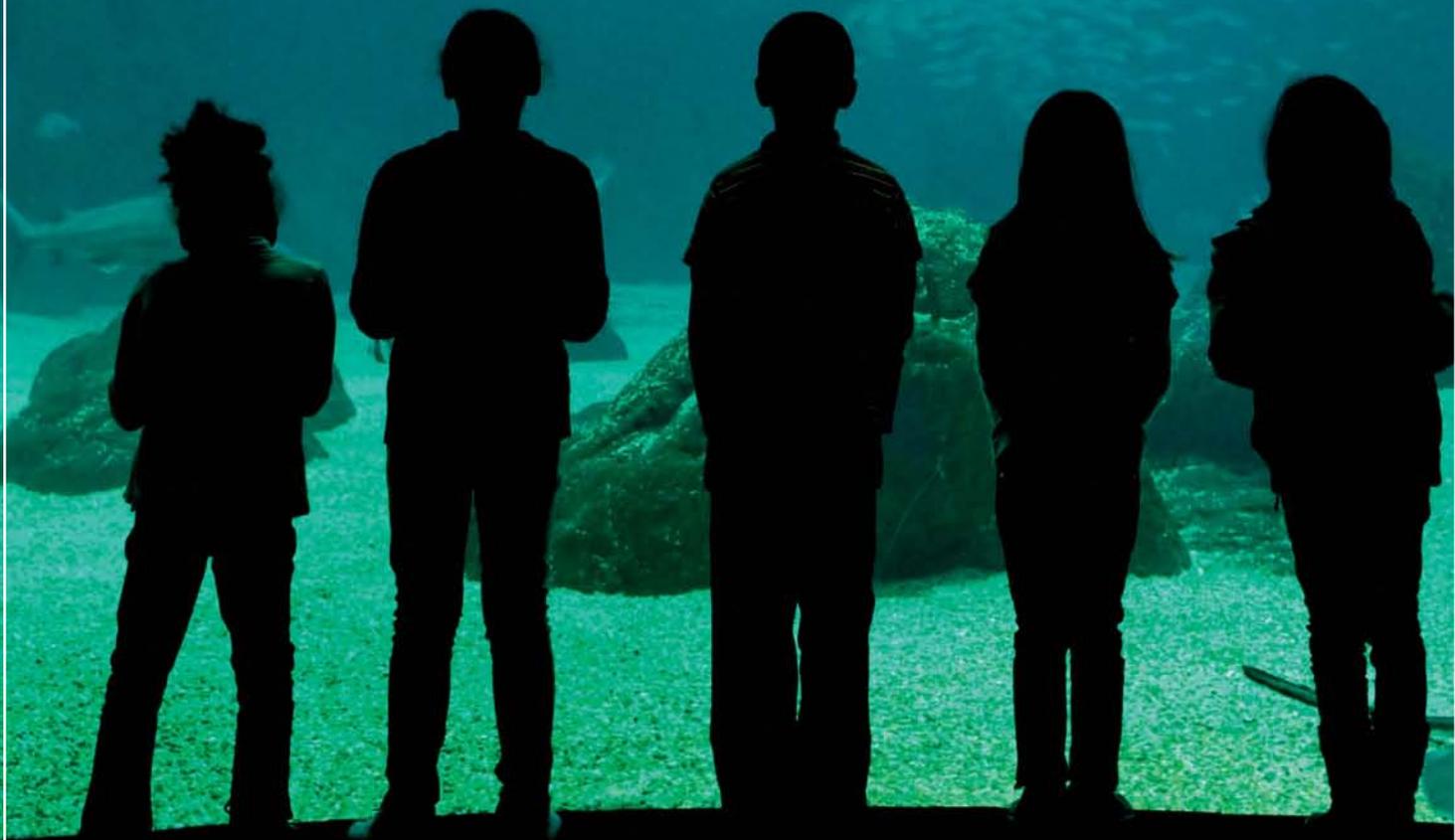
## **Beyond the classroom**

Educational visits offer huge benefits for children's personal and social development, and can also improve their engagement with learning and support their attainment. There are many opportunities on educational visits which simply cannot be replicated in the classroom.

Outside the classroom, children are able to experience the real world, and gain context for their learning, whether that is seeing chicks on a farm and realising where their food comes from or starting to understand about the forces acting on a rollercoaster. The £2.50 you provide for the museum gift

shop allows them to apply their maths knowledge by calculating costs and deciding what to buy. Exciting experiences outside the classroom also fuel their imagination and expand their vocabulary, improving their writing skills. Research has shown that inspiring learning experiences outside the classroom can lead to better performance in tests and higher quality written work.

In addition to developing subject-related skills and knowledge, in stepping outside the classroom, children learn to conduct themselves safely in the real world. As a parent, you may be horrified by the idea that your child will be using public transport to travel to an educational visit, but this can be a fantastic learning experience, helping them to





develop independence and learn how to manage their own safety. So many children are now driven everywhere that they never use public transport – an experience that will be very useful to them as adults. Outside the classroom, children come into contact with a much wider variety of people, and develop their communication skills by interacting with them.

In the current climate, it can sometimes feel that all our children get from their time at school is an ability to sit tests, and as result, their experience seems to be about stress and pressure, rather than any sense of joy in learning. Educational visits and activities in the school grounds take some of that pressure away and allow children to get excited about what they are doing. All of this makes learning more meaningful and memorable, which will in turn improve academic achievement.

### **Staying away**

Residential experiences involving at least one night away from home can be the most alarming aspect of educational visits for some

parents. For many children, a school residential is their first experience of spending the night away from their parents. It is difficult to let your baby go and stay with people who are effectively strangers to you, although your child is with them every day at school. Waving them off as the coach leaves the school gate, many parents worry about how their child is going to cope without them, and spend the week worrying about

how their little one is doing far away from home. More often than not, of course, the child is having a wonderful time, heedless of their parents' worry!

Residentials have a fantastic impact on children and young people. The benefits that can be gained from a day visit are amplified by being extended over a longer period of time. As explained by Learning Away ([www.learningaway.org.uk](http://www.learningaway.org.uk)), a research project exploring the benefits of residential experiences:

"No matter how carefully planned the activities are on a day trip, how exciting the venue or how experiential the learning, it will still finish at or around the end of a normal school day; day trips cannot incorporate the extended communal and informal time on a residential that our research suggests can be so transformative."

On a residential visit, pupils have to learn to sleep away from home, perhaps share a room with people they don't know, take responsibility for dressing themselves, and maybe even do some of the cooking and cleaning.

Their relationship with classmates and their teachers can undergo a huge change – the scary Year 6 teacher never seems quite the same once you have watched her take her turn on the zip wire, even though she was clearly terrified. By spending more time with their

pupils, teachers can get to know them much better, and this means that they will be better able to support them back in school.

### **How can we help?**

As a parent, there is a lot you can do to support and encourage schools to plan high quality educational visits that will make a real difference to your child's development:

#### **ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS**

When you are informed about a visit, ask the teacher what the learning outcomes for the visit are – what do they expect pupils to gain from the experience? You can also ask what criteria were used to choose a venue. How do they know that the experience will be safe and appropriate? Does the site have an accreditation to denote good educational provision and appropriate risk management procedures, such as the LOTC Quality Badge ([lotcqualitybadge.org.uk](http://lotcqualitybadge.org.uk))?

#### **RELAX!**

It is understandable to worry about your child when they are on a visit, especially if they are away overnight, but independence is a key part of the experience. Give them space to develop that independence, and don't expect to receive regular updates or phone calls. Many schools ban phones during visits.



### SUPPORT INDEPENDENCE

Work with the school to support your child's development. Some children arrive on a residential with a bag packed by a parent and have no idea what clothes or equipment they have with them. Supervise their packing, of course, but involve them in the process – make sure they know what they need and where it is. They will need to be able to repack at the end of their stay without you there to help.

### PREPARE APPROPRIATELY

Help your child to be ready for the visit – make sure they are dressed appropriately and have any equipment needed. Ensure they have hats, waterproofs, warm clothes, comfortable footwear – whatever is appropriate for the season and activity. Talk to your child about where they are going and what they will be doing. Show an interest and encourage their engagement with the visit.

### DURING THE VISIT

If you attend a visit as a parent helper, accept that you may not be put in a group with your child. An important part of an educational visit is allowing children to explore aspects of themselves that aren't seen in the classroom. Under a parent's watchful eye, they are less able to exercise their independence,



as the situation is more familiar to them. Don't volunteer to accompany a trip because you think it is an opportunity to have a day out with your child. You are there to support the school staff, and need to be prepared to follow their instructions.

### AFTER THE VISIT

Accept that your child may come home muddy and exhausted – it's a sign they have had fun and thrown themselves into the experience – even if it means more washing for you! Think about going back to the venue on a visit with them so that they can explain and show you what they learnt.

### SHOW AN INTEREST

At parents' evening, celebration assemblies, or even at the school gate, talk to staff about learning outside the classroom – these activities are as important as the rest of their work, and vital for their development.

Most importantly, understand that educational visits play a key part in your child's education, and support school staff to make these trips happen. If parents don't support visits



by giving permission, returning paperwork, and reflecting their child's enthusiasm for these experiences, it makes it much harder for schools to keep organising them. The PTA can play a major part here – not only through helping out with funding so visits remain affordable for all families – but also by raising awareness of the amazing benefits these opportunities for learning outside the classroom have to offer.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Victoria Wilcher** is communications and marketing manager at The



Council for Learning Outside the Classroom (CLOtC) – a national charity which offers training and support to those working in learning outside the classroom (LOtC) in order to achieve its vision that every child should experience the world beyond the classroom walls. The CLOtC website has lots of useful information on LOtC – including research into the benefits of getting out of the classroom. Find out more at [lotc.org.uk](http://lotc.org.uk)

CLOtC manages the LOtC Quality Badge, the national accreditation which recognises organisations with good quality educational provision and effective risk management. You can search the online database of accredited sites at [www.lotcqualitybadge.org.uk](http://www.lotcqualitybadge.org.uk)





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# It's not about THE MONEY...

Of course raising funds is important, says **Elsje Smart**, but a truly successful PTA has so much more to offer the whole community than cold, hard cash



**W**hen my older daughter started school I was in that blur of a time with two kids under five (although luckily mine were both great sleepers, so I wasn't as blurry as some). Releasing your children into the world of formal education for the first time can be a daunting prospect – suddenly you have no control over them for six hours in the day; and, even more worryingly for some of us, you are about to be forced to meet a whole bunch of strangers in the same situation.

Besides, what actually happens at school? Who really knows, apart from the staff and children? Joining the PTA to me felt like a way of being a small step closer to understanding what went on in the classrooms and how it all worked, as well as a chance to get to know the teachers a little better. With hindsight, being involved with school has also made my children more comfortable there, and happy to go, as I was willing to invest my own time in their education, albeit indirectly. For them to see that I wanted to be a part of the school, that I cared about it, that I felt it was important, could only have a positive impact on them.

## **A common cause**

So I joined a group of (mostly) women with the same main

goals in mind. Raising money, yes; but – more importantly to me – also making school life more fruitful, enjoyable and fun by being able to provide the children with things that ordinarily would not be covered within the budget: posh cameras, iPads, warm football kit for cold winter afternoons, 32 ukeleles, playground equipment, art supplies, fun summer fairs, etc. I wanted to become part of a group of people who had the same enthusiasm as I did to make the school an even better and more fun place for our children to be; to make it the best experience possible for all of them.

Meeting other parents in this context was great; there's nothing worse than being a 'billy no mates' in the playground. I quickly got to know so many like-minded people who were willing to be generous with their time and who cared about their children's education. I enjoyed the evenings we spent making things for stalls at various events, chatting over a glass of wine (or two...) while I tried to perfect my very non-crafty skills. Having one of my own monstrous decorations sold back to me by a canny child at a Christmas fair was a moment much appreciated by my more creatively gifted colleagues.

The majority of the friends I have at the school were made





through the PTA and some have become more than just the acquaintances I expected them to stay when I first joined. Most of us are short on time, juggling our support of the cause with the needs of our families as well as a range of part and full-time jobs; so we always make the most of the pockets of time we do have together, packing a lot of fun into those odd hours!

### Local heroes

Marazion School is on the South West coast of Cornwall, opposite the majestic St Michael's Mount. The head is a great believer in getting the community involved with school, and vice versa. PTA activities always attract non-parents as well as those whose children are involved – for

example, for the past two years our Christmas fair has been the biggest arts and crafts event in the town and very popular, bringing people in from outside Marazion itself to browse and buy. We always make sure that Santa is not played by a school staff member or parent, as another way of involving the people of the town. We have run a couple of pub quizzes, which have been great to bring the community together, as well as supporting the hostellers where we host the events, of course. Non-PTA parents who attend get a chance to get to know each other better; the money we make, for us, is almost a bonus really.

I have always been so grateful to local, often family-

run businesses, who are always more than happy to donate prizes for the Christmas and Summer fairs; the continual generosity of hard-working professionals willing to share their efforts and expertise with the children of the town always astounds me.

