

Talk for Year 5 parents
Mrs Julie Robinson
22 April 2006

Thank you for coming along this morning and special thanks to those of you who put forward questions and themes in advance of today's talk.

As I mentioned in my letter, this is the first of a series of short presentations for parents that I'm introducing this year and as such it is rather an experiment. I hope that you will find this morning to be informative and helpful.

I trust that you have had a chance to speak to one or two staff over coffee and you might feel that it's increasingly difficult to make contact with teachers as your child becomes older. That's true: at the secondary stage you will find that you drop your child off in the car park and there simply aren't opportunities to chat to other parents and teachers – it's much worse at the next stage! SO I urge you to please call or write in, email and get messages to the staff as regularly as you need to. As in everything else, you will find it much easier to work together and solve problems if you develop a good working relationship with the other party.

Your children are well-established in the prep school, having worked their way through the junior section of the school. They are used to subject-based teaching and a busy and stimulating timetable. In many ways, Year 6 offers a continuation of those same opportunities, yet there are one or two issues that you need to be especially aware of at this stage and that is what I want to cover with you today.

Busy people are often successful people and we want – with you – to help the children to learn the important skill that is managing their time. For instance, please monitor the extra-curricular activities that your child participates in and if he or she is getting tired, help them, with us, to re-prioritise or rotate activities. This will be especially important if you have several children and if you live a distance from the school, of course.

Your children have recently completed an epic dramatic production and there's no Year 6 production although Mrs Gearey will be preparing the Year 6s for the Tunbridge Wells Arts Festival and the English dept English Speaking Board. There will also be a large-scale inter-House music competition in the Lent term 2007.

The children have homework diaries and we hope that you and the Form Tutors will check these every week. We encourage the children to write important reminders and note their prep in these diaries which can become a valuable tool in increasing organisation, motivation and independence in a busy world. (Some are much better than others at using the diaries and, again, it really helps the children if you support them in using the diaries themselves).

If your child takes a musical instrument then there will be instrumental lessons to fit across the academic timetable, there will be concerts, rehearsals and please support the discipline of practice. Children can only achieve through consistent application and we need to be encouraging good levels of commitment so that they understand the importance of a conscientious attitude in achieving success. Feel free to nag the children to check the instrumental lessons timetables displayed in the music school and if it helps, quote school when reminding your child that they have to work/practice/go to sleep/etc! As in their later lives, the children need to realise that it won't always be fun and only through sound preparation and a certain self-discipline can we achieve high standards in the Arts and all sorts of other areas.

Year 6 is the year in which we introduce streaming. One of the classes will be selected according to all-round academic strength, in preparation for the scholarship stream in Years 7 and 8, and the other two classes will be mixed ability. We don't, therefore, call it a scholarship form. If your child is not placed in that top stream, then he or she won't be precluded from taking a scholarship at a later stage to certain schools and certainly it won't affect scholarship bids in art, music, sport or all-rounder scholarships. That top stream will not contain scholars exclusively, however, and I can say more about that later when we come to questions...Most importantly, the streaming and setting are not set in stone.

There is the usual setting in maths and French and Latin. Please bear with us over set placements and streaming. The staff have long experience of this and we aim to allow the children to develop at their own pace.

A number of you will have been researching the next school that you wish to send your child on to for secondary education and we recommend that you firm up that choice this year. Margie Redstone, Director of Studies, liaises with the secondary schools and together we ensure that each pupil is properly prepared for the next phase. If you haven't yet decided, there is time and we will have a Choosing Your Next School evening in the Michaelmas term, next term. Please do stay in touch with Margie over your choice of school and if you have strong views about your child sitting any kind of scholarship then let her know...If you are considering Eton, Winchester or Harrow then we need to know as soon as possible as these and other schools have 11+ entrance procedures. Please trust our judgement which is based on years of experience and well-developed relationships with a large number of schools. If we feel that a school is totally out of the question for your child, there will be good reasons and we will advise you accordingly. A good first step is to arrange a meeting with Margie to discuss the options: do you want a co-ed/single sex/rural or urban/local school...then make a shortlist and visit the schools. Try not to be swayed too much by where your child's friends are going.

Year 6 will offer your child just as many and diverse opportunities as you have come to expect here. At the end of the next academic year, the children will embark upon their CE and Scholarship syllabi and that means that the amount of prep will gradually increase. There are some sessions within the timetable where children can do prep and they are expected to bring some home as well. Your children should not feel overwhelmed with work, however, and we ask that you let us know through Form tutors if you feel that your child isn't coping with the amount of academic work that is coming home. The children have a long school day and we DO expect them to rest and enjoy family time when they are at home, or a balance between work and activities if they're boarders. The children need to learn how to organise their work and manage their workload (again, with our support and use of homework diaries). We have long experience and understand. Be patient! Things can occasionally appear difficult at the start of the year but the children soon adapt to new routines.

