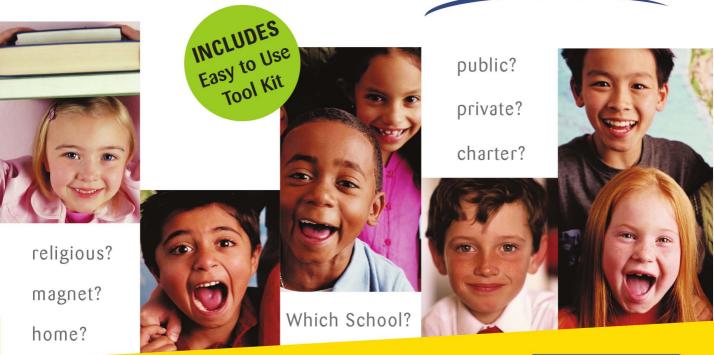


THE ELEMENTARY YEARS (K-6) Choose your child's school with CONFIDENCE



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Step Two: Chapter 9 What are Your Family's Social and Practical Needs?

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 9

- ➤ Fit Factor #3 is Social Issues: these are your family's preferences about characteristics of other students, and their parents, at your child's school. The four family preferences for Fit Factor # 3 are these:
 - ✓ Parent Community: Your preferences about the parents of students attending your child's school.
 - ✓ Parent Involvement: Your preferences about the level and type of parent involvement in your child's school.
 - ✓ Student Community: Your preferences about the students attending your child's school.
 - ✓ *School or School Type:* Your preference for your child to attend a certain school, school type, or school using a certain design.
- ➤ Fit Factor #4 is Practical Matters: these are your family's logistical needs and financial constraints affecting your choice of schools. The six family items for Fit Factor #4 are these:
 - ✓ *Child Care:* your needs for care during non-school hours.
 - ✓ *Schedule: your* daily and yearly scheduling needs.
 - ✓ *Transportation:* your need for your child's transportation to and from school.
 - ✓ Location: your need for your child's school to be located in a particular place.
 - ✓ Your Other Children: coordination of your multiple children's educations.
 - ✓ *Money:* money available in your family to pay for school and related expenses.
- ➤ You can identify the Fit Factor #3 and #4 characteristics most important for your family by thinking about and discussing your values, preferences and needs in the listed areas and by assessing your financial resources.
- Remember, you must identify the few most important characteristics of your family to match with schools for a Great Fit. Each of the Fit Factor #3 and #4 items will be a Must Have for some families.



Family Fit Factors #3 and 4 What are Your Family's Social and Practical Needs?

Regina, single mother of a boy, age 5, and a girl, age 7, works cleaning houses while her children are in school. At night, she waits tables at a nearby pub. Her mother keeps the children until she gets home at midnight. She needs a school that ends as early in the day as possible. With her cleaning done by 2:00 p.m., she wants to spend the rest of the afternoon with her children. But she also is concerned about the social group in her children's school. She has seen the depressing downfall of so many boys in her neighborhood and wants her own son to be exposed to many boys (and their parents) with high expectations for a bright future. The neighborhood school won't do. Private school is out for financial reasons (and she doesn't see scholarships as likely for her children right now). She is happy to discover – and fortunately able to get both children into – a public charter school with the right schedule and a diverse group of students from all over the city.



Ming and Li Zhang's first child Margaret was a chatty preschooler. Ming and Li had both moved to the United States as children with their parents. When Margaret was born, they were determined to help her fit into the dominant culture. But as she grew, they realized how little she knew of her heritage (Ming's parents had moved back to China and Li's parents were deceased). They live in urban San Francisco, in the Marina district, where Ming is a radiologist and Li a patent attorney. While the city as a whole has a strong Chinese culture, their neighborhood and preschool have few children of Margaret's ethnic heritage. They read in the newspaper about an experimental Chinese language and culture immersion program in which half the children are native English speakers and half native Chinese speakers. Investigating further, they were convinced of the program's academic rigor. They applied, and Margaret was waitlisted. Late in the kindergarten year, she was admitted off the waiting list. They jumped at the opportunity for Margaret to spend time in a community with the perfect mix of students.