It really isn't about the money, then – or at least, not exclusively. In my experience, the PTA is about community, friendships and bringing together families who might not usually spend time with each other, and that's

what's made it so pleasurable for me to be involved. I've tried to hang up my hat a couple of times, I confess; but it keeps hopping back on.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Elsje Smart** is a member, and former secretary, of Friends of Marazion School in Cornwall



## COMMUNITY CHEST

**IF YOU ARE CONCERNED THAT YOUR PTA ISN'T DOING ALL IT COULD BEYOND ORGANISING EVENTS AND COUNTING THE PENNIES, WHY NOT PUT A FEW NON-FUNDRAISING IDEAS ON THE AGENDA FOR YOUR NEXT MEETING? FOR EXAMPLE, DOES YOUR ASSOCIATION...**

#### ...organise social events for new parents?

Every year another group of mums, dads, carers joins the school community as their little ones enter Reception; the PTA can be a great source of support for them as they find their feet, and a couple of relaxed, 'get to know each other' evenings can really help them feel welcome and involved.

#### ...provide school information?

Of course, most of what parents need to know is now stored on every school's official website – but sometimes it's useful to have a few 'old hands' pointing people in the right direction, and a convenient, regularly updated list of dates for diaries. Perhaps you could even put together a special 'Need to Know' pack for parents – a bit like the 'Freshers' Guides' given out to young people when they start university, full of inside tips and helpful hints?

#### ...say thank you to teachers?

We all know how hard they work – and we certainly expect them to be accountable to us as parents – but how often do we let them know they're truly appreciated? Occasional

PTA offerings of cakes for the staffroom, or even a termly 'thank you' breakfast, can do wonders for morale and help keep relationships positive.

#### ...support community projects?

Support is a two-way thing – so if there's an opportunity for the PTA to lend a hand with non-school-related initiatives, it's a really good way to maintain the spirit of goodwill and reciprocity high within the community.

#### ...meet online?

It's amazing how many ways a well-managed Facebook group, Google Hangout or other social media space can improve communication and engagement amongst parents. Not everyone can get along to a meeting, but ideas and feedback can be shared online at any time, and it's a brilliant way for people to get instant support.

#### ...help with publicity?

Positive promotion for schools is more important than ever these days, and a lively, active, friendly PTA can have a significant role to play in spreading the word about what a fantastic educational experience its children have.



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# Our HOUSE

**Cathy Longhurst** explains how the PTA at Mandeville Primary School helped create a very special place indeed for pupils

**F**ew people would argue with the statement that reading is at the core of everything we do in school today and at Mandeville Primary School, where I am headteacher, it is certainly something to be treasured. In September 2014, our school held its first ever reading festival and the core focus of the school development plan from that point onwards was to cultivate and develop a love of reading.

We wanted to start the school year with a real buzz, getting the children excited about reading and making that first week feel different and inspirational. As well as book corners in the classrooms, displays around the school and a high profile

given to our library, teachers had also pitched up reading tents and gazebos on the school field. In particular, one larger tent was provided for children who wanted to read at break time, with a very strict 'no entry without a book' policy. We included a box of books that changed each day for our Foundation and Key Stage One children, while Key Stage Two learners were encouraged to bring their own choice of reading material.

### ***"May we have our tent back?"***

At the end of the week, the tent came down as planned, but I was unprepared for the stream of children that knocked at my office door pleading for us to put it back up. Following this

the school council wrote me a heartfelt letter asking formally if we could please put the tent back. When I replied that the weather wasn't good enough to have a tent up all the time, they wrote again and suggested the idea of having a shed to use at break times instead. Inspired by their persistence and hunger for a place to read, I began some research and found someone who designs and builds bespoke wooden structures.

Of course, with any project of this scale, funding and support is vital; if we were to have relied solely on the school budget, this idea would have been completely out of reach. So I quickly met with the PTA to ask them to support our reading plans and part-fund the project. I explained that we wanted to



build a reading house that had the wow factor. It had to be somewhere the children would want to spend time, so I needed financial support to make it happen. I invited the PTA to join our discussions with the school council – and this was a pivotal moment, because when they saw the children's passion for reading, they offered to raise enough money for the whole project.

### ***The power of persistence***

Our PTA has evolved over a number of years and has become more and more important to the school, especially in creating the community we enjoy today. The committee changes its personnel every few years but every time it manages to get parents and the local community involved, including those who have never participated in projects before. Our community is widely diverse in culture, language and experience and it can be challenging to engage all groups in activities that appeal to them, but our PTA never gives up trying.



## FROM THE CHAIR



The PTA at Mandeville has a really good relationship with the headteacher and senior leaders in the school and we all work well as partners in providing experiences and resources that have a positive impact on children's learning. The PTA trusts that the leaders know what is needed for the school and for the children. That open and honest relationship makes communication easy and helps projects to run smoothly.

The reading house was a fantastic project to work on as it came directly from the children. We all felt a huge sense of achievement as the Mayor of St Albans came to cut the ribbon and open the house last summer. Fundraising is rewarding but takes a huge amount of effort from all concerned; this project has raised the bar in terms of aspiration for the parent body. It's as if we can achieve anything now..."

**Ginny Mettrick (outgoing chair of the PTA, Mandeville Primary School)**



*"It gives me a place and time to read my book and improve my English in peace." (Ria)*

We think it gives the children an additional sense of pride in their environment and in their school generally. They love the fact that no one else has one, and it's often admired by outside visitors. The house has also succeeded in raising the profile and a love of reading, which was the primary motivation. The children understand that reading is of highest importance at Mandeville; commissioning a very special place in which they can enjoy it is very clear proof of that.

Although this project was school led – in other words, we identified the need for the house, engaged the builder and included the children's input (which resulted in the house being on stilts!) – we discussed the progress regularly at the half-termly head and parents meetings, as well as in frequent meetings with the PTA committee. Once identified, the decision to fund the project was very quick; there was mutual trust and confidence between the committee and me that the project was well thought through, and of great benefit to the children.

### **Time, learning and legacy**

The funding part does take time, of course, and in this case meant two full years of fundraising involving a couple of Autumn fairs, a number of very loud discos, a bingo night, various quiz evenings for parents, a huge dog show and two very well attended 'camp nights' with over 20 tents pitched on the school field.

The build itself took two months, and we had it happen during term time so that the

children could watch the entire building process. The PTA also learnt a great deal from this project, not least that is so important to be led by the school itself in choosing what major projects to focus on rather than trying to come up with bright ideas in isolation. The reading house was an essential part of the school development plan and therefore worked to ensure that the vision of the school was met.

The importance of fundraising with an identified focus was also a useful lesson – it quickly became clear that because parents knew where their money was going, they were happier to contribute more, in terms of time, cash or both. The end result of the project was also very impressive, so it has left the PTA with a feeling of legacy.

### **A special space**

Having the reading house has changed the lives of our pupils. It was designed for children to read in at playtimes, however, we built it with windows, benches and a floor which is

comfortable to sit on so that teachers can take whole class lessons in there too, so it is often used for guided reading groups. The location was carefully considered – it overlooks the football pitch and provides a welcome shelter from which cold and wet parents can watch wintry matches.

Two children from year five have taken a lead in organising and promoting the reading house to our younger children. They gathered the following quotes from fellow pupils:

*"The reading house is an amazing resource to have, as it is available for lessons and at break time." (Olivia)*

*"It has been really helpful to have the reading house as it means that we can spend time reading before lessons." (Abi)*

*"It has really improved the school." (Alice)*

*"It is a great addition to the school and it makes us a bit different." (Natasha)*

*"It's a nice place to read." (Lucy)*

*"It's awesome because it's a quiet place where I can read my book." (Will)*



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Cathy Longhurst is headteacher at Mandeville Primary School, part of Spiral Partnership Trust (spiral.herts.sch.uk), which is a community of schools working together to provide exceptional quality education and make a positive difference to children's lives.**





# SECONDARY ISSUES

Life beyond primary school can seem mysterious and scary for parents and children alike – but a chance to talk can make the move easier, says **Madeleine Holt**

**F**our years ago I found myself chairing the PTA at my local primary school.

It was my first experience of building a sense of shared enterprise, with the aim of fundraising for a new playground. I discovered that I loved trying to inspire people towards a common goal, in particular one which would benefit the whole community.

But I soon realised that at my primary there was one area where there was far less of a consensus: where to send your children for secondary school. In fact, there was a general view that the local secondaries – all of them community comprehensives – weren't as good as grammar schools and private schools miles away.

Parents seemed to form their views by listening to gossip in the playground and trusting reputations that were often five or ten years out of date. I knew they were inaccurate because, as an ex-journalist, I had made it my business to talk to families at the comprehensives – and they were broadly very positive about their experience there.

## Questions and answers

It seemed to me there was an information gap – and so Meet the Parents was born. That autumn, with the consent of the head of my children's primary school, I brought into the school hall one evening a panel of parents whose offspring were at the local secondaries. Primary school parents could meet those from the comprehensives, and ask them whatever they wanted. The session was frank, intense and hugely helpful to

the audience, judging from the feedback forms they diligently filled in.

Next, Camden local authority approached me to ask if I could run the scheme in their primaries, with funding from the LEA. Camden were keen to reduce the number of families using their primaries but then defecting to schools outside the borough. I have done this now for two years, but still run an event at my local primary voluntarily. Parents in Islington, Haringey, Barnet, Oxford and Bristol have run with the Meet the Parents idea, and now hold their own voluntary events.

So has it made a difference? There's no doubt the scheme gets parents looking round schools they may not have previously considered. After our first Meet the Parents event, the number of parents looking round a secondary that had suffered from an unfair reputation rose from three to thirty.

We've now held events at my local primary for four years: that consistency pays off. Our school provided the single biggest number of families at the open week for the closest comprehensive: 63 people registered, with 30 from a school that's been hosting the scheme for only two years.

## Honest opinions

I also know from testimonials that Meet the Parents events can change people's secondary choices. What makes the most difference? Including students on the panels, not just parents. Seeing how confident, honest, ambitious and self-aware local state school students can be is the strongest weapon schools have in winning over anxious primary school parents. In fact,

**“The whole point of Meet the Parents is that you aim to fill the vacuum between the schmooze of school open days and the ill-informed negativity of the rumour mill.”**

**MADÉLINE HOLT | FOUNDER OF MEE THE PARENTS**

## DO IT YOURSELF

**ANYONE CAN SET UP A MEET THE PARENTS EVENT – ALL YOU NEED IS THE AMBITION TO ENCOURAGE PRIMARY PARENTS TO STAY LOCAL AND THE TIME TO ORGANISE AN EVENT; IT'S A PERFECT PTA PROJECT. HERE ARE THE KEY THINGS YOU NEED TO DO:**

- ▶ **Make sure your primary head is up for letting you use the school hall one evening early in the autumn term (the second and third weeks in September are the best time, just before secondary school open days).**
- ▶ **Start approaching families from the local secondaries in the second half of the summer term. Inviting families you know is the easiest way. If you don't know people, then approach the transition contact at the local secondaries, and ask them to get Heads of Year to recommend families.**
- ▶ **Try to get a broad range of families on your panel: this is often hard to do, but from experience the more the panel reflects the social and cultural mix of the secondary schools, the better. And only invite secondaries that feel they are genuinely part of the community – not several bus rides away.**
- ▶ **Limit your panel to no more than 12 people. Four people per school works well – say two parents and two students or one parent and three students.**
- ▶ **Ask your head to introduce the event. Sometimes they are willing to chair it – otherwise do it yourself if you have the confidence or find a willing parent.**
- ▶ **It's a good idea to host refreshments after the question and answer session: this gives parents the chance to buttonhole panellists for a more intimate chat.**

Meet the Students would now be a more accurate title for our scheme, because we now often have more young people on the panel than parents.

The single most important thing is that the panellists are frank about their school experience. Clearly, if they don't like their schools they are unlikely to take part. But, from experience, it just doesn't wash with primary school parents if the invited families spout PR.

The whole point of Meet the Parents is that you aim to fill the vacuum between the schmooze of school open days and the ill-informed negativity of the rumour mill. The most successful events give panellists the chance to say what they would like to improve about the school; after all, it's unlikely to be perfect.

One final point: I decided from the start that I would not invite selective schools as a point of principle. For me, selection breaks up communities – and it's community cohesion that is at the heart of Meet the Parents. Others may feel differently about

this, but I remain convinced that the very best education is in a community school supported by everyone in the area, whatever their walk of life.

In our increasingly atomised society, there is very little left now to bring people together. The local school – whether primary or secondary – performs a critical role. It needs all the support it can get.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Madeleine Holt set up the social enterprise Meet the Parents and, more recently, helped co-found the Rescue Our Schools campaign after a career as culture correspondent on BBC Newsnight. Find out more by visiting [meettheparents.info](http://meettheparents.info), or emailing [info@meettheparents.info](mailto:info@meettheparents.info)**



# The SOCIAL NETWORK

Is your PTA making the most of modern technology to keep connected? **Tes Macpherson** explains how to get it right

**E**ffective communication is vital for a thriving PTA – and these days, of course, there is a whole host of social media platforms and free apps that can help parents keep in touch with each other, and with school, using the technology that most of us already carry in our pockets every day. Here's a run-down of some of the most popular social media channels, with some top tips on how you could use them to keep everyone in your school community connected.