I've been asked to mention whether Vinehall prepares children for 11+ exams to other schools. As you know, Vinehall is a prep school taking children up to age 13. The top two years at this school are exciting, busy and enjoyable ones for the children who see many of their efforts come to fruition. They have opportunities to take on all manner of responsibilities that are not available to children of their ages in 11-18 schools and our pupils will tell you that Year 8 is the best year. So we don't support children leaving before 13+ just because they want to start at public school. Sometimes and understandably for financial reasons a few pupils will move into the state system/go to grammar school at 11. We support those children and we understand that it is not the fault of the child if their parent decides to move them at 11, even into a senior school. Just this week I made a point of telling a Year 6 girl that she is forgiven for the family decision to leave at the end of the year. However, you will understand that I don't want the rest of our senior girls to be left in a minority and it's not good for the school if lots of girls leave so we do not encourage children to go (except in very special circumstances) and we do not offer structured 11+ preparation. Sevenoaks, St Leonard's and Benenden all accept children at the 13+ stage: the work we do here prepares them perfectly for entry at this later stage. On the whole, parents who want their children to sit 11+ exams organise private tuition outside school. I hope that almost all of you will want your children to stay on to 13.

One of the highlights of Year 6 is year 6 Camp, a residential weekend on Tanner's Farm with Mr. Hudspeth, myself and other staff. This is a wonderful feature of Vinehall and I urge you to encourage your children to take part. They are typically very keen! Preparations are made through a few activity afternoons on Saturdays across the year and then all Year 6 go off to camp together. If you are considering boarding, then Camp provides valuable preparation. It's great fun and knits the Year group together.

Boarding is not compulsory but we do recommend boarding in the senior years. On the whole, this is more popular with children than their parents as an idea. In reality, we know that it is of enormous value to the children, helping with work, with developing relationships with their friends, as preparation for the future and giving them space to grow in a structured and safe environment. Parents of boarders will tell you how good it has been for their children and how the children are still very close to the family. There is some flexibility over weekends these days and it really is a worthwhile experience for our children before they go on to senior school. If you feel anti-boarding, I urge you to remain open-minded.

Certainly, you should find that your children are growing up. They are not the naïve youngsters who first arrived in big school! Years 5 and 6 can bring with them certain social adjustments and parents of girls especially find that there are issues to be dealt with amongst the girls as they grow up. **THIS IS NORMAL!** The current Year 6 includes some strong characters and it wouldn't be realistic to expect every day to run smoothly between them. Do let us know if you have any concerns. We'll be able to help the children to talk through their feelings in circle time at school and it's important that staff and school work with parents at home to support the children through these stages of growing up. Staff are familiar with the pressures that you and the children are under and will want to be understanding, supportive and helpful. Please work with us if you have a concern. There really is no need for confrontation. We are all at Vinehall for the same reason, to support your children, and so if you come in asking to discuss an issue with a teacher, you will find them receptive – just like anyone else – if you take the attitude that this can be worked out and listen to the school's side

Very soon, you will have teenagers, or tweenagers, on your hands. Perhaps you already feel that your child is going on 18 or even 21! We are here to help! Feel free to quote us over appropriate bed-times, the importance of getting work completed and other knotty issues! And, again, stay in touch. It is likely that if your child is feeling growing pains then they are not alone and we like to discuss current issues in Form time, through PSHCE lessons and generally. Social themes come up in assemblies, drama and English, RS and other subjects.

You will continue to receive effort assessment grades regularly and you should feel that you are in touch with the Form teacher through prep diaries. Don't be afraid to make contact with teachers at school if you want to know more about your child's work or progress. We do want to work with you in supporting every child.

As in all busy prep schools, there is ongoing tension between academic work, music and The Arts and sports. Strong all-rounders will need help prioritising their time and perhaps rotating their activities. If they are tired or if the logistics are difficult, you and we will be explaining to the children that they simply can't do everything. Again, this is life and we hope that there is enough on offer so that

every individual finds his or her niche, particularly as some very strong pupils specialise. There should be enough for everyone.

There will be a few Saturday fixtures. Dates of matches are advertised in the calendar in advance. Please give school precedence on match Saturdays and, again, work with us. If you're planning a birthday party, for instance, we'd hope that you'd work around our fixtures calendar. Feel free to check with the office, who often know dates well in advance of the calendar being published. Whilst it is difficult to finalise any calendar too far in advance, the calendar is published much earlier than it used to be.

If your child is selected to play, then it's important to remember that the children support each other in teams and see team play as an opportunity. Perhaps your child won't be selected for the team that YOU want to see them in. Please trust the coaches. Work with us. Again, talk to the relevant staff and build up a rapport with them so that they can be fully aware of your child's aspirations.

Much as we would like to be perfect, to please everyone, to give you exactly what you want when you want it, life in prep school is not that simple. There is much too much going on and we feel that we are achieving the impossible for a school our size. We do accept that we can make mistakes and in a changing world we can miss things from time to time. If you do encounter a problem, please let's give each other the benefit of the doubt and find an amicable solution. And do let me know what would have helped so that I can help prevent an issue in the future where possible.

The school's structures have evolved, developed and improved over the years but we still want to be yet better. With your support and suggestions, we continue to improve.

The Friends of Vinehall Committee has become an increasingly valuable communication link with parents and between parents and school. Now we have a particularly effective Committee with Form Representatives, increasing opportunities to build the school community.

If you remember only one thing from this talk, please remember this...That we are all here as parents and teachers to help your child to do well. We are all on the same side and we can do great things for the children by working together. Do stay in touch with us: the form tutor, the instrumental teacher, the sports coach, the subject teacher, Houseparent, School Nurse, secretary...Any one of us will be pleased to help.

If parents do not have copies of the PARENT HANDBOOK, these are available from the office.