



QUALITY TIME
ELSTREE SCHOOL'S DAY PUPILS AND BOARDERS HAVE LOTS OF SPACE AND FREE TIME TO FORGE FRIENDSHIPS



IN IT TOGETHER
LEFT TO RIGHT: ELSTREE PUPILS ENJOY TRADITIONAL SPORTS; CHANNING GIRLS PRACTICE FRIENDOLOGY



PLAY TIME
LEFT TO RIGHT: FRANCIS HOLLAND GIRLS BOND IN AND OUT OF THE CLASSROOM; ELSTREE SCHOOL HAS A RICH CO-CURRICULAR PROGRAMME



FRIENDS UNITED

The connections forged during our school years impact our long-term emotional intelligence and wellbeing. **Laura Sutherland** learns about the initiatives laying the groundwork for healthy friendships

From the isolated feeling of your first day in a new class to falling out and making up with your best friend, navigating the choppy waters of a school's social scene can often be more stressful than the pressures of academic achievement. After all, while there's typically a set path to success when it comes to securing good grades, the unpredictability of other children's feelings and evolving group dynamics makes consistent happiness and security in friendships less of a given. There are, however, curricula and practices that ensure qualities of kindness, self-compassion, confidence and resilience are nurtured in each individual, in turn making the course of companionship run smoother.

"Relationships are at the heart of everything we do," says Caroline Smith, senior deputy head of Chelsea-based girls' school Francis Holland Prep (franchishollandprep.org.uk). "Often, conflicts in the playground couldn't be left at the classroom door, and this was impacting their learning, as they were so consumed by their friendship issue."

In the search for a solution, staff discovered *Thrivers*, a book by educational psychologist Dr Michele Borba. It

outlines for parents and teachers the difference between 'thrivers' and 'strivers'; the former being someone that succeeds, while the latter always feels that they're trying to keep up with their peers and never thriving in the way that they could. The research emphasises that nurturing character traits in children is essential, with a focus on developing the whole child, including emotional and moral intelligence, to equip them with the tools to overcome life's challenges and find fulfilment. Character strengths highlighted include empathy, perseverance, self-esteem, integrity, curiosity and optimism.

Friendology 101 soon followed, providing Francis Holland's teachers with a friendship-skills curriculum to empower pupils. Curated with different age groups in mind and using tools such as the Friend-o-Meter – which helps children gauge the status of friendships and discuss them openly with the other party – it helps children establish and maintain healthy relationships while managing conflict with kindness, increasing overall resilience.

In dedicating time to teach this, the school has created a common language around friendship, which

has been beneficial for its girls. Head of EYFS, Flora Jackson elaborates, "Friendology curriculum has been transformative. The lessons not only foster essential social-emotional skills but also guide us adults on how to best support them". A year-one pupil told staff, "This has been the greatest lesson, I've learned how to be a good friend".

Fellow girls' school Channing in Highgate also subscribes to the benefits of Friendology's teachings (channing.co.uk). Head, Dina Hamalis says, "Learning how to navigate friendships and maintain healthy relationships is a key part of preparing pupils for life beyond school whilst also ensuring their school days are as happy and productive as possible." She explains, "Friendology's innovative programme empowers our pupils with the skills, language and confidence they need to form meaningful friendships and build positive relationships. They learn strategies for emotional regulation, conflict resolution and managing social challenges."

The all-through school also supports pupils moving to the senior division with the Girls on Board approach, which helps girls, parents and teachers to understand the complexities and dynamics of female friendship. The language, methods and ideas empower girls to solve their own friendship problems and recognises that they're

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usually the only ones who can. By empowering girls to find their own solutions, parents can worry less, schools can focus more on the curriculum and the girls learn more effectively – because they're happier. Deputy head, Freddie Meier says, "We help our pupils to recognise that they don't always have to agree with people to be their friend, learning to disagree agreeably is a really important life skill."

Berkshire prep Elstree School believes its traditional offering of an extensive sports and co-curricular programme, combined with a boarding environment, creates the free-time, space and autonomy required to forge meaningful, sustainable bonds, with shared interests, experiences and teamwork forming the bedrocks of friendships (elstreeschool.org.uk). Meanwhile, in the classroom, form groups and PSHE lessons regularly explore the dynamics of friendships, feelings and respect. Time is taken to acknowledge differences in characters, cultures and personal growth and development, all of which have a bearing on how friendships develop.

Tom Wyatt, deputy head of pastoral explains, "By nurturing independence and encouraging the children to make their own decisions, they realise the consequences of their choices and the impact of their actions, especially on those around them. They learn the value of tolerance, respect, honesty and kindness – not just as words, but as actionable components of a treasured friendship."

And the proof of these teachings is in both fledgling playground bonds and friendships that endure well into adulthood. Wyatt recounts a recent school visit from an Elstree Old Boy who delighted his former teachers with the story of how nine out of the 12 ushers at his wedding were old school friends. ■