## FACEBOOK

Facebook helps PTAs communicate regularly with parents without relying on the office to send out frequent texts,

emails or letters. You can create a public page, so anyone who 'likes' it will receive updates to their newsfeed. Alternatively, you could start a 'group'; for added privacy, make it 'closed', which means that members must be approved before joining, and keeps the content restricted.

### Why choose it?

Facebook offers an ideal opportunity to engage parents in a two-way conversation. The 'like' button is a quick way for people to show their support.

### What to post

Share eye-catching PTA event images or posters, news of funds raised and how the money will be spent, perhaps with photographs of your 'wish

list' items. Get parents excited about what's coming up, and ask them to get involved.

### When to post

At the start of each term publish your events and meetings calendar so people can mark their diaries. Promote each event several times – busy parents will be glad of the reminders! Afterwards, share fun event photos (but not those including children unless you have express permission), and update the community on money raised.

### How often

If you have a full PTA calendar, posting once a week may be enough to keep people informed. However be aware that recent changes to Facebook's algorithms mean

preference is given to promoted (i.e. paid for) posts, so there's no guarantee that your announcements will be seen by all parents.

### What to avoid

Consistency is important. If you post nothing for months, people might well forget about you – but over-posting is a no-no too! Remember – parents mainly use social media to keep in touch with family and friends or to be entertained; try to fit with that remit.



## TOP TIP

Use Pixabay.com for cool free images, then free graphics tools like Canva or Pixlr to add your own text overlay.



## TWITTER

Twitter is perfect for drip-feeding small updates. Parents can follow your PTA account and see your 140-character tweets in their stream. A 'protected' account provides increased privacy but limits your interactions with non-followers.

### Why choose it?

The real strength of Twitter is that it broadens your network. It's not simply a channel to reach parents, but to connect and confer with other PTAs, and even local businesses who could help with your events, through sponsorship, for example. It's also useful for publicising your public events outside of school.

### What to post

Post event announcements and tweet links to specific web pages where parents can buy tickets or volunteer. Tweet real time info (e.g. raffle ticket numbers as they are drawn!) Use hashtags like #PTA or #summerfair to find and connect with other PTAs. Mention @ptasocial for a retweet, and join the termly live #PTAsocial Twitter party too, to share tips.

### When to post

Schedule tweets in advance if you want a baseline of timely messages to reach your audience, using free tools like Tweetdeck, Buffer, Hootsuite or SocialPilot. To interact with local businesses, find out if your town has a 'Twitter Hour', and join the conversation.

### How often

This depends on what you intend to achieve on Twitter, how much time you have to 'network' and what connections you want to make; but the more active you are on Twitter, the more productive it becomes.

### What to avoid

Twitter is littered with abandoned PTA

accounts. So plan your content, stick to your schedule and make sure there are clear instructions for your successor.

## TOP TIP

Have some fun by tweeting GIFs (moving images) to draw extra attention to your tweets. See Giphy, ReactionGifs, gifbin or even make your own!

## PINTEREST

Pinterest allows you to save images and webpages to visual 'boards'. You can follow different pinners for inspiration or search on topics of interest.

### Why choose it?

Overlooked by a lot of PTAs, Pinterest is actually a great source of fundraising inspiration and a handy place to save ideas for discussion on topics ranging from summer fundraising stall ideas and DIY make-and-sell projects to home-learning tips.

### What to post

As well as 're-pinning' good ideas to your boards, you can pin your own original content. Save images from your web searches, or upload photos you have taken yourself.

### When to post

Pinterest is all about building up collections of material to browse and explore, rather than sending out news and information, so it's good to get into the habit of sharing interesting ideas as you come across them – because you never know when they might come in handy.

### How often

Don't worry about this at all; post as much or as little as you like!

### What to avoid

As with all social media channels, be careful not to share photos

of children without express permission.

## TOP TIP

Crowdsource ideas and photos from parents using Flickr, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and email.

## AND FINALLY...

There are various free tools available to create email lists for sending PTA newsletters, thus taking pressure away from the school office – try Mailchimp, Send In Blue or Mailer Lite.

Although social media and email programs step up communication with parents, they are not specifically geared around task-management. However, if you are still using excel sheets and paper sign-

ups, you are missing a trick, as there are various online options you could explore. For example, PTAsocial is a free, private, mobile-friendly PTA membership site that provides events stall rotas with 'message walls' and email notifications, taking the stress out of the logistics and enabling lots of parents to sign up for, say, an hour each, with minimal fuss and maximum convenience.

For one-off events with a simple rota, Doodle or Sign-up Genius are a good bet.

## STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

### 1 INTRODUCE YOURSELF

Whatever social media channel you choose, make sure you publish a clear 'about us' section, stating your PTA's name, aims and contact details – and don't forget to put links to any social media presence on the school's main website.

### 2 GEAR IT AROUND EVENTS

Make a calendar of your PTA events and figure out how far ahead you'll need to communicate for each one. At the beginning of term, tell people what's coming up and then update them regularly on planning news and fundraising progress.

### 3 GET PEOPLE ONSIDE

Take a collaborative (rather than service-oriented) stance. Set expectations from the start that parents need to help in order for events to go ahead. Then make it easy for them to muck in! Spell out exactly what needs doing – ask for lots of helpers, each doing a little. It's less likely to scare people off.

### 4 LISTEN AND LEARN

Ask for constructive feedback, to open a positive dialogue (and discourage flippant casual remarks). Make use of polling features to gauge opinions, and always acknowledge comments.



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# 10 APPS to help them LEARN

Turn 'screen time' into an educational opportunity with these essential downloads that children – and their teachers – will love, says **Sway Grantham**

21st century teaching and learning", as journalists like to call what our kids are doing in the classroom these days, can look very different from when we were at school. However, one of the best things about modern education is the way that technology is unlocking so many more ways than ever for parents and teachers to work in partnership – not least by using the desirability of touchscreen devices to get children excited about maths, grammar, science and more.

With so many apps available that boast 'educational benefits', it can be hard to know which are genuinely worth the time it takes to download – let alone use – them, so I've put together a selection of examples that I know will engage children, are simple to understand, and will help pupils meet their learning goals, whilst being reasonably priced. All of the apps listed will work on iPads, many on iPhones and where possible I have listed Android apps as well. They are all available for free or a small cost.

1 **Fruit Ninja Academy** was born out of the popular game 'Fruit Ninja' where users tried to slice fruit across the screen as quickly as possible. This app utilises that fun game approach with scores, rewards, levels etc. whilst adding in elements of early maths. It allows younger children to practise a range of beginner maths skills gaining stickers and trophies as they go. With graphs to track progress, it's a great app to practise those basic skills and become fluent.

2 As children move beyond the need for regular practise of basic Maths skills, **Twelve a Dozen** is a lovely app where children are the character 'Twelve' who completes levels to try and save their town from the 'Ultimate Prime Number'. It uses the basic maths skills, but also introduces aspects of problem solving e.g. 'you must make a number that contains a 4' and you need to decide whether to add or subtract to make this possible. The app scaffolds this learning process well, allowing children to backtrack and offering hints if





## AND THERE'S MORE...

Finally, I thought it worth suggesting some 'homework' apps which might help inspire your child to complete their independent learning tasks in a creative and unique way. Many schools now allow children to take ownership over how they present their work and apps such as **Haiku Deck** (a beautiful alternative to powerpoint), **Adobe Voice** (combine photos and voice narration to make a video) and **Halfone 2** (digital comic strips) are great ways to make the most of this. Combining creativity and learning is a great way to get children progressing through the guise of sharing their knowledge.

also been really well thought out with 'parents' sections to the side allowing you to help and monitor your child's progress.

they are stuck – preventing the frustration of not progressing. This is a lovely app to share together as talking through the problems with your children can allow them to verbalise and organise their thoughts.

3 Capturing a child's imagination is a great way to encourage writing at home and the app **Scribble Press Deluxe** takes this a step further. This app allows children to write 'books', whether they wish them to be non-fiction or fiction, and add simple illustrations from existing clipart or self-drawn illustrations. They can even use the camera on the device to add photos of themselves or their pets to their stories. How about working together to create an epic adventure starring the whole family?

4 From making books, to reading them the **Amazon Kindle** app is not to be overlooked. Downloading a book and sharing it via a tablet can be a convenient way to read whilst you're out and about together, but there are also many other advantages to using an app to read. If you want to combine it with Amazon's Audible app, your child can switch between listening to the audiobook and reading along

independently. They can also use the built-in dictionaries to efficiently look up any unknown words and continue reading smoothly.

5 Whilst English and maths are primarily where our children's learning targets lie, discussing the wider curriculum can lead to many interesting conversations and inspire the curiosity we need to see in successful learners. **The Human Body** app by Tinybop does just that! It's an app that allows you to explore the human body and all its layers: from how the ear responds to sound, to what happens if you remove the skeleton? These bodily functions can be discovered together in a true sense of exploratory learning. Discovering things together is a great way to show your child that we're all learners and that learning exists beyond school.

6 What about learning a language together? Or getting your child to teach you what they've been learning at school using the app **Duolingo**? This app has the perfect balance of pictures, multiple choice, reading, writing and translating to help learners pick up the language. With points and badges for practising

for just 10 minutes each day, it's a great app to use as a family.

7 With all this technology around us, the need for those who can program is growing. This is a completely unknown area for most parents and again provides a chance for you to learn together. With younger learners, **Daisy Dinosaur** and **Scratch Jr** offer a chance to explore controlling a character with simple drag and drop commands. Can you make the characters dance? Or race?

8 As their confidence grows, **Hopscotch** and **Code Warriors** allow children to hone their skills to make more complex programs in a game-based, visual environment.

9 Combining the skills of science, computing and others such as logical thinking, the **Crazy Gears** app is great for parents to work with their younger children. The aim of the puzzles is to make a sequence of gears to pull a toggle using specific tools each time. Working through these with your child, or discussing them afterwards, can help promote skills such as predicting and reasoning, which helps them across the curriculum. These apps have

10 For older children, **Crazy Machines Golden Gears** and **Simple Machines** by Tinybop have similar ends with more complex puzzles. Also, check out the 'parents guides' which come with suggestions on what you can discuss to help your child understand the problems and real world uses.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Sway Grantham** is a primary school teacher, who blogs at [swaygrantham.co.uk](http://swaygrantham.co.uk). Follow her on Twitter: @SwayGrantham



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# 'TIS THE SEASON.

The Autumn term is full of opportunities for celebration and excitement – **Lucy Jones** has some suggestions to help your PTA make the most of them

**T**he days draw in, the leaves crackle and fall... and faces turn to the PTA to provide entertainment for the children, original gifts for the wider family – and of course, a healthy profit by the end of it all. December is an ideal time for a PTA to position itself as the go-to for all its members, placing the school right at the centre of its community, where

it should be; so, how do you intend to answer the call?

### **The captive audience**

If your school has a nativity or other performance, a PTA stall could sell cups of tea and coffee to the queue, in the interval or during the mingling afterwards. If you haven't already, consider investing in a hot water urn. Disposable cups, teabags and instant coffee store well and

can be dragged out at every opportunity. Could you 'sponsor' the programme or have a stall to sign people up to help?

### **The silver screen**

Film nights can raise easy funds with relatively few volunteers. Pay attention to your licensing, as you may be able to show movies for nothing under the school's umbrella if you charge for snacks only and not the

screening per se. Children are easily pleased with a film they've already seen, watched again with friends; parents are delighted to pay £3 or so for a couple of hours' childcare to cover Christmas shopping or extra work hours. Why not choose old favourites such as *The Grinch*, or new classics, like the ubiquitous *Frozen*? Cheap refreshments could be juice cartons, crisps from multipacks,

freshly popped popcorn (our favourite equipment), sweets, etc for minimal outlay.

### **The personal touch**

Selling personalised tea-towels, shopping bags or coasters can be extremely lucrative, as can Christmas cards. Preparation has to begin well in advance (typically October) but the volunteer time can be spread more comfortably. Last year we produced the classic 'every child's self-portrait' tea towel; we will probably do so again in three years' time. We cleared £450 profit (primary school, 215 pupils) and most of the preparatory work was done at home with a bottle of wine and a box of Maltesers (ahem, each) after the children were in bed. This year we will look at shopping bags with the school logo. Some companies will send out templates, sample packs and proofs for nothing, so you risk none of your funds before the cheques start rolling in. When comparing companies, look at the balance between unit cost and volunteer input required. It has to be said that each these are fairly volunteer-intensive, but they tend to attract people who are not usually available for other events, such as those with caring responsibilities, or lone parents. Any project which requires individual artwork from the children can be worked into a lesson if your class teachers and SLT are supportive. I find that a large box of chocolates left in the staff room works well as a thank-you! Pester power will be your friend – but do remember to be sensitive to a range of budgets and include options accessible to everyone.

