

# PickyParent

GUIDE



THE ELEMENTARY YEARS (K-6)

## Choose your child's school with **CONFIDENCE**

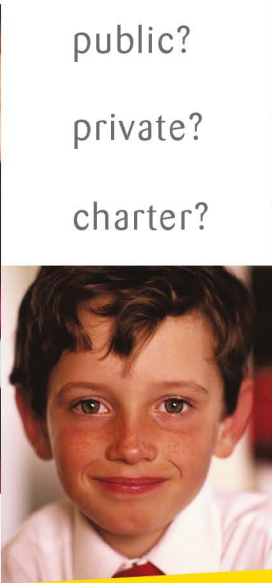
**INCLUDES**  
Easy to Use  
Tool Kit



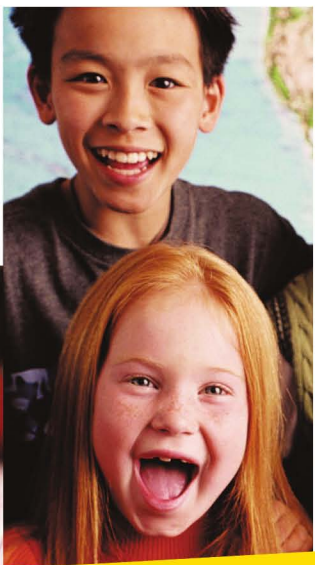
religious?  
magnet?  
home?



Which School?



public?  
private?  
charter?



Bryan C. Hassel, Ph.D. & Emily Ayscue Hassel



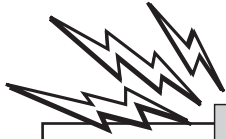
**Step Two: Chapter 8**  
***How Do You Want a School to  
Interact with Your Child?***

This downloadable PDF is an excerpt from:

***Picky Parent Guide:  
Choose Your Child's School with  
CONFIDENCE***

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## LIGHT'NING LIST

### *What To Know from Chapter 8*

- **Fit Factor #2 is How Your Child Learns:** these are your family's values and capabilities that influence how a school should teach and interact with your child, both in and out of the classroom.
  
- **The three family characteristics for Fit Factor #2 are these:**
  - ✓ *Values about school-wide expectations and rules on student conduct* = you have strong preferences about school rules and expectations regarding students' social behavior, including both school policies and the actual behavior that results. You may have specific preferences about manners with other children and adults, dress, discipline, honor codes, and other behaviors.
  - ✓ *Values about how children should learn* = you have strong preferences about how children should be taught and behavior managed in the classroom at school.
    - Teaching method: how teachers teach
    - Classroom behavior management: how teachers manage classroom behavior
  - ✓ *Your role as advocate for child* = your ability to understand and communicate your child's needs to teachers and principal. The lower your ability and comfort in these matters, the more important to find a school that will help.
  
- **You can identify the Fit Factor # 2 characteristics most important for your family** by thinking about and discussing your values, preferences and abilities in the listed areas.
  
- **Remember, you must identify the few most important characteristics** of your family to match with schools for a Great Fit.
  - ✓ *Values about student conduct rules, how children should learn and your role as advocate for your child* will be Must Haves for some families.

## Chapter 8

### Family Fit Factor #2: How Do You Want a School to Interact with Your Child?

*Lissa and Sean have one child, McKinsey. With his father in the Foreign Service, Sean grew up living in several countries, and he attended Montessori schools through fifth grade. Lissa attended very strict traditional schools through high school, and always felt trapped. Both Lissa and Sean want a school where McKinsey can discover herself and follow her own passions.*



*Les and Anita are less concerned about teaching method than with behavior. Anita, a former teacher turned corporate trainer, strongly believes that behavior problems are the major issue in schools today. So they are looking for a school with strict behavior rules both in and out of the classroom, a strong honor code, and a high-standards dress code (uniforms would be ideal).*



