

*Let's talk  
about*  
**BOARDING**

for Parents thinking about sending their children  
to Boarding School



All boarding schools aim to promote the wellbeing of their boarders so that they can achieve both academic and personal success and fulfil their ultimate potential. Below is a list of ideas to consider when deciding that Boarding School is perhaps the best educational option for your child. The list, produced by Directors of Boarding from across Australia, will hopefully provide you with many ideas as you approach the decision of which school is the best for your child. Although not an exhaustive list it is an excellent way to begin your journey and start the conversation about boarding.

We have over 190 boarding schools in Australia to choose from, including those which specialise in activities, academic studies and performing arts, so the choice is wide and varied. We here at the Australian Boarding Schools Association wish you and your family all the very best as you begin to consider boarding.

*Warmest wishes, all of us at ABSA*



## SO WHY SEND YOUR CHILD AWAY TO BOARDING?

Firstly, let's have a look at some of the overall benefits of boarding. Boarding schools believe that happy, resilient and self-confident students achieve well in school and ultimately in life. Boarding schools help to develop these life skills to prepare adolescents for a successful adult life.

These life skills include such things as:

- Using social media responsibly, including suitable times and places to use their devices, what is suitable to post and how best to handle social media when things go wrong and understanding the benefits of social media.
- A variety of hygiene and health issues, including the basics of washing clothes and changing bed sheets - all important life skills for all students.
- The importance of keeping their bedroom area tidy.
- Helping them get into good study routines that work and learning the value of homework sessions and how they can learn best. Understanding how they learn also helps them manage their study time effectively.
- The importance of communication with staff, home and other boarders and how these communications change over time. Being socially connected is an essential skill for boarding life.
- Developing time management and study skills that work for them.
- The development of leadership skills through the myriad of opportunities available.
- Developing resilience – a key issue for their lives now and into the future!
- Access to help with their homework from the school, boarding house staff and fellow boarders.
- Learning the skills of living with others.
- The importance of good sleep patterns.
- Dealing with homesickness, and learning ways to handle missing home.

Boarding life also allows your child to be more fully involved in the myriad of co-curricular opportunities on offer at the school and hence become fully immersed in all of the many benefits that the school can offer.

## CHOOSING A SCHOOL

When it comes to choosing the right school for your child, there are a huge number of things to consider. Remember, not every school suits every child, and sometimes you may need to have your children at more than one school so as to suit their individual needs.

Some of the issues to consider when choosing a school include:

- Research the school carefully and choose a school based on its values and what's right for your child. This will help to ensure that the values and beliefs that are learnt at home are followed through when your child is at boarding school.
- You need to decide whether you believe a single-sex or a co-ed school is right for your child.
- Weigh this decision up carefully as each child may have quite different needs.
- You will also need to consider if the boarding house is big or small and what difference this makes and whether it is on school grounds or off campus, All these are personal family decisions for your child and each can be beneficial, depending on your child's needs and what you are looking for in a boarding school.
- Try to read all of the material and brochures, talk to a variety of schools at field days or expos and then make sure to visit at least two or three choices to see for yourself how each school 'feels'. It is usually best to visit on a school day, so that you can see the school in action, but don't forget that you also want to see the boarding house in action too if possible.
- Lunchtime can be an excellent time to visit schools.
- Make sure you meet all the relevant school and boarding house staff and if possible talk to some of the current boarders. You will soon have a feeling about a school and this will help you with your decision.
- If possible, talk to current parents and students of the school you are considering to help support your decisions but remember that just as your child is unique so is the decision of which boarding school is best for you. Others' opinions are helpful but be mindful their view is based on their child and not yours. Your gut feeling after a visit is often the most trusted opinion.
- Get to know the Head of Boarding if you can as this relationship will be essential.
- Ensure you take your child with you on the visit and allow them to have an input into the decision. This helps them feel like they are part of the decision-making process and assists them in feeling more at ease later on. Get them to ask their questions during the visit and debrief as a family after each school. A pros and cons list really helps to support your decision as there will usually be good and not so good factors about each school.

Once you've made a decision:

- Be confident in your decision and trust your intuition in making this decision - it will be the right one!
- Bring the school into your child's world by visiting it often, subscribing to the school's newsletter, reading the school magazine, looking at the school's website often and maybe even attending school productions or sporting events to help get the feel for the school. This will help you begin to see the school as part of your family too and will assist your child to settle more quickly when they come to go away.
- Remain positive in your decision and on tough days remember why you elected to board your child.