### **The fun of the fayre**

The Christmas fayre is the highlight of the PTA calendar for many schools, and D-Day for countless PTA committees. This is where the balance between fun and fundraising is most important. If the children are keen to go to the fayre in the first place and want to stay there once they arrive, the adults will stay longer and



spend more. People tend to arrive at an event with money in their pockets they expect to leave without, and you want to make sure that you can bank and keep as much of that as possible. Consider carefully before inviting in external suppliers for stalls who will charge money, if the Smith family have brought a tenner, you want all of that cash to land in your treasurer's lap at the end of the night, not just £1 commission from the jewellery stall.

Give families easy opportunities to use up the odd fifty-pence piece on Hook A Duck on their way out. Try to avoid high expenses on materials where possible: do any parents have contacts with catering suppliers or stationers? Any crafty grandparents who could put together a Whack A Rat? What can you get for free? Our local bakery donates trays of gingerbreadmen for decorating, and all the rolls for the hot food stall; the butcher supplies burgers and sausages at cost price on a sale or return basis. Last year we had a second hand toy stall supplied by donations, and the children adored it.

It's in primary school that

children begin to understand the reciprocity of gift giving. You can provide opportunities for them to practise this skill by having a stall of small presents for parents, such as toiletries and small gadgets. A wrapping station nearby completes the mystery – you'll be enchanted by the children's faces as they emerge with a mascara wrapped in eight layers of sticky tape. Will The Fat Man in Red be visiting your extravaganza? A little ingenuity and a very patient volunteer can make magic for small children. Aldi's chocolate Santas at under a pound make a very suitable Santa present which doesn't require wrapping. You can charge extra for a posed photograph – perhaps supply props such as elf hats or reindeer antlers.

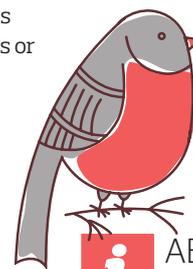
### **Giving back**

In the season of giving, maybe it's time to spend some of your money. It's hard for families to understand that their donations are funding a new climbing frame which might not be built until next year or the year after; it's far more satisfying – and therefore, motivating – for them to see

their return in more immediate terms. Inviting a small local company into school to perform a pantomime will give every child a cost-effective treat. This can be achieved at under £2 per head and is a memorable event for the children, not to mention downtime for them (and their teachers) in the hectic season. Or you might consider bulk-buying selection boxes or seasonal colouring books – in my experience this is covered by the revenue of half a disco, or one film night.

Whatever you choose to do, remember that it should always make you smile, whether through seeing the children's faces, looking at the balance sheet – or ideally, both. Don't

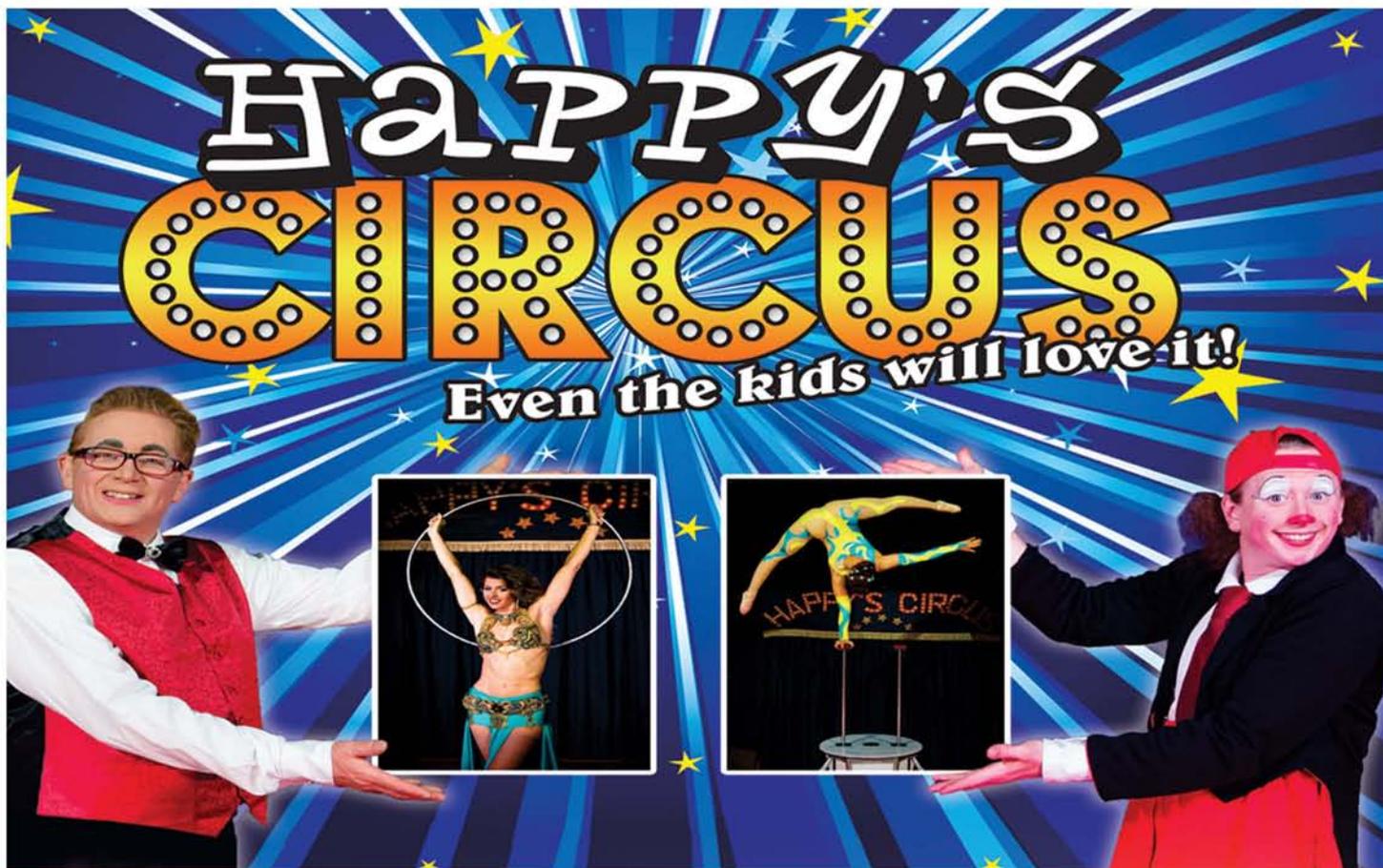
stretch yourself to breaking point... after all, it's the season of goodwill towards everyone, and that includes the PTA!



### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Lucy Jones is a volunteer at Sandiway School PTA, in Cheshire





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# The GREAT OUTDOORS

Creative, well planned outside spaces can transform the way children play and learn at school, says **Juno Hollyhock** (and they needn't cost a fortune, either)



It's not very often that we get an old fashioned 'snail mail' letter in the Learning through Landscapes office ([ltl.org.uk](http://ltl.org.uk)), so it's always nice when someone takes the time and effort to put pen to paper.

Recently, we received a missive from the vice chair of a PTA keen to address a recent Ofsted inspection in her small rural primary school where the issue of the lack of a quality outdoor play space was identified as being 'of utmost concern'.

The writer cited the importance of finding support when there is no budget to develop a 'suitable and improved learning environment for our children to explore and learn from'. The letter was clearly written by someone with a passion for the children in the school and the whiff of desperation lifted off the page.

I have so much admiration for people who take on monumental tasks like this. PTAs are a unique stronghold of volunteering power. They take the biggest challenges, throw their experience and effort behind them and, in some cases, achieve staggering results.

Playground improvement schemes delivered by PTAs can be criticised as 'vanity projects' – as if somehow people personally benefit from the reflected glory of days and weeks spent raising funds, months spent seeking planning and permissions, lengthy meetings where nails are chewed and tongues bitten and more than one internal spat that keeps folk awake at night.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

As my letter from the PTA member, who had clearly had a battering from Ofsted shows, these people are diligent, tenacious, hard working and seek only to improve outcomes for the children in their school.

## **Making the case**

Getting outside is so important for all children. I could repeat ad infinitum the benefits shown by numerous research projects into health and wellbeing, attainment, connection with nature, behaviour, motivation, concentration etc.

Whether taking a lesson outside to use the richness of the natural environment to demonstrate a point in science or maths or to provide inspiration for an art or literacy project or perhaps just joining in a rowdy game of tag or even lying on your back making faces out of the clouds, time together for teachers and pupils in the

## **HERE TO HELP**

Would you like to help your school use its grounds to better support learning, improve focus and concentration and improve health?

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Visit [ltl.org.uk/membership/supporter.php](http://ltl.org.uk/membership/supporter.php) to find out more and sign up!

outdoors is beneficial.

The outdoors – the natural environment – doesn't just provide a space for directed learning. It also provides a wealth of opportunity for self directed play; that important vehicle where children discover the adult world in a way that is safe and allows them to push their own boundaries. Nature is ripe with the potential for children to develop their imaginations and deepen their social skills as they play together collaboratively and constructively.

Moreover, much as I dislike the tendency to treat the outdoors as some kind of

'fit gym' that can somehow combat obesity in children, I have to admit that children who play outside do tend to be more physically active. They also have a tendency to avoid getting the repeated coughs and colds that circulate cheerfully in overheated and under ventilated classrooms during the winter months.

### **Shopping for success**

The key question for anyone, PTA or otherwise, looking to develop their outside space must be 'what do we want to achieve in our school grounds?' not 'what do we want in our school grounds?'

The first question allows you to think creatively and in a way that ensures that you will derive the most flexibility from your space, it will also prompt you to seek innovative solutions to problems.

The second question will leave you heading hot foot to the nearest glossy catalogue stuffed with eager pieces of playground equipment leaping off the page into your lap and snuggling up. How could you possibly not buy this cute and endearing little piece of climbing equipment? See its shiny primary coloured bars! Feel the quality of that plastic coating!

The only problem is – it's not

that much good for anything other than climbing on, and it's not awfully natural looking.

That's not to say your school shouldn't become the proud owner of some new piece of equipment – not at all. It's just that you should be really clear about what you want and go looking for it – not be pounced on by some upstart piece of kit that has ideas above its station.

Sort of like not going shopping past the doughnut aisle when you're hungry.

If you start from the premise of what you want to achieve in your outdoor space then your subsequent shopping becomes more relevant and will be better used.

Consider asking questions along the lines of the following:

- > *How do we want the outdoor space to enhance our teaching and learning?*

- > *How can we help our children to experience as wide a variety of types of space (think surfaces, open space, equipment etc) in the outdoors as possible?*

- > *How do we make non-directed, imaginative play rich with potential in our outdoor space?*

- > *How could we use the outdoor space to help improve team building, resilience and relationships?*

- > *How might our outdoor space improve physical activity?*

- > *How do we encourage quiet time and reflection outside?*

Then consider what might help you to achieve the outcomes you're looking for.

Modular play equipment, sandpits, water features, gym trails, loose natural materials and shelters can all play a role in achieving your aims, and many of the quality products on the market at the moment are versatile and fulfil more than one outcome if used creatively.

### **Bring them all in**

One of the many strengths of the PTA is the link it provides between school and all parents and carers. Set slightly aside from the formal statutory roles of Boards of Governors (or Local Academy Councils in the case of academies) a PTA has the





flexibility and skill to work with a wide range of parents and carers on fun and exciting projects.

Engaging parents and carers early in the process of re-designing your new school grounds can be the link to success or failure. For example, the school may love the newly acquired mud kitchen with controllable water-flow to the runnels and sandpit zone, but parents/carers who haven't been involved in the journey towards this great learning and play resource may be somewhat cross when their small charge comes home resembling a Thelwell cartoon character head to toe in gunk.

Early communication is essential, and parents and carers bring a whole wealth of experience and skill with them. For instance, they may be willing to volunteer with digging a new growing area or

supporting fundraising activities for a green gym or you may even have gifted craftspeople and construction folk in the parent cohort who can help save valuable expenditure when the time comes.

Engagement with parents/carers can include newsletters via paper or electronic means, the handing out of flyers at home time, displays and updates at parents evenings, invited meetings with refreshment, a barbecue in your school grounds or a set of social network pages. Showing examples of what the PTA wants to achieve is always helpful and can often stimulate offers of help and support. More importantly this type of communication can be used to explain why the school and the PTA feel this is important and therefore can help parents and carers to plan for their child's involvement.

## Money matters

There are many ways to fundraise to provide for the transformation of your school grounds. Here are some of the main principles to bear in mind:

Generally speaking, relying on income from events (such as cake sales etc) won't work for the bulk of your funding requirements; these should be in addition to other activities as they are time heavy and income light but provide a terrific opportunity to communicate and drive up enthusiasm.

Local businesses should be approached but only once there is clarity about what they might get out of that relationship – do their employees use the school? Is there a marketing opportunity? They are likely to have to align a financial contribution to a budget line so let's make it easy for them.

If funding bids are needed then it is important to ensure that the volunteer who raises their arm for this task has some

experience. Many funding bids these days are a little formulaic and experience can save you days of failure – when in doubt ask for support, for example from an organisation like LTL.

Make sure that you are all clear about what you're trying to achieve and stick to the key messages.

One great source of potential funding is the Tesco Bags of Help scheme administered by Groundwork – this has recently been extended to include school grounds and information can be access here: [groundwork.org.uk/Sites/tescocommunityscheme/Pages/about-tes](http://groundwork.org.uk/Sites/tescocommunityscheme/Pages/about-tes)



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Juno Hollyhock** is executive director at Learning Through Landscapes.