*Christine is a widow who works part time (good life insurance spared her from full time work) while raising four children. Though she's gotten more assertive by necessity, she feels uncomfortable asking for much from her children's schools. "I use up all of my toughness just keeping a roof with no leaks over our heads." She already feels as though she's constantly asking for favors just to make her schedule workable. She needs schools that will work hard to meet her children's differing needs (and differ they do!). She needs schools that will stay in touch with her and let her know when something seems amiss with one of her children.*

## How Your Child Learns: The Family Perspective

Families can have strong views, and a tremendous influence, on how children learn at school. In fact, many parents are more concerned about the environment in which their children learn than the subjects their children study. Regardless of what subjects your child learns, you may have expectations regarding how students are taught and treated at school. And you most certainly can affect how well teachers understand and respond to your child's needs. So, you should consider whether any of these is an important factor in choosing your child's school:

- *Values about school-wide expectations and rules on student conduct*, not just in the classroom but in less formal interactions, too (including expected manners, dress, discipline and honor code)
- *Values about how children should learn*, including:
  - ✓ *Teaching method* and
  - ✓ *Classroom behavior management*
- *Your role as advocate* for your child at school

## Values about School-Wide Expectations and Rules on Student Conduct

*Jan and Andy Smith were full-time lawyers and parents of three. They chose a school with a “character program” that included weekly class time devoted to topics like making friends, the effects of teasing and taunting, and so on. These were good, solid values lessons that these busy parents were worried they wouldn't have time to reinforce. When Jan decided to make the switch from full-time professional to full-time parent and volunteer, she began spending far more time at the school. She was shocked by the values that the school's culture informally promoted. The student body of the school was highly homogeneous. Scholarships were limited in number, and the high tuition bill ensured that only children of high earners could attend. The school had developed a “keep up with the Joneses” culture of conformity and focus on money. While formal manners were emphasized with adults, students were rude to each other and intolerant of others who looked or acted “different.” There seemed to be no emphasis at school on monitoring this informal behavior outside of the classroom. The school friends that her child brought home to play largely reflected the values of the school. These values were not at all aligned with hers and her*

husband's. She began to realize that the informal social environment of the school was far more influential than the formal character program. They sought and found a school where both the formal rules and informal expectations better fit their values about student conduct.



Janet, a divorced mother of one son, enrolled her child Mark in a school where students were expected to set their own group norms for behavior and work through conflicts on their own. Janet liked this approach, as it reflected her belief that children must learn to set their own personal boundaries. But in November, Janet was called to the principal's office to discuss her son's behavior. The principal liked Mark, and thought he just needed a little coaching to improve his behavior. The principal was confident that Mark could work things out, all kids could really, and he just wanted her to be aware of the issue. One month later, Janet was horrified to overhear another mother telling a friend about how her son had been bullied repeatedly by "this awful pack of boys, especially a boy named Mark – do you know him?" To which the other mother replied, "No, but I have heard about that group. I guess they're just still learning. They are boys, after all." The next day, Janet began to hunt for another school for her son. She found one for the following year that had a very clear focus on values that were like hers, but where the discipline policy was very clear, with specified, increasingly unsavory punishments for "bullying." Within a year, her son seemed happier and more affectionate towards her, but just as important his behavior had changed significantly, and he was, as his teacher told her, "one of my easy kids."

### **Values about School-Wide Expectations and Rules on Student Conduct: What They Are, Why They're Important**

You probably have expectations about how your child should behave at home and elsewhere, and you have values that underlie those expectations. Kindness. Respect for others. Honesty. These are all social values that communicate how we expect our children to relate to others. The particular social behaviors parents value most differ from family to family.