Mostly it will be to benefit them academically and socially. Hold on to this as the bumpy road of adolescence is not always easy!

## PREPARING YOUR CHILD FOR BOARDING

With the decision made the next step is to do as much as possible to prepare your child for living away from home within a boarding school context.

Some ideas and actions in the months leading up to going away that have helped others include:

- Try to always speak positively about boarding school and all that your child can expect to gain from the experience. They will pick up on your anxieties so prime yourself to be positive.
- Talk through any fears or anxieties that your child might have and come up with solutions for helping to manage these once they become a boarder.
- Discuss homesickness with your child and how they might manage this, and also try to think about how them going away may affect you too. Discussing this openly will help them so that they will talk to you when they do travel this path.
- If they don't already know, teach them how to use a mobile phone and put the important family numbers in the phone together.
- Teach them how to use a washing machine and how to iron their clothes. They may need this even if their laundry is being done for them.
- Make sure they understand personal hygiene and room hygiene. Boys often need to have the use of soap and deodorant explained much more carefully than girls. Girls will also need personal hygiene taught and explained as whilst boarding staff can help with this a chat from mum is probably better.
- Help them to develop the habit of making their own bed at home and keeping their room tidy - this will help immensely with the expectations of them in a boarding context where often they will share rooms. Perhaps even develop a rewards chart for them at home to assist in this.
- Get them to have sleepovers at friends or other family members' houses so that they get used to being away from you and the family home. This may be difficult for some families but if it can happen it will help them become more used to being away from you.
- Get them used to doing some sort of homework or study time every night - reading a book, or doing some online exercises is better than nothing in the twelve month period before they go away. Introducing academic structure into your child's routine will help them manage the increased workload and demands of boarding school life. Most 'prep' time at boarding schools is held after dinner so an hour of quiet time after dinner each night at home will assist them to be used to this.
- Begin to build their independence in whatever way you possibly can - these skills will help your child immensely.







And just prior to them going:

- Plan your communication times and keep these 'appointments' as a minimum. They then know you will be getting in touch and they will find time for you too!
- Get them to pack their own suitcase for school so they know what they have with them.
- Name absolutely everything that they are taking and send them on their way with a laundry marker to assist in this if labels go missing on washing day.
- Talk to them about making friends and tolerating others. Kindness is of essence to all good boarding experiences and if your child is always kind their journey will be an easier one.
- Think about what they can take with them to have a sense of home within their boarding dorm - photos of home and a teddy or football are important.
- Ensure they attend the Orientation and Transition Programs at the School (stay the night at the Boarding House if this is possible). These will help both you and them feel more at ease with the transition and they will become settled more quickly by being involved in these pre-boarding activities and events.
- Take them to the School on the proposed transport links so that they are familiar with the train, bus or plane route that they will need to use to get home if possible.
- Ensure they have the relevant public transport tickets Myki in Vic, Opal in NSW, MetroCard in SA, Go Card in Qld, SmartRider in WA, Greencard in Tas, Tap and Ride Card in NT if they are attending a city school. To have these beforehand will prove very useful to them later and get them used to these systems.
- Open a bank account and show your child how to access their funds. Discuss the money limits with your child before starting boarding (if necessary discuss this with the Head of Boarding as each school can have different systems in place).
- Always talk positively about the boarding experience – what a wonderful opportunity this will be. Try not to share terrible stories about boarding in the past – things have changed!
- Ensure they have a mobile phone and Skype/Facetime addresses to enable contact with home.
- Explain responsible use of social media before they leave home and what your values are in this regard. Remember that social media is not negative if used appropriately. Ensuring your child's positive behaviour online will help them in their boarding journey. Talk about your expectations of their phone; think about accessing support for this through such things as FamilyZone which is a parental control platform for mobile phones - [www.familyzone.com](http://www.familyzone.com)



## PREPARING YOURSELF FOR YOUR CHILD GOING AWAY

You may not be prepared for how much you will miss your child as your energies up to their departure have usually all been involved in choosing the school and preparing them for going away, so give yourself permission to experience a sense of loss, to acknowledge these feelings but then to realise the need to let them go and return to the positives of why you sent your child away for school. Remember that it will take time for them to settle but most do flourish in boarding - give them time to shine.