Donna, an investment banker, and her developer husband Ran, were in conflict between two private schools. One is a large, old-line traditional favorite of their social set, and is just five blocks from their home. The other is a new school, located 25 minutes away in good traffic, which has drawn many families away from the traditional schools with its focus on diversity (many scholarships are offered to achieve this goal), community service, and individualized instruction. The social connections among parents at the old-line school are strong and would be beneficial to both Donna's and Ran's businesses. Yet, Donna became concerned about the "bubble world" in which many of the children attending this school seemed to live. She was just not impressed by the lack of worldliness of these children, and frankly, many of their parents. The new school seemed to have drawn away just the sort of people she wants to influence her child and family. Satisfied with the quality of the new school, Donna and Ran ultimately chose it for its parent and student community, so in line with what they want to foster in their own family. They formed a carpool with neighbors to limit their driving.



SOCIAL ISSUES

Some parents begin the search for schools with social issues at the top of the list. With so little information available about the core job of schools – educating children – parents turn instead to easier-to-observe social matters. But even if you are concerned primarily with academic affairs, you should pause a moment to consider your social needs and preferences.

There are four broad social issues that you will want to consider:

- ➤ The parent community
- > Parent involvement in school life
- ▶ The student community
- > Your biases or preferences for a particular school, school type or school design

The Parent Community

What It Is, Why It's Important

Some parents very much want to take advantage of the parent community brought together by their children's schools. Others will not spend much time with other parents (but remember that your child may) because of work or lack of interest. You must set your own priorities and decide both how important the parent community is to you and what characteristics you seek.

Some characteristics of other parents you might want to consider include these:

- **Friends:** Is it important for your child's school to have parents you already know, or even particular parents?
- > Neighbors: Is it important for you to have neighbors at your child's school?
- Location: Is it important for you to have other parents from a particular location (other than your neighborhood)?
- ► *Values:* Is it important for other parents to have the same values as you? Which values?
- Social behavior and manners: Are there particular ways you want, or don't want, other children's parents to act?
- Social and economic status: Do you have preferences about the diversity or makeup of the parent community?
- Race and ethnicity: Do you have preferences about the diversity or makeup of the parent community?
- > Other characteristics: What else do you want, or not want, in the parent community at your child's school?

When Is This a Priority for Your School Hunt?

Be honest with yourself. If rubbing shoulders with those in a certain social set is important to you, confess to yourself right now. If your children are living an exclusive life of privilege and financial wealth, and you want your entire family to be exposed to more economic diversity, then make that a priority. If you want to be part of a community that includes many others from your ethnic or cultural background, say so. And so on. Think about it, talk about it, and decide what's important to you. Make this a Must Have if you have strong preferences about any of the items listed above.

Parent Involvement

What It Is, Why It's Important

Some parents, but by no means all, want to become actively involved in their children's schools. Let us tell you what the research says about this. *Scads* of articles, in both the popular press and academic journals, have appeared calling for more parent participation in schools. This goes beyond helping your own child. It is about expressing your commitment and contributing your talents to improve and operate your child's school for the betterment of all students, not just your own.

There is good research linking parent involvement *at home in your own child's education* to student achievement. In fact, the research is detailed enough that we pretty well know how parents should – and shouldn't – help their children outside of school hours (see Chapter 18).

But despite all the time and effort put into recruiting and organizing parents to become involved in schools generally, there is little evidence that parent volunteerism at this level helps children's academic learning overall. The kind of parent effort we are talking about includes volunteering in the classroom or media center, attending school meetings, etc. Some studies have found a small correlation between the level of parent involvement and test scores. However, the schools with higher test scores also are those in which students start school *already* achieving at higher levels – and the parents of these fast-start kids are also more likely to volunteer at school. So, it is more likely that what the parents have done *at home* to prepare their kids for a good start in school, rather than the less focused volunteer time at school, brings up the tests scores.

That said, should you care about volunteering at your child's school? Oh yes! Here's why:

- If your volunteer activities are appropriately focused, you can *simulate the proven, beneficial* at-home interactions for children who do not have parents able to play this role.
- ➤ If your volunteer activities enhance one or more Great School Quality Factors (e.g., allowing teachers to work with smaller groups of children), then you may directly improve school quality.
- Your targeted activities may improve the school's fit with your needs or your child's.
- You may have special skills to do necessary work that your school would otherwise have to fund from the school budget, freeing up money for qualityfocused expenses.
- > You will feel good about it and enjoy getting to know teachers and other parents.
- You will understand your child's school environment better and thus be able to help your own child better with both academic and social challenges.

Even avid parent volunteers will average only a few hours per week at their children's schools. Your child will spend at least 30 hours per week there.