You may want your family's values and expectations for behavior to be reinforced actively by your child's school. A school reinforces values not just with what's taught in the classroom, but also through its rules, behavioral expectations and other aspects of "culture." If you have strong preferences, and feel that your values must be reinforced at school, then you'll want to ensure that your child's school culture fits. A school's culture is defined by both formal policies

that set *expectations* for student behavior and *actual* student and teacher behavior allowed, both in and out of the classroom. Common cues parents can observe include these:

- Manners expected with other students and adults
- Dress (expected and actual)
- General discipline policies and practices
- Honor code (concerning both academic honesty and other student responsibilities)
- Other behaviors expected in the school community

While there are many cultural aspects of a school that most adults would agree are more desirable than others (e.g., kindness among children is reinforced, rudeness is discouraged), some values are more subject to opinion.

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*If you give your children a strong moral compass, they can be adventurous in the world knowing they won't get lost.*

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For example, consider three schools with differing dress codes. School A requires navy and white uniforms to establish equity in appearance among students in an economically diverse population. School B's dress code requires collared shirts for boys, no jeans, and prescribed dress lengths for girls, to establish a sense that all students are meeting a certain standard of social refinement. School C's dress code simply requires that students be fully clothed (shoes, shirts and pants or dresses) and otherwise allows individuality of attire.

The other cultural aspects of those three schools would, most likely, reflect the underlying values expressed through their differing dress codes. School A most likely has a clearly expressed behavioral code, for students and staff, that includes values like "respect for others" regardless of economic background, interpersonal kindness, and a focus on common community goals. School B most likely has a strict code of discipline and reinforces formal manners in student-teacher interactions. School C would be more likely to encourage individuality and tolerance for diversity in social and academic interactions.

All three approaches have costs and benefits, but each creates a distinct social environment which may or may not align with your family's values. Dress codes are not always so well aligned with the rest of school culture, but they are one important cue.

### ***When is This a Priority for Your School Hunt?***

This is a Must Have if you have strong opinions about school rules and expectations regarding children's social behavior and general conduct. Consider the following factors that make this a more likely Must Have:

1. Your time with your child is very limited, or
2. You have difficulty teaching the religious, moral, or ethical lessons you want your child to learn, or

3. Your child is very susceptible to peer influence, or
4. You are very concerned about the values and behaviors your child is adopting at his or her current school, or how your child is treated by others at school.

If this is a Must Have for you, you should make your own list of the behaviors you want your child's school to reinforce and the cultural cues (manners, dress code, etc.) that are most important to you.

As you begin to take a closer look at schools, you will notice that some are more adept at reinforcing their intended values than others. Ones with explicit character programs – in which students and teachers actually spend time discussing values and behavior each week – are more likely to reinforce stated values and expected behaviors than schools with just a written policy. But even a school with a concrete character program may allow and even reinforce unintended behaviors in other ways. Look for warning signs such as students who are polite and respectful with adults but rude and mean-spirited with other students. If you have particular concerns related to your child or family (e.g., a child with an obvious physical disability, a child of a race different from most other students in a school), ask to speak with parents in similar situations to get the real scoop.

## Values about How Children Should Learn

*Jane and Carter were dissatisfied with the strict, structured environment of their second grader Sandy's classroom. They envisioned school as a place where their child should "learn how to learn." In Sandy's school, assignments were very much directed by the teachers, with explicit instructions and little room for students to pursue their own interests. The classroom reflected this, with desks all lined up in neat rows facing the front of the class. Jane and Carter hadn't really formed their opinions until they'd seen Sandy's classrooms in action over the years through their monthly classroom volunteering. They felt like Sandy was a robot, just following detailed instructions all the time. With their resolve building, Jane and Carter sought a school where their daughter could do more learning and discovery on her own and where teachers would earn her respect, not fear. They considered several schools and finally chose one with a "balanced" approach to learning. Sandy would spend about half of her learning time on self-directed activities and half on teacher-directed ones.*



*Jack attended kindergarten at a small private elementary school where children were encouraged to choose learning activities from work centers scattered throughout the classrooms. His parents had chosen the school*



*for its small, friendly environment. Teachers were “facilitators” to guide children when needed. Over the summer, Jack and his parents attended a family reunion including many cousins, two of whom were about Jack’s age. Jack’s parents were astonished to find that one of the cousins had begun reading in October and the other was just starting. Jack didn’t even know the letter sounds yet, as he rarely chose to do the “letter” work center at school. Concerned, they called the school director when they returned home. The director politely told them that the school did not “push” reading onto children until 3rd grade when end of grade testing began, but that children who were ready could certainly read at school if they wished. This reflected the philosophy of the school, which parents of students were expected to accept when they enrolled their children. Jack’s parents immediately sought and found another school with more structure. They found one where all students were expected to know letter sounds and begin reading by end of kindergarten, and the curriculum and teaching method supported this goal. Students still had a one hour block of time every day for activities of their own choice, but the rest of the day was teacher-directed (though often in small groups). By December of first grade, Jack was reading on a second grade level. He was very proud and called himself a “bookworm.”*

### **Values about How Children Should Learn: What They Are, Why They’re Important**

Many parents have either explicit or assumed values about how children should learn, and be taught, at school. These values often stem from a larger world view about the balance between following authority and the freedom of individuals. In the case of schools, the balance is between the authority of teachers to direct children and the freedom of children to explore and follow their interests. Even if you do not know of a specific teaching method you like best, you probably have an opinion about the authority vs. freedom issue.

This issue comes to the fore in two main ways: the *teaching method* used to instruct students, and the techniques employed for *classroom behavior management*.

**Teaching Method.** Teachers can help students learn in two major ways. They can use “teacher-directed” methods: telling children what they need to know through lectures, readings, chalkboard displays or other methods. Or they can use a “student discovery” approach: providing appropriate materials, perhaps with guiding questions and goals, that allow students to figure out new knowledge for themselves, often in activities of their own choosing. The first teaching style is that of “expert”: let me teach you what I know. The second is one more akin to “coach”: let me use what I know to stimulate and motivate you to learn for yourself. Both

styles can be effective when used well. The question for you, as parents, is whether you have a strong personal preference about how your child should learn. You may even have a strong desire for a *mixed* approach that uses both teacher-directed and student-discovery methods.

***Classroom Behavior Management.*** A teacher’s authority over children’s behavior in the classroom can take different forms, “controlling” (strict) and “developmental.” A controlling approach will include establishing clear rules and consequences for breaking them (as well as occasional rewards for adhering). A developmental approach includes more subtle tactics for influencing students’ behavior: coaching students to improve their self-control; frequent recognition and reward for positive behaviors and progress; and effective use of peers, parents and the principal to reinforce good behavior. Again, the question for you as parents is whether you have an inclination towards a particular classroom disciplinary style, and whether that is a Must Have for your child’s school. You also may have a strong preference for a mixed approach, teachers who employ both controlling and developmental tactics as each situation requires.

### ***When Are These Priorities for Your School Hunt?***

Teaching method is a Must Have only if you have a strong opinion about how your child should learn and be taught at school. Classroom behavior management is a Must Have only if you have a strong opinion about how behavior should be managed in your child’s classroom.

What if you philosophically favor a certain approach, but your child needs something different? For now, make note of your preferences. Better to be honest with yourself about your biases so you can take them into account. Later, you’ll have the chance to weigh them against your own child’s needs.

## **Your Role as Advocate for Your Child**

### ***Your Role as Advocate: What it Is, Why It’s Important***

The last family characteristic that will affect *how* your child learns at school is your ability as a parent to help your school understand your child’s needs. We hope this book will go a long way towards helping you *understand* your child, but you also have the sometimes intimidating task of *communicating* with your child’s school. In some cases, you may need to induce changes in your child’s school or even “go to the mat” to get what your child needs.