A few ideas to help you manage the highs and lows of boarding include:

- Try to stay optimistic and positive about boarding and get others around you to do the same so that it can be something to look forward to, especially through the first few weeks when homesickness will most likely occur for both you and your child.
- 'Chil sickness' is as common as homesickness but you will get used to this feeling - remember it often does not go away, you just get used to it. Look at what else you can do to keep busy. Try to get support from other families of children at boarding school (The Facebook Group 'Boarding School- Aussie Families is a great help)
- Remember that your child may call you and 'dump' and that hearing your voice can sometimes cause emotions that aren't always there. Have open and honest lines of communication with the boarding school and work together to manage the many ups and downs of early boarding life. Encourage your child to tell you three good things each phone call rather than dwelling on any negatives. This might be an agreement you have before they go, to end every phone call on a positive note.
- Speak to other parents and keep yourself busy.
- Begin to see yourself as the co-pilot with your child as the pilot beginning to take charge of their lives. You want this for your child as they develop and grow so that they can pursue their dreams and goals. This is the life of all parents at high school, it just becomes more pronounced when your child goes away to school.
- Become involved yourself by joining in the parent activities at the school or start your own Mothers' Facebook group so that you can catch up for coffee when you are all in town. Some schools have this organised for you, so try to join in where you can.
- Say goodbye to your child positively each time you visit - show them that you believe in their ability to cope and always tell them how proud you are of them. This will help them believe in themselves in the big world of high school.
- Remember that you are still your child's hero and the most important person in their lives - you hold the key to positively impact their boarding journey, so never lose sight of your importance in their lives.
- Keep in regular contact with your child and encourage all family members to as well. Boarders still love receiving letters and parcels from home. Email, Skype and phone calls are vital, but must not occur during homework sessions, mealtimes etc. as this can be unsettling.
- Ideas to vary the communication include special greeting cards, sending snippets of newspapers from home, following them on Twitter, surprising them with special visits or parcels, getting them a subscription to a magazine, putting post it messages inside their bags, sending them back with home cooked cakes to share with their friends, sending fruit baskets or little boxes of happiness and a visit from friends and family that live close by is always welcome.
- Try to get to the school at least once a term to spend a weekend with them or to take them out. They often like to invite a friend on this special outing and this is important in developing their boarding friendships and in allowing you to get to know their boarding friends.
- Regularly contact the Head of Boarding – emails are great. Let them know any relevant family news and check in on your child's progress often. Contact with the school is essential.



- Remember, if your child is struggling at school the boarding staff are a great help to parents. They can help you to contact the relevant teacher at the school or alleviate any fears you might have. Set up positive relationships with boarding house staff, knowing who to call when and about what is really important and will help you cope with 'parenting from a distance'.
- Send videos or start a joint online journal so as to share your day with your child and allow them to share their day with you too. Doing something together and talking about it is always fun.
- A gratitude journal is also a great idea to help you both focus on the positives in both of your lives.
- See what is done for birthdays and make sure your child's day is celebrated.
- Offer your child support and listen to their concerns but don't always rush in to rescue them - support them to develop their own resilience skills and help them to find solutions for themselves. Ask them how they might solve a 'crisis' before you solve it for them. They will usually surprise you with some great ideas.
- Have a 'treat' calendar - how long till they come home and what you are going to do with them when they are home for you and for them - their favourite meal etc will be important to look forward to all together.
- Have a timetable of their school day on the fridge and know who their teachers are. This will help you in discussions with them and chatting about their day.
- Make coming home exciting but understand that your child will grow and change whilst they are away and so allow 24 hours for them to settle back into home routines and activities.
- Reassure your child and help them work through any anxieties and help them come to their own solutions - open up to allow them to discuss all issues with you. They sometimes just need you to listen and nothing more!
- The whole family will take time to adjust to them being away and also when they return in the holidays - be aware of this. Keep up their contact with their siblings, perhaps one contact a week is just for the siblings to socialise. With social media this could be strong online communication.
- Invest time in their new friends, invite them home for the weekend on occasions but also remember to have time just for you as a family. Try to encourage them to have day student friends, as a local family and friend near to school will be really useful to fall upon for support at times or to just have 'time out' from boarding.
- Share difficult phone calls between both Mum and Dad - perhaps different calls can come at different times ie Mum in the morning and Dad at night. You will work out quickly what works for you as a family and when each of you need to talk.

For parents a great book is Parenting from a Distance: Positive Ideas for Parents of Boarding School Students by Debbie Bushell. It's an online book so easy for parents to purchase and print out.

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