- Your child's teacher will feel appreciated and may return the favor with attention for your child.
- ➤ If fundraising proceeds are used directly to support one or more Great School Quality Factors or a Fit Factor important to you, then your fundraising activities can directly improve the school's offerings.

You must decide whether you would like to be active in your child's school, what role you would like to play, and how important this is to you for choosing a school. Many parents who very much want to volunteer at school have a preference for the type of volunteer work:

- ➤ Helping with school's daily life. This includes volunteering for classroom activities, helping in the media center, chaperoning field trips and the like. These activities, if properly focused to meet school goals, can contribute to the quality of a school.
- > Decision-making. This includes volunteering as a member of a school advisory or governing board and similarly empowered roles. Parents who understand school quality can have a powerful impact in these roles, influencing and helping the school to improve in significant ways. But parents sometimes pressure schools to focus on misleading quality "red herrings." If you're reading this book thoroughly, consider yourself a good candidate for a decision-making role in your child's school.
- ► *Fundraising.* This includes organizing or participating in fundraising activities, such as school carnivals, book fairs, dances, candy and wrapping paper sales, and so forth. Some parents want to contribute time to such activities only if the fundraisers also serve an educational purpose (e.g., book fairs), while others prefer those that promote social interaction among parents (e.g., dances, dinners, auctions and the like).

When is This a Priority for Your School Hunt?

If you have a strong preference about the type and level of time contribution parents ought to make, then this is a Must Have.

- ➤ If you strongly prefer a very active parent community and are able to commit this time yourself, you will want to look for a school that expects and gets the parent involvement you want.
- ► If your time or interest is limited, you will want to ensure that parent volunteer expectations or requirements are not too burdensome for your situation.

Make this a Must Have if you have strong needs or preferences one way or the other.

Parent volunteers focusing time directly on Great School Quality Factors can make all the difference for the children they affect.

The Student Community

What It Is, Why It's Important

With abundant news stories about scary incidents in schools, and some about inspiring activities initiated by students, most parents are at least somewhat concerned about the student community at a school. Many of you have great hopes and great fears about the values and behaviors of your child's peers, and how they will influence your child. Indeed, your child's peers, both in her classroom and elsewhere in a school, will most certainly influence her view of the world and her behaviors. That influence may be to reinforce your own family's values, or to take your child in a very different direction from what you as a parent anticipated. This issue often takes a great leap in importance as children move from elementary to middle school, but many parents are concerned about their children's school peers from the start.

You will need to identify the student body profile you want and decide how important it is to you that your chosen school fits this profile. You may find that what you want in a student community mirrors what you want in a parent community, reflecting your overall values.

Characteristics you may want to consider for the student community include these:

- ► *Friends:* Do you want your child to have school friends he or she already knows, or do you want your child to forge new friendships?
- Neighbors: Do you want your child to go to school with children from your neighborhood?
- Location: Do you want your child to go to school with children who live in a certain place (other than your neighborhood)?
- > *Values:* Is it important for other children to have the same values as your family? Which values?
- Manners and social behavior: Are there particular ways you want, or don't want, other children to act?
- Student achievement: Do you want your child to go to school with students who generally perform at higher, similar, or lower levels than your child?
- Social and economic status: Do you have preferences about the diversity or makeup of the student body?
- Race and ethnicity: Do you have preferences about the diversity or makeup of the student body?
- > Gender diversity: Do you want an all-boys or all-girls program for your child?
- > Other characteristics: What else do you want, or not want, in the student community at your child's school?

Peer Race and Income: Will They Affect My Child's Learning?

One question that many parents have is whether the makeup of the student body at a school will affect *their children's academic achievement*. Should you avoid schools with certain kinds of student populations, or seek out schools with some other profile? The short answer is "no." The main determinants of whether your child will succeed in a particular school are the school's quality and fit with your child and family needs (particularly those needs affecting academic learning). As you look at schools, these should be your focus.

Why? Interestingly, many parent assumptions about peer effects do not hold water under high quality research scrutiny about student results. Those that do are almost entirely explained by school quality shortfalls, not characteristics of the students. Does that mean the makeup of the student body is irrelevant? Not necessarily. Mediocre and low quality schools often fall into two traps in response to their student populations. The traps are created not by the peers in the school, but by the sub-par response of the school to its students.

The first trap is this: seemingly homogeneous student populations (e.g., all white, all African American, all middle class, all poor) can tempt school leaders and staff to assume that all of the students are the same, when in fact (as you know from our Child Chapters 2 - 5) individual