How well you are able to accomplish those tasks – understanding your child, communicating with and influencing a school – to meet your child’s needs will

greatly affect the importance of finding a perfect fit school for your child. *The more comfortable and capable you are acting as your child's advocate, the less important it is for you to find a school that perfectly fits your child.*

Some common barriers to acting as your child's advocate include time constraints, lack of confidence, language barriers, and cultural differences. You may have other barriers, either temporary or permanent.

Assess your abilities as a family team. In some families, one parent will be more comfortable than the other talking with teachers and principals. In others, a tag team effort will produce the best outcome. If you are a single parent, you may find help from friends or extended family members who know your child. We don't recommend showing up at the principal's office with all 25 members of your family clan! But it is perfectly acceptable for an aunt, uncle, grandparent or close friend who can be helpful in understanding and communicating about your child to get involved.

### ***When is This a Priority for Your School Hunt?***

Consider this a Must Have if you think that lack of time, confidence or other barriers will prevent you (or your family helpers) from acting as your child's advocate at school. In this case, it will be more important to seek a school that fits all your child's needs very closely, or one that offers a program highly individualized to each child. You will also want to look for a school that communicates well with parents, in both directions: sending out information about what's happening at school and how individual children are doing, and welcoming parents as partners in crafting each child's education.

**SNAP TO IT****What To Do**

- **Refer back to your Family “Quick Think”** on page 109 to refresh your memory regarding things that really stand out about your family. Estimated Time: 2 minutes
- **Use the Family Needs Summary** on page 110 to get a quick fix on the Fit Factor #2 *How Your Child Learns* characteristics. Estimated Time: 5 minutes
- **Use the Know Your Family’s Needs table** on page 375 to further clarify your family’s Fit Factor #2 characteristics and the importance of each for choosing a school. You need not read the whole table: focus only on items you believe are important for your family. Estimated Time: 15 minutes
- **Discuss your family’s needs** with your spouse or other parenting partner. Estimated Time: As needed
- **Record your Must Haves and Nice to Haves** on your *Family Needs Summary* (page 110). Estimated Time: 10 minutes

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## You can now take charge of your child's educational destiny!

If you are one of the tens of millions of parents picking a first school or considering a change for your child, *Picky Parent Guide* is the **definitive action manual and reference guide** you need. Built off decades of the best research, *Picky Parent Guide* delivers simple wisdom that works. Easy to grasp and inspiring to use, the Confident Choice Tools make choosing and working with your child's school a snap! You can relax knowing that you are doing everything a parent can to enhance your child's success in school and life.

### A great value! Here's what you get inside this book:

- ✓ Dozens of customized, practical ways to improve your child's school performance
- ✓ Complete step-by-step Confident Choice Tool Kit to help you choose the right school, without wasting hundreds of hours and potentially thousands of dollars
- ✓ Point-by-point discussion to help you match your child and family needs with schools
- ✓ Complete research-based introduction to the seven universal Great School Quality Factors that any parent can learn to recognize. Unbiased with respect to school type
- ✓ Filled with surprising, often touching stories of school choice success
- ✓ School types, teaching methods and educational lingo explained and demystified
- ✓ Customized questions, targeting your needs, to ask when visiting schools
- ✓ Stress-saving tips on getting in to your favorite schools
- ✓ Plainspoken advice on how to interact with school staff to get what your child needs
- ✓ Dozens of ways to get for your child what you can't get at your current school

... and much more!

"All parents should have this book by the time their kids are 3 years old, if not sooner." -**Johnathan Williams**, Co-Founder and Co-Director, *The Accelerated School*, Los Angeles, *The Time Magazine Elementary School of the Year 2001*

"These tools eased our worries and helped us choose just the right school for our child and family."

-**Gray Dunaway**, Mortgage Broker and Mother of Two

"I love this book!...*Picky Parent Guide* will enable parents to make the best decisions possible for their children."

-**Gaynor McCown**, Executive Director, *The Teaching Commission*

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