## IF YOU DON'T ASK...

**Not every school needs to raise significant amounts of money to change its outside space; there are many things that can be achieved through the application of some volunteer labour, donations of materials, and a bit of effort and thought. For example, it's always worth considering the following:**

- > Asking for seeds and plants near their sell-by date from local nurseries (I have been known to hang around on delivery day sniffing out the odd damaged fruit tree that they can't sell to the public!)
- > Requesting any damaged/unusable goods from the superstores that have ranges of outdoor and garden materials (do ensure that they're not damaged to the point of being unsafe).
- > Talking to your local authority about leftover materials and plants from highways and byways and parks divisions.
- > Keeping a watchful eye out for any local construction works

– a few spare donated scaffold planks make for excellent raised beds and they often have tools and other pieces of timber that can be useful, sometimes even topsoil which they might be willing to transport if they don't have to pay for its disposal (note: soil to be used for growing must be of a certain quality so do take care here).

- > Gathering any items that you think of that can be planted – pots and pans, linen and hessian bags, old wellington boots, wooden boxes, plastic boxes, bins etc.
- > Gathering any items that might serve as seats – again sturdy boxes but also logs and tree trunks.
- > Using loose and natural materials for fantastic play opportunities – old sheets, ropes and clothes pegs for a den building kit, pine cones, earth piles, leaves, conkers, driftwood and pebbles (please don't take large quantities of pebbles from municipal areas, though, as this is theft!)

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Rein in the chaotic playground environment, and create safe spaces that allow more children to enjoy being active with a smoooga...



## **What is a smoooga?**

Smoogas were 'born' around three years ago to allow and encourage more children to participate in a wider variety of active sports and games at school. A smoooga is a fully portable multi-use games area, made of recycled and recyclable plastic modular panels, meaning they are fully weatherproof and extremely robust and safe. There is no fixing, no tools required and they can be dismantled and moved for specific events (or just for a change). Being modular, the systems can also be added to and reduced in size appropriately, and they are available in Oxford blue or forest green.

## **Why would we need a Smoooga?**

"We now have two smooogas in our school, and there have been a number of differences as a result," says Alison Townsend of Emneth Primary. "Younger children now have space to play sports, and arguments and disagreements have stopped.

Previously, the space was also dominated by older children and after lunch teachers would spend the first 30 minutes trying to resolve issues that started on the playground."

## **Why is smoooga a valuable asset for our school?**

Whether it's about containment and changing the culture of play, or about improving sports delivery, a smoooga can help. If building an arena or using separating walls to create zones, smoooga offers 1m-high panels as standard, as well as 66cm water-filled barriers called 'zoners' to mark out your space.

"As you can imagine, the playground could be pretty chaotic at times with balls and children flying everywhere," says Jason Elwell of Marish Primary School. "The space was dominated by football, with accidents regularly reported by children and staff who were hit by balls. The domination of ball sports also restricted students from using the playground for

other purposes. Now, that's all changed."

## **Apart from breaktimes - when is a smoooga used?**

Use your smoooga as an outdoor classroom for drama, maths and PE. "The smoooga court was extremely beneficial to me in helping to deliver PE lessons," says Joel Graham, PE Teacher at Tower Hill School. "It keeps children contained in the same area, helping them

to focus and stopping balls rolling away. I would highly recommend smoooga to enhance school playgrounds, or just to experience a new way of enjoying sports."

## **How does smoooga help children to participate and feel more included?**

"The children love it," says Mrs Bagnall, headteacher of St Ebbes, Oxford. "It has created a new point of interest. They all gather round and watch each other which has been an unexpected outcome. It's lovely, especially to see the older, Year 6s watch the Years 2s playing football."

## **What do kids have to say?**

Arjun: "The really good thing about the smoooga arena is that instead of people running across, we can actually play without anyone distracting us."

Nayha: "It helps to play hockey, because before the ball might roll out and then it takes time to get it back, whereas with the smoooga it just bounces back on the floor. The game's a lot smoother and everyone gets more of a chance to play."



# *Your* **SHOUT**

Struggling to recruit new volunteers? It could be time for a PTA image makeover, suggests PR expert **Ruth Sparkes**



With funding drying up and difficult economic times here to stay, schools need extra income more than ever – especially primaries. Ever bigger expectations of what they should provide for children, along with ever smaller budgets, means there's less money available not just for such things as trips and treats but for essential teaching equipment, too, and even building repairs; clearly, the parent teacher association has never been more useful or needed.

And yet all too often it's the case that a school's PTA consists of the same few people undertaking the same tasks year in year out, creating a so-called 'clique' – a wall which, whether real or imagined, stops others from having a go at helping their child's school and, in doing so, enhance their education. So how, as an existing, active member, do you go about encouraging new volunteers to join in while dispelling the pernicious and tedious myth of the 'pushy yummy mummy' who is only interested in getting special treatment for her precious darling?

### Different views

Perhaps a good starting point for any PTA trying to bring in fresh blood is to take a long hard look at how the organisation is actually perceived by all those not currently involved – and of course, that is likely to be most of the parents. Is yours seen as a small group of willing (or unwilling) individuals treading water to keep the school afloat? If so, the time has probably come for a major overhaul, because that's not a tempting proposition for anyone.

Some of the most successful PTAs across the country have really upped their game in recent years becoming incredibly successful and running as small social enterprises. They have gone out of their way to be much more creative fundraisers – thinking

outside the box, moving beyond the school, linking up with business, and seeking out sponsorship.

That's not to say there's no longer a place for such fundraising staples as the traditional school fete – slapping teachers in the stocks and throwing sponges at them is still, unsurprisingly, very popular! But when you deliberately put a 21st century slant on what is sometimes viewed as a rather staid organisation you may be surprised how many more parents step forward to get involved.

To put it another way: it's all about marketing.

For instance, it may be stating the obvious – but you need to get the message across that helping at fundraising events has benefits for parents, too. It enables them to get to know the teachers better and develop more of an understanding about the way the school works, gaining fresh insight into all the problems, challenges and fun of everyday classroom life. This in turn means they are better equipped to support their children's learning at home.

### Something for everyone

A good PTA needs to blow its own trumpet in more ways than one, making sure parents grasp the full extent of how very useful it can be. For instance, it can help local families get to know each other, which is obviously important for school matters – but also great for a more active social life, especially for those at risk of becoming isolated, perhaps because they have only recently moved into the area, or are facing cultural, linguistic or other barriers.

Joining the PTA has another benefit too, one which may not be at the forefront of parents' minds initially but which can have a massive impact on the whole community over time – because the truth is, being a member of the PTA gives parents the chance to promote and enhance the school's standing within its local

## FIVE WAYS TO ENLIST FRESH FACES

1 Find out how your PTA is viewed by those not involved by sending out an anonymous survey via the school office. Keep the questions as open as possible; you may be surprised at the answers.

2 Consider putting what your PTA is doing on Facebook and Twitter, it will make it more user-friendly to many younger parents who might feel more inclined to get involved if they can access the information online.

3 Keep the positive publicity coming – never miss an opportunity to shout about the benefits of being active in the PTA; volunteer to speak at assemblies; produce regular newsletters; you could even run a 'recruitment poster' competition for pupils.

4 Make sure it's easy for parents to become involved, and that they realise they

can offer an hour here and there without risk of finding themselves stuck in the role of treasurer or chair for the next three years.

5 Encourage teachers and the head to speak to parents about the PTA, and remind them not only what it does for the school, but how active involvement can have a positive impact on their own children's learning.

6 Don't be afraid to use flattery – most people have a talent or skill that they are happy to showcase, whether it's making cakes, managing a spreadsheet, or unravelling the mysteries of a computer; and they are often more likely to respond positively to a personally tailored request for assistance than to a generic callout. Find out what the parents at your school have to offer, and work out ways that their various assets could be of use.

community and ultimately, with school inspection teams.

It may sound trite but parents should be aware that the future of the school can literally be in their hands. The more effort they put in, the more they will benefit as the school's reputation and status grow – and that can only be for the good of all concerned... even to the point of positively affecting house prices!

Here's another plus: although sometimes embarrassed by their very presence at events, most children do actually like to know parents are there for them, taking an interest and sharing their experience. Being part of the PTA, even in the most minor way, is a clear and visible demonstration of an important link between a child's home and school environments.

All these are PR messages that, if successfully delivered to the school community,

could completely change the way your PTA is perceived. The bottom line is, energetic, proactive promotion is vital if you are going to get more people involved; your task, ultimately, is to help less confident or engaged parents realise that there are serious benefits to be gained, not to mention a lot of fun to be had, through getting more involved. And after all, isn't that what being a parent is all about?



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ruth Sparkes is managing director at EMPRA, an award-winning PR and marketing agency specialising in the education sector ([empira.co.uk](http://empira.co.uk)).



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# SCHOOL'S OUT!

Panicking about summer holidays survival? **Rebecca Winward** suggests some ways to keep the long break enjoyable, productive and stress-free – for everyone

66

**S**ummer is coming. And with it, perhaps some nervousness at the prospect of losing the routine that term-time brings. It's not just the challenge of keeping your children busy while you work, do chores, or tackle other responsibilities, either. When your offspring are used to being occupied at least five days a week (not forgetting that extra-curricular sessions such as football training, music lessons and Brownies often don't run during the holidays), you may

think it's only a matter of time – and not much time, at that – before you hear the dreaded cry of "I'm bored..."

But while there are obvious challenges, there are plenty of opportunities, too. It's invaluable for kids to be able to recharge after the demands of the school year, so there's a significant benefit right there. However, just because school stops for the summer, it doesn't mean that learning has to – or should. "Because the summer holiday is long, when children return in September there is a

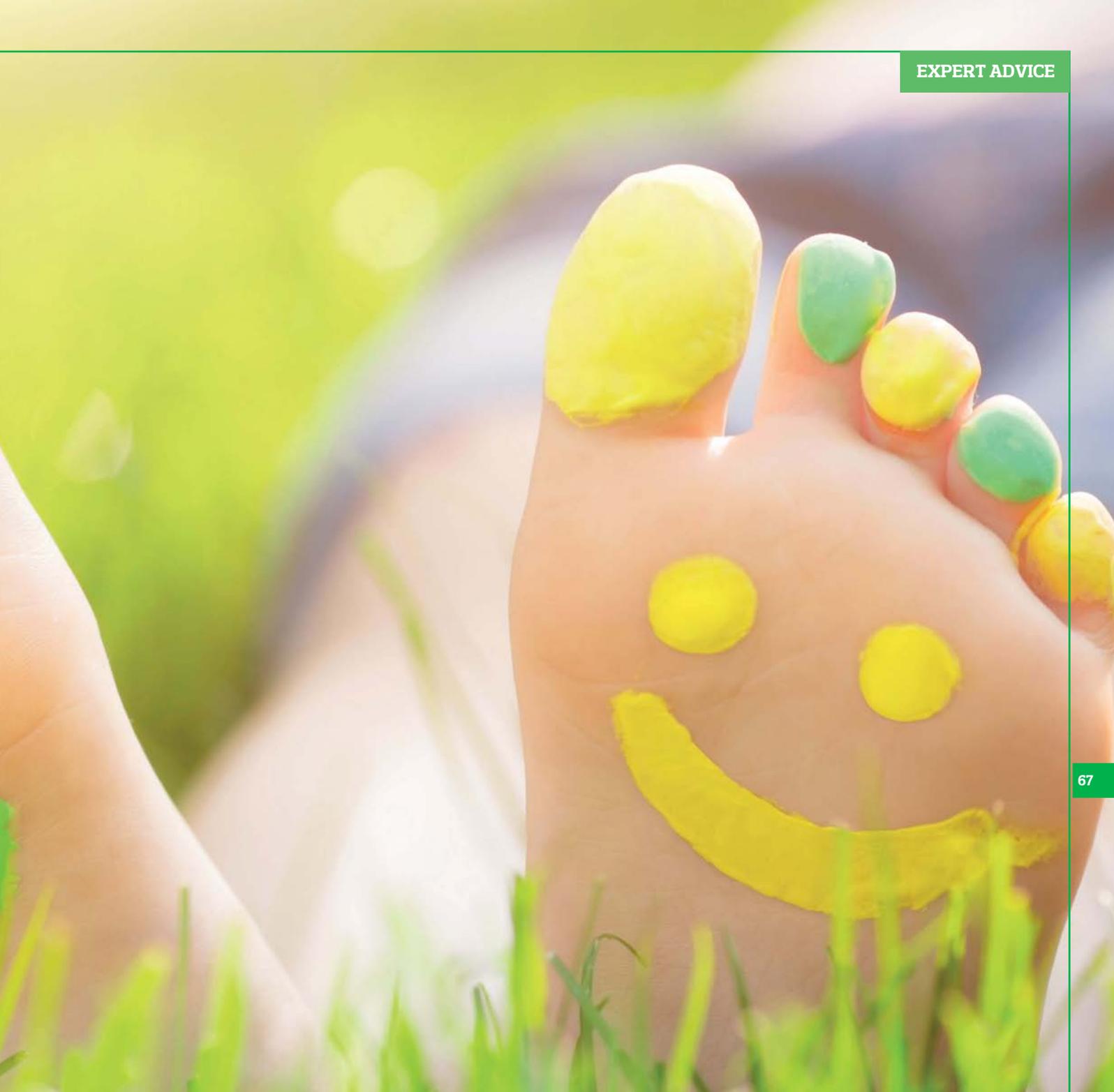
noticeable drop-off in their ability to learn," explains Chris Andrews, Year 6 Class Teacher at Brightlingsea Junior School. "While the break is important, it is also important that they don't completely switch off from using the learning skills they have begun to acquire at school."

### **Fun & games**

Of course, without the structure of the school day, there's more scope for fun and creative ways for children to learn about the world, develop social and

communication skills, and hone their artistic and physical talents (and they'll hardly notice that they're learning).

You don't necessarily have to formulate a specific schedule of activities and events to ensure kids have continuity in using their basic learning skills. "Read with your children," advises Emma Borthwick, Early Years Lead and Class Teacher at Suffield Park Infant School, Cromer. "Sharing books and words needs to be a continual activity, and it's so important for children's language



development. If money is tight, join a library and enjoy stories for free!" Writing skills can be similarly straightforward to maintain – a 'holiday journal' is a fun way for your child to record all the things they've done during the break, and you can set aside an hour at the end of each day for them to draw and write about their experiences (perhaps keeping them out of mischief while dinner is being cooked?) Maths can be kept up by helping with tasks such as comparing prices in the supermarket,

and when it comes to their ability to research, everyday challenges such as looking for a particular destination on the map or discovering how to use the washing machine can help ensure that enquiring minds don't stagnate.

### **Plan ahead**

However, to make the most of the coming break, a little preparation can be helpful – so why not spend an hour thinking about it now? Put in your diary any particular events you're attending (from fun days,

festivals and country shows to the family holiday), then fill in the gaps with visits, challenges and chill-out days (there are important skills to be learned though children occupying themselves, too, so do give them room to do so). Just one activity per day is fine, but it's also worth thinking about some Plan Bs, in case of cancellations, illness, bad weather, or just when there are a few fallow hours to fill. Make sure you get your child involved in making choices about their holiday activities,

not just because they'll be more engaged and excited about what's coming, but to practise their research and decision-making skills too.

Naturally, you need to play to your child's strengths – and also ensure they'll enjoy whatever you have planned (it sounds obvious, however sometimes in striving to offer our children the best start in life we can forget this crucial point). But why not see if you can pick a selection of activities that also cover off the broad areas of development?

## GET ACTIVE

Having fun outside – running, jumping and generally moving about – will not only boost fitness, but encourage physical skills and confidence:

> Build a den – if you don't have room in your garden, then some farm or country parks, forest schools, and several National Trust properties offer day sessions or dedicated areas for this activity.

> Join the world's largest treasure hunt and go geocaching ([www.geocaching.com](http://www.geocaching.com)).

> Set up an obstacle course in the garden. Skipping ropes, hula hoops, balls, Frisbees and space hoppers (and more) all make great components for a challenge that requires you to hop, jump, crawl, balance, and throw something at a target. Don't forget a stopwatch to record times!

> Go on a nature walk. Look for wild animal tracks, conduct a bug safari, see how many different tree species you can count, and record which birds you see and hear (it's a good idea to take a pocket guide with you).

## CREATIVE THINKING

Arts and crafts, music, dance and drama not only fire up young imaginations, but encourage unstructured play, aid concentration, promote

experimentation, and can be great confidence-boosters:

> Create some masks (check out [www.pinterest.com](http://www.pinterest.com) for a wealth of mask-making inspiration), then use them as a character starting-point for the kids to think up, rehearse, and perform a play.

> Put on some upbeat music and ask your children to dance in the style of various animals. How might a lion strut their stuff?

What sort of moves would an antelope have? Older kids might prefer to copy dance styles from Youtube videos, before coming up with their own choreography.

> Encourage your child to take photographs while exploring a new place, then print out a few favourites. Make picture frames from card (or use one of the kits available from retailers like [www.bakerross.co.uk](http://www.bakerross.co.uk)), and hold an exhibition – which shot will win a prize?

> Make a water xylophone, tissue box guitar, some rain shakers and balloon bongos (all easily and cheaply put together following instructions found online), before having a jam session with your homemade musical instruments.

## IN THE KNOW

Finding out about the world can be exciting – it's just a case of making it interesting and relevant, so kids 'want' to learn:

> Wherever you live there's bound to be a museum locally, offering opportunities to learn about all sorts of topics from domestic life to industry, science to art – and there's often specific activities to help engage young minds. All national museums now offer free admission, as do many run by local authorities.

> Visit a farm park, to encourage an understanding of where our food comes from.

> Ask them to plan a fantasy holiday. Where would your child like to go and why? How would they get there? What sights would they like to see? What activities would they do? What would they need to pack? Can they stick to a holiday budget?

> Have a family quiz – you could even give older children a topic each, and ask them to come up with a few questions they think might fox the adults.

## LET'S BE FRIENDS

Social skills are key to success

in working relationships and everyday interactions, as well as within families and friendships, so every opportunity should be taken to encourage them:

> Play board games – learning how to win and lose graciously is important. Games that involve communication, such as charades or Junior Scrabble, will also specifically help to encourage social interaction.

> Work as a team to pitch a tent, construct a living room fort, or create a giant picture.

> Make a family tree, and encourage your kids to talk to relatives about their experiences of childhood – they could even make a scrapbook and fill it with lots of pictures and memories.

> Day out at the beach with friends and family? Have a sandcastle building contest, with the kids split into two teams. Who can work together to come up with the most impressive sand architecture?

## SAFETY FIRST

Choose a provider that is monitored by Ofsted ([www.ofsted.gov.uk](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk)), accredited by the British Activity Providers Association ([www.thebapa.org.uk](http://www.thebapa.org.uk)), or licensed by the Adventure Activity Licensing Authority (<http://www.hse.gov.uk/aala>). It's also wise to check out information on staff training, CRB checks, insurance, and first aid qualifications, as well as children-to-staff ratios (which should be about 10:1 for children aged 8 to 14, and 8:1 for younger school-age children).



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca Winward is a freelance journalist, whose PTA adventures will begin in 2017 when her own daughter starts school.



## HAPPY CAMPERS

Although a trip to 'summer camp' is generally considered to be an American ritual, there are similar opportunities now available on this side of the pond, as well as a variety of residential (and day) summer schools, activity holidays, and kids' clubs run by schools, sports centres and churches. All of these can be extremely useful for families who need to consider childcare during the holidays, of course – but, budget permitting, offer brilliant experiences for all children (not to mention a potential break for parents!)

Here's our pick of some of the interesting options available:

### For first-timers

If your child hasn't been away without a family member before, then it's a good idea to start them off with a smaller residential camp that boasts a home-from-home atmosphere. Mill on the Brue in Somerset caters for a maximum of 70 children (aged 8 to 15) per week, with each attendee becoming part of a smaller group of 12 similarly-aged children, led by the same two instructors throughout. Find out more at [www.millonthebrue.co.uk](http://www.millonthebrue.co.uk) or call 01749 812307



### For digital whizzes

Kids with a penchant for tech will jump at the chance to design and create their own apps, games and robots at Fire Tech Camp. Options range from day courses to week-long residential camps, suitable for ages 9+, and locations include London, Bristol, Cambridge, Reading, Manchester, High Wycombe and Sedbergh. Call 020 7193 4002 or visit [www.firetechcamp.com](http://www.firetechcamp.com)



### For creative types

Based in South East London, Nimble Arts specialises in creative day clubs for 4 to 11-year-olds. Throughout August kids can widen their experience in music, drama, film making, arts and crafts, and storytelling, learning new skills while having lots of fun – each day has a different theme, so there's always something fresh and exciting to do and make. Find out more at [www.nimblearts.co.uk/holiday-courses](http://www.nimblearts.co.uk/holiday-courses) or call 07714 745 040



### For football-mad kids

Whether your offspring might have a promising future in the sport, or just love it with a passion, SCL's soccer school gives 4 to 12-year-olds a great chance to have fun and improve their football skills. Day and week-long non-residential courses are led by FA-qualified coaches, at locations across Berkshire, Hampshire, London and Surrey. For details call 0845 644 5747 or click on [www.wearescl.co.uk/soccer-schools](http://www.wearescl.co.uk/soccer-schools)



### For maximum variety

With more than 80 venues around England, Super Camps runs three different types of day camp programme – mixed activity, outdoors, and specific interest (cooking,

arts and crafts, and science). Some locations offer all three of these, so are particularly good choices for families where the children have very different preferences. Visit [www.supercamps.co.uk](http://www.supercamps.co.uk) or call 01235 467300 to find out more

### For music buffs

From classical to rock, Uppingham Summer School offers residential weeks and weekends ideal for those with musical talent – as well as running courses in drama, creative arts, sport, history, technology and science, catering for a wide range of other interests and aptitudes. Find out more by calling 01572 820800 or by logging on to [www.uppinghamsummerschool.co.uk](http://www.uppinghamsummerschool.co.uk)



### For a US-style camp experience

Camp Cooper in Crieff provides the classic American-type summer programme for children aged 7 to 17, with 'electives' providing kids with the opportunity to personalise their schedule. They'll also take part in group sessions with their cabin-mates, and all-camp activities such as camp fires, talent shows and Hawaiian luaus. Call 03333 440077 or visit [www.internationalsummercampuk.com](http://www.internationalsummercampuk.com) for more information.



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# OUT of the BOX

**Claire Wall** shares her top tips for packed lunches with a nutritional punch that will tempt the fussiest eater – without taking over your morning routine

**T**he breakfast-time realisation that your other half ate the last of the chicken from the fridge, leaving you with nothing to put in today's sandwiches; whining in the supermarket as you try to get the kids past the latest special offer on lunchbox-sized mini chocolate bars; the daily joy of fishing the squished banana out the bottom of their school bag... all in all, packed lunches can be one of the biggest frustrations of the school week for parents. But the good news is there are ways to make the whole process much, much easier (and provide a healthier meal at the same time).

Let's kick off with the basics. Most schools let you send your child to school with a lunchbox if you want to do so. Many families are making the switch to healthy school meals – especially since the start of free meals for all infants – but packed lunches are still really popular.

Different schools have their own arrangements, so check with yours to see how things work. Some establishments allow everyone to eat together, whether they have a school meal or a packed lunch; others ask pupils with packed lunches to sit in a specific part of the dining room; or children with lunchboxes may have to eat in the classroom. If your child's friends all have school meals, you may find your youngster wants to join them.

Your school may have a packed lunch policy, which sets out the sorts of foods that children are encouraged to have in their lunchboxes, and



foodstuffs that are not allowed. These policies often ban foods like sweets, chocolate bars, crisps and sugary drinks, whilst encouraging children to have at least one portion of fruit or veg, and to drink water. Please support your school's policy if there is one. It's there to help improve children's diets and give them a consistent message, because the school canteen

shouldn't be selling sweets or salty snacks like crisps, either; it may also be in place to protect children with serious allergies.

### **The good stuff**

There's no getting around it: it does take a bit of time and effort to make good packed lunches. That's because we've got to mix up the menu: variety is the secret to a healthy diet,

whatever your age – we've all got to pack in lots of different foods. So if your child's lunchbox relies on the same sandwich, yoghurt and fruit combo every day, it won't be working as hard as it could for your little one's nutrition – even if, on the face of it, it sounds healthy.

So what does a good lunchbox include? Start with a portion of starchy food. That



## TEMPTING FUSSY EATERS

You might be giving your child a packed lunch because they're too fussy to handle school meals – so here are some lunchbox ideas developed to encourage even the most hesitant of eaters to experiment:

> Chop fruit into ready-to-eat chunks: often, kids are put off by having to peel their own.

> Get them to be the sandwich makers: give them the component parts to put together themselves when they sit down for lunch: a little pot of grated cheese, some sliced cherry tomatoes and a wrap.

> Involve them in planning what goes in: give them a few choices so they can decide what the menu will be.



> Dip in: kids love to dunk, and a home-made dip can be a

great way to smuggle in a bit of hidden goodness. Try some breadsticks with our salmon version, the recipe for which can be found at [ow.ly/u4XK300mQo4](http://ow.ly/u4XK300mQo4) along with hundreds of other delicious and healthy meal ideas.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Claire Wall** is a senior nutritionist at the Children's Food Trust.



could be white or wholegrain bread, rolls, pitta bread or wraps, plain naan bread, bagels, cooked pasta, rice, noodles, couscous or potato as a salad.

Add at least one portion of fruit, and one of veg – fresh, frozen, canned or dried. You could get the veg content by chopping up carrot, cucumber, pepper or celery sticks; grating carrot into sandwiches or wraps; or adding sweetcorn, peas or pulses in salad. Bulk up the fruit content with sliced apple or melon, plums, grapes, strawberries, kiwi, satsumas, chunks of pineapple, or some dried fruit.

Next, add a portion of protein. You could go for sliced meat, chicken, fish, or sliced egg in sandwiches, rolls or wraps, meat alternatives like tofu, or pulses like kidney beans and chickpeas in salads.

Throw in a portion of milk or dairy food – yoghurt or fromage frais, cheese in sandwiches or wraps, or milk as a drink.

Speaking of drinks, water or plain milk are the best choices – avoid squash, fizzy drinks and flavoured water even if they're

labelled 'sugar-free', 'no added sugar' or 'reduced sugar'. These drinks are more damaging to children's teeth and don't have much nutritional value.

Avoid sweets, chocolate and crisps in a packed lunch. If you want to include something sweet, make cakes and biscuits with fruit, or choose fruit scones, malt loaf or fruit bread, which tend to be lower in sugar. If you'd normally send crisps, switch to plain breadsticks or rice cakes instead to keep the salt down.

Pick different foods from these lists to help you mix it up through the week. So, your typical menu might look like this:

**MONDAY:** Tuna and sweetcorn pasta salad with red pepper sticks; apple slices and plain yoghurt; water to drink.

**TUESDAY:** Chicken and potato with salad; ginger biscuits with satsumas; milk to drink.

**WEDNESDAY:** Cheese salad wrap; banana and raisins; water to drink.

**THURSDAY:** Egg salad sandwich; seasonal fruit salad with fromage frais; milk to drink.

**FRIDAY:** Chickpea vegetable couscous salad; blueberry muffin; milk to drink.

The other thing to think about is where your child's lunchbox will be kept in school. There's nothing worse than a sandwich that's curling up at the edges in the heat, so here's how to keep lunchbox food at the temperature it tastes best:

> Use an insulated bag with an icepack from the freezer to pack your child's lunch in on really hot days, or choose a lunchbox with a built-in freezer block.

> Freeze sandwiches once you've made them. Take them out of the freezer in the morning and they'll defrost ready for lunchtime.

> Freeze yoghurt in a secure container. Again, take it out in the morning and it should stay cool until lunchtime while it defrosts.

> Pack salad ingredients separately rather than within sandwiches – bread goes even soggy in the heat.

> Ask your school to provide lunchbox storage out of the sun.



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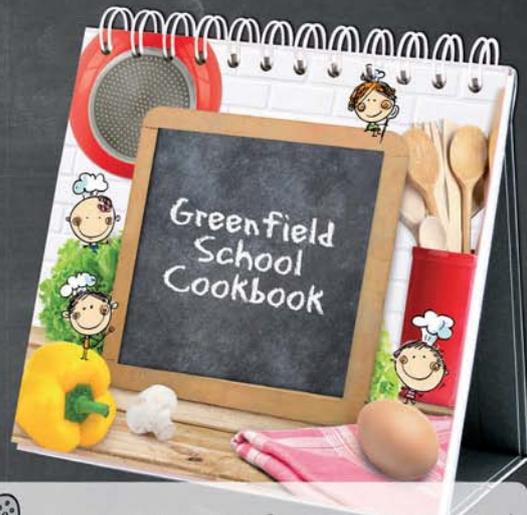
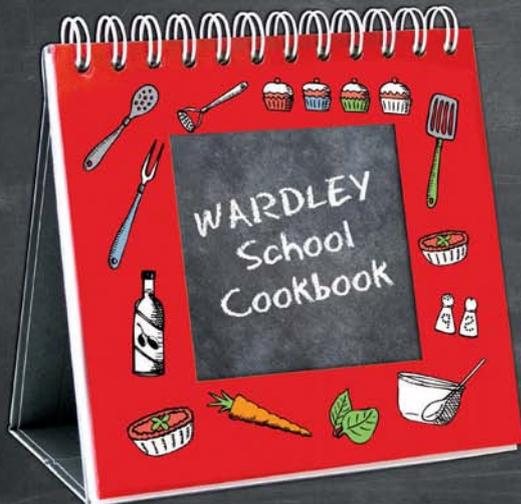
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# The shows MUST GO ON

Is a theatre trip for pupils really something the PTA should consider supporting? Absolutely, insists **Jeremy Newton** – and here's why...

**N**o one disputes the fact that all primary school age children, whatever their circumstances, should have access to a broad range of arts activities. Early engagement with the arts can raise aspirations, increase confidence, improve communication and language skills, and develop critical thinking and analysis, as well as unlocking creativity.

But among all the arts activities to choose from how useful, really, is a trip to the theatre? If your school has limited financial resources and scarce time available to do additional activities outside the curriculum (and let's not forget, that there are many parents, as well as the teachers, who give their time for school trips) why not spend it doing an activity in class – perhaps watching a show on DVD? No coaches to book, no health and safety forms to fill out, no volunteer notes and briefings... surely that's got to be better for everyone?

Well, no. Theatre trips provide an important part of a child's learning.

Experiencing a live performance can have an inspirational effect on children. I choose the word experiencing rather than seeing because it's not just watching a performance that is special but the whole thrilling experience from travelling to the theatre, sitting in the middle of the auditorium for the first time, watching the lights go down, hearing the music begin – even the

snack in the interval! For some children it's a new experience entirely and one they would not otherwise experience, because of financial pressures at home or simply a lack of interest, even though the theatre might be on their doorstep.

Carefully planned, the trip can add value by broadening and enriching the curriculum and offering new classroom resources. A theatre visit on the calendar can offer teachers a fresh set of ideas for new class activities exploring beforehand the storyline, themes and background to the performance they will see. During the visit children can develop their skills in critically appraising and appreciating arts and cultural activities. And back in the classroom teachers can encourage children to feed back on the creative work they experienced, what was new or different about the theatre and use the trip to explore the characters and their personalities.

## **Inspiration and familiarity**

Whilst stimulating the very active minds of most primary school pupils, theatre also has the capability of reaching and inspiring less able learners, thereby engaging all the children. What I have been privileged to see firsthand is how theatre makes the learning process fun, inspiring and memorable for pupil and teacher alike.

There is also a valid point to be made about increasing children's familiarity with,

and awareness of, local arts and cultural venues. They get to know more about what happens in their local theatre, are comfortable in those spaces and feel a sense of belonging. Hopefully they will return, and make more use of the performances and activities happening there in the same way they go back to their local library, park and leisure centre.

But it's maintaining a relationship with the theatre that will bring even greater results for the children and the school; long-term engagement leads to the greatest impact.

Children & the Arts has built up a sizeable evidence base in support of the value of well-structured links between schools and cultural venues in their locality showing an increase in academic attainment, improved communication skills, and new personal skills for the children participating. The external research carried out by Arts Council England shows that children from low income families who take part in arts activities at school are three times more likely to get a degree than those who do not. The same research also demonstrates that employability is higher for pupils who study arts subjects at school and that these students are more likely to stay in stable employment after leaving full time education.

## **Getting with the programme**

In 2006, Children & the Arts set up the Start programme

to enable arts venues and schools to work together to offer disadvantaged children and young people opportunities to engage in creative activities that inspire them and enhance their experience of the arts. In these ten years we have worked with nearly 390,000 children. Our three year Start projects ensure children visit their local arts venue at least twice each year, to see high quality arts performances and exhibitions. We also give children the chance to go behind the scenes to meet artists, directors, actors, choreographers, technicians and dancers.

Alongside these visits, Start provides an opportunity for pupils to take part in creative workshops, developing their own performances, dance pieces or artworks. One example has been our work with local schools in Woolwich, SE London and Greenwich and Lewisham Young People's Theatre.

Each year Start at Greenwich & Lewisham Young People's Theatre has enabled young people aged 7 to 12 years to see two pieces of theatre: one produced by GLYPT and a touring production. Theatre visits are supported by pre- and post-show workshops in schools where practitioners from the theatre encourage pupils to explore the themes represented in the productions to open up the world of the play further and inspire creative responses. Teachers are involved in the planning of activities and the choice of the second production



their students see as well as receiving CPD to support their own practice. The theatre is keen to introduce the young people involved to a wide range of artistic experiences and the creative responses offered have so far included clay model-making, creative writing, puppetry, street dance, physical theatre and screen printing.

The theatre has seen young people involved in the Start programme begin to visit the theatre independent of school, with their families and friends. Children have developed a familiarity with the venue and the people working there, often remembering names and eagerly greeting workshop leaders they encounter on separate visits. Teachers often comment in feedback sessions that the least confident children thrive on the experience of working with the theatre, enthusiastically commenting on the experience after a visit to the theatre or taking part in a workshop and join in with class discussions that they otherwise might not have.

Funding a theatre trip can be the start of a wonderful new relationship. There is no shortage of venues in the UK and they are always very keen to have children visiting; they like the 'buzz' of young people in the audience – and they know that they are their future customers. The great majority of them therefore offer subsidised tickets, education workshops and projects with schools. They also often hold family days and regular children's activities. These are opportunities worth exploring. Quite simply, early appreciation and enjoyment of the theatre, and other art forms, can fundamentally change children's lives for the better.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**Jeremy Newton** is chief executive of Children & the Arts. The charity was founded by HRH The Prince of Wales with the fundamental belief that every child has the right to be inspired by the arts – its UK wide arts engagement programmes work with deprived children from areas of social and economic disadvantage and builds partnerships between their schools and local professional cultural venues. Through the work of Children & the Arts, children learn that cultural venues are welcoming, accessible places to visit; since 2006 the charity has introduced nearly 390,000 children to life-changing arts experiences. [childrenandarts.org.uk](http://childrenandarts.org.uk), follow @childrenandarts.

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To watch videos and read stories about children with genetic disorders, visit [jeansforgenes.org/educationalresources](http://jeansforgenes.org/educationalresources). Here you will also find ready-made assemblies and classroom resources.



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### Why do you call them Relax 'n Learn Teaching Tales?

Because calming introductory words draw in and relax the reader, allowing the imagination to guide him/her on a safe, guided journey into a magical, riverside land

called Blockley Bank. A calm, relaxed mind is an absorbent, learning mind. Eric the Oracle's 'first aid toolkit' of explanation and wisdom helps the books' beautifully illustrated characters learn how to handle bullying, an approach by a stranger, deal with loss, separation and change, challenge negative thinking and create self-acceptance. The relaxed child, observing at a safe distance, is highly likely to be able to understand, learn and model the skills offered.

### Why is this collection of teaching tales so important, and different from other books?

There are plenty of instruction books with lists of dos and don'ts on managing difficult situations and unhappiness. But, as teachers know, there's a huge difference between learning and understanding. The key difference with these books is the safe distance from the 'meat' of the humorous tale, with careful explanation that supports involvement and understanding. I hope the imaginative way of gently highlighting

problems and teaching ways to tackle some common scenarios facing children and young people today helps teachers support children.

### Exactly what does Eric the Oracle offer?

Practical, realistic tips on how to make healthy decisions, and build resilience, confidence and self-esteem, all of which underpin happiness and good citizenship. Eric provides thoroughly researched interventions, life-coaching skills and emotional support. All these are based on the principles of care, understanding, acceptance, mindfulness, forgiveness, responsibility and mutual respect. Eric is all about promoting positive mental health and emotional wellbeing.



## LITERACY

**CONTACT:** BADGER LEARNING **VISIT:** BADGERLEARNING.CO.UK **CALL:** 01553 816 083

For the perfect guide to guided reading, look no further than Badger Learning



### What makes a good book a good choice for guided reading?

Ultimately it is whether or not a book will be enjoyed by the intended readers. 'Scheme' books for guided reading certainly have their place but we feel that a mix of scheme books and exemplary 'real' books sets children on a journey to become readers for life. Does it have a good storyline with a satisfying ending? Will it keep the reader interested with its pace, good characterisation and plot? Does the book have a text/emotional level that is appropriate?

### What parts of the curriculum are foremost in your mind when putting together a guided reading pack?

In the main we focus on literacy, and in particular children's reading development. In the past we have offered guided reading collections that are thematic and cross-curricular, but our customers tell us what they like and their

biggest reason for working with Badger Learning and using our expertly written guided reading selections or teacher books is that the books are 'real'. These are books that they are encouraging children to enjoy, and reading for pleasure is a big thing.

### What book choices have proved most popular with children and schools, and why?

It seems that guided reading is most popular in Year 3 and 4 as this is usually our best-selling age range. And certainly Roald Dahl is always popular, as are Dick King-Smith and Michael Morpurgo. Hopefully, though these children are enjoying an introduction to Gill Lewis, Julia Green, Neil Gaiman, Andrew Norriss, Frank Cottrell Boyce, Nicola Davies and more.



### What sort of advice does your guided reading pack give to teachers to help them get the best out of their guided reading sessions?

Our teacher books provide ideas for developing children's comprehension of a text and allow you to assess and monitor their progress. Every teacher book has a unit that gives you a chapter-by-chapter synopsis, notes and guidance for a teacher-led session, and much more. There's a useful

tick list matching pupil progression against curriculum objectives, included in each unit. In addition there's a chart to help you focus on specific areas of the curriculum covered by each book. For teachers looking to create bespoke selections for their school, every unit is available as an editable download.

# We need TO TALK...

Fed up with parents' evenings that tell you nothing and take you nowhere? Professor **Sonia Blandford** explains an approach that could turn things around

**D**id you know, parents' role in supporting their child's learning in the home is the single most important changeable factor in achievement for all ages? In other words, parents and carers can make a significant difference to the educational achievements of their children simply by joining with teachers in a much more strategic way – and Achievement for All is an education charity which supports families and

teachers across the country to enable them to do this. In fact, the relationship between parent/carer and teacher is so important, that the cornerstone of the Achievement for All programme is our 'Structured Conversations' model.

'Structured Conversations' transforms the more traditional form of parents' evening. Rather than a five or ten minute chat, the Structured Conversation is a much more strategic approach to engaging parents and teachers. After all, nobody knows a child better

than their parents or carers, yet as parents, we often end up feeling ignored, which can result in frustration, and barriers going up. Achievement for All seeks to address this balance and encourages schools to involve parents and carers in their child's development and learning in a much more constructive way.

To have a lasting impact, parents' meetings and events need to involve parents and children who are fully engaged in their child's learning – yet how can they

be, without understanding the learning journey their child is undertaking? Traditional parents' evenings simply don't enable this to happen. More often than not, they are focused on giving parents information on the past performance of their child in school and do not offer the opportunity to engage parents and teachers in developmental conversations.

The Structured Conversation can change this. Sessions take place every term, and last between 30-60 minutes; teachers are trained and



supported with a new collaborative approach to explore, focus, plan and review. This enables teachers, parents and carers to celebrate success, share any concerns and agree aspirations for the child. Together, goals are set for learning and improvement and a joint decision is made on how to achieve these targets – both at home and in school. The result is that parents are listened to and are given a voice – enabling them to express their aspirations and expectations, as well as contributing to the planning and target-setting of their children.

### Digging deeper

"Structured Conversations were the most important thing for us," says Justine Roberts, headteacher at Normanton on Soar Primary. "That's the thing that really worked. It has changed our mindset and the way in which we engage with our parents. It's about listening rather than talking, taking into account people's views and feelings rather than telling them what they already know

about their child. Structured Conversations have helped us discover things about our children that we wouldn't know though the ordinary parents' evening approach. It has helped to structure precision teaching and learning around a child. It was a real shift away from having those formal parents' evenings. It was about having a dialogue on parents' aspirations for their child, rather than us trying to fit them into a box."

This approach unlocked the potential of one child in particular who was diagnosed with ASD and falling far behind in his learning. "We tried to get him to attend an after-school club but he was very reluctant," explains Justine. "We explored this with dad during one of the Structured Conversations. It turned out that his son was a very keen gardener. So we set up gardening club. We transformed the top of the school field into the garden with some funding from E-on. The child was very much a key part of this and he played a pivotal role in establishing the garden. He was an inspiration for other

## WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

According to the charity Achievement for All, introducing the Structured Conversations model means that...

### PARENTS WILL:

- > Feel more confident to engage with their child's school
- > Be given opportunities to contribute to their child's learning, express their views and concerns and be confident they will be acted upon
- > Develop high aspirations of what their child can achieve

### CHILDREN WILL:

- > Feel more confident in school
- > Make accelerated progress towards targets
- > Receive appropriate support at home and in school to meet aspirational targets

### SCHOOLS WILL:

- > Be more effective at listening to parents about their child's learning
- > Provide better information to parents about their child's learning
- > Use the outcomes of the conversation with parents and pupils to improve the learning and teaching for pupils

children as well.

"This activity helped him to move really far ahead socially, emotionally and with his attainment as well. His progress was exceptional and by the time he left us he was within national expectations for attainment. Dad tells us that his son has taken everything he learnt with us to his new school and

he is doing really well. There is always something out there. You have got to be creative in the way that you approach things. You need to look outside the box and find ways of helping your families and children to fulfil their potential. Every child deserves that."

The Structured Conversation enables parents and carers to feel more empowered and involved in their child's educational life and wellbeing. A stronger partnership is made with the teachers and both work together on the best outcome for the child, using background knowledge, hobbies and interests. After all, teaching is not a one size fits all approach. And this is just one element of the Achievement for All programme. The other three: leadership, teaching and learning, and wider outcomes, have been designed by educationalists to complement one another to achieve fantastic results and create a lasting impact across the whole school.



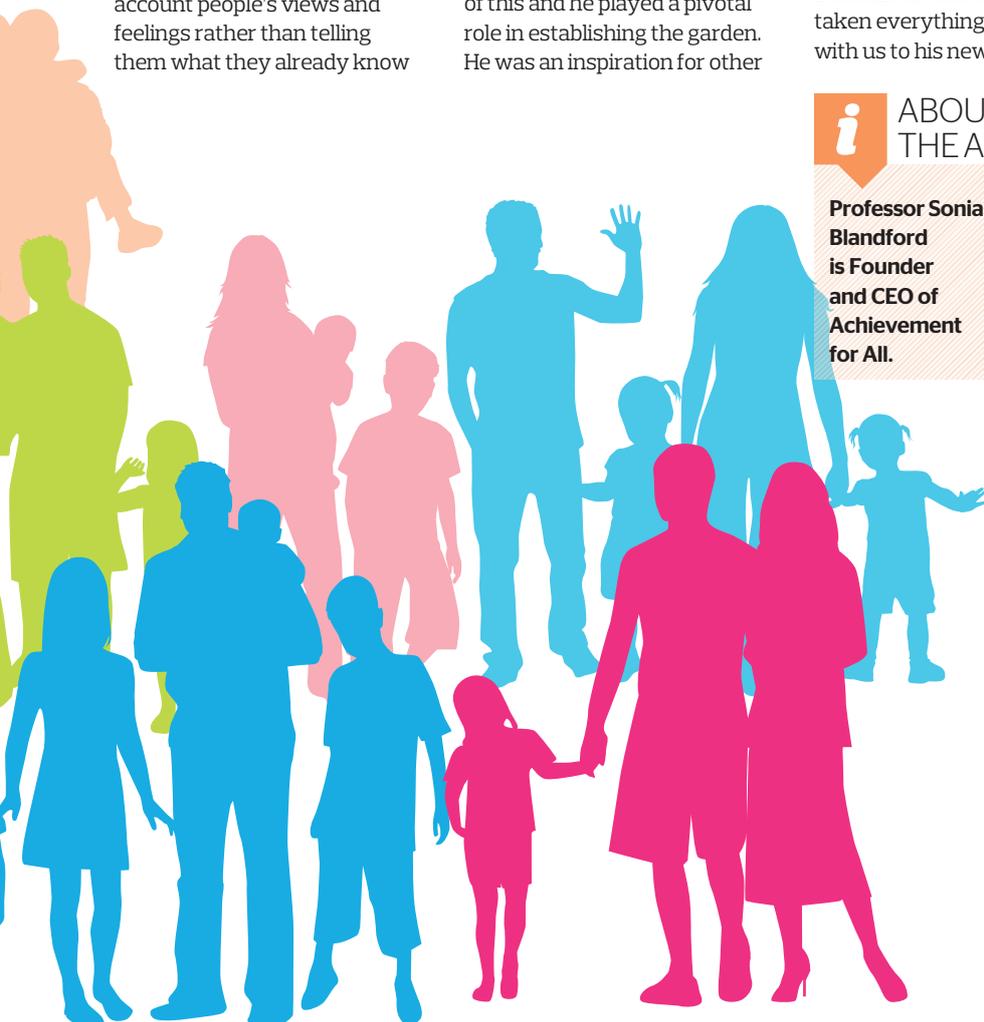
### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Professor Sonia Blandford is Founder and CEO of Achievement for All.**



## NEXT STEPS

Interested in finding out how the Structured Conversation – and the Achievement for All programme more generally – might work in your school? Contact [enquiries@afaeducation.org](mailto:enquiries@afaeducation.org) for more information.





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# MY PTA LIFE

Comedian, writer and actress **Lucy Porter** has joined the ranks of parents with primary school aged children – and it's not nearly as scary as she imagined...

## HOW OLD ARE YOUR CHILDREN?

Emily is five – she's in Reception. John, who is four, will start school in September; he goes to nursery at the moment.

## HAVE YOU BEEN SURPRISED BY JUST HOW INVOLVED PARENTS ARE EXPECTED TO BE WITH SCHOOLS THESE DAYS?

Well, we were quite late having our children, so we had prior warning, watching our friends' kids go through school, and seeing how much they do (including getting me to do fundraising gigs for them, as it happens). Also, there's been this explosion of women's fiction, hasn't there – writing about all those typical 'parenting nightmares'. I suppose really, I was expecting

it to be much worse than it was. I had fears of competitive cake baking and stilettos at dawn in the playground – but in fact, my experience has been really lovely.

## AND ARE YOU ABLE TO JOIN IN WITH MUCH?

If I'm honest, before Emily started, I did find the thought of having a school-aged child quite scary; and that was partly because I was worried about having to do stuff. But as it is, we do get involved, and it's not too much. Well, I say 'we' – somewhat to my relief I've realised that the nature of my work means that I'm often unavailable evenings and weekends, when PTA events tend to happen, so my husband [actor Justin Edwards] steps up for most of it.

## WHAT KINDS OF THINGS DOES HE DO?

Oh, he's been Santa for the school, and our son's nursery. Actually, he's played Santa in a kids' show on TV, too – he's getting typecast. He did ask me once, with a worried face, 'Is it because I'm fat?' Of course, I told him that it was because he's an excellent actor. He does other stuff, too. He brought all the 'lost property' home and washed it to sell at a fair – that was an onerous task I didn't think he'd see through, but he did. And he's done a lot of baking; he's great at it. He does all the kids' birthday cakes now – he's even been approached by other parents for commissions. His creations are a bit rough and ready, but they are big; what they lack in aesthetic finesse, they definitely make up for in volume.

## DO YOU DO THE SCHOOL RUN?

Yes, we both do; we take turns. And again, it's really not been like it is in the books, with everyone constantly judging everyone else. Maybe we're just lucky, and have a particularly nice school – but I've dropped Emily off in the morning wearing jeans over my pyjamas having got back from a gig at 2am, and I've picked her up straight from recording for TV, with a face full of make-up and my hair immaculately styled (we won't talk about my style from the neck down)... and no one has commented either way. It's all very friendly!

## IS THE PTA AT YOUR SCHOOL VERY ACTIVE?

They are brilliant. There's at least one activity

every term, and it's a range of interesting, quirky things – they did a barn dance, for example, which was great fun, and there are summer and Christmas fairs and picnics, plus little fundraising ideas, like gifts stalls for Mother's and Father's days. So there's always something going on, but you don't feel like you are being permanently pestered for your money and time. And ultimately, they raise a lot of money, which the school really needs. It's a tiny team of women, some of whom have other jobs, too; they do incredible amounts.

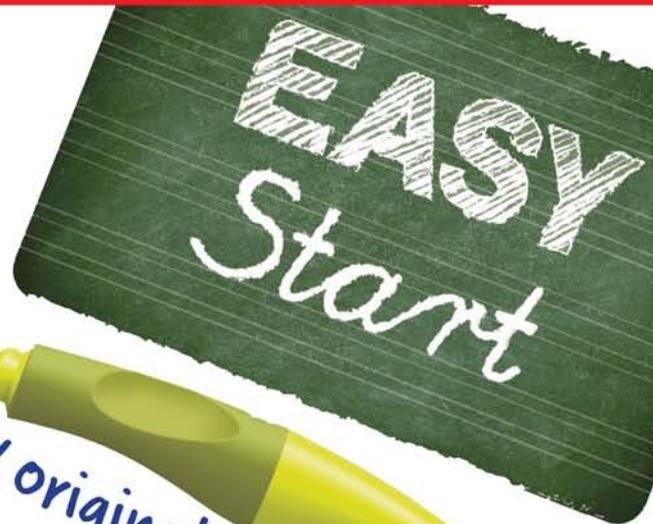
## ARE THEY APPRECIATED, DO YOU THINK?

They certainly are by me! And yes, I think they are generally. When we first went to look at schools in our area, I remember thinking that a vigorous PTA was a really good sign. One place we visited didn't have anything like that at all, and I found that a bit of a concern. It's good for school morale and spirit to have parents actively involved, raising money – and it's a nice social thing, too.

## DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEAS FOR FUTURE PTA EVENTS?

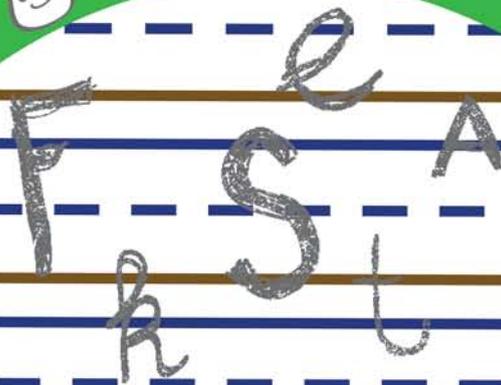
My life's obsession is quizzing. I love it. So I'm keen to organise a quiz night for our PTA (I'm doing one for a friend soon, so we'll see how that goes). Putting the questions together is my favourite part. Mind you, they might have to get someone else to host it; I'm likely to take it just a bit too seriously. There's a frustrated game show host in me trying to get out – and I'm not sure the school hall is where that should happen, for my kids' sake if nothing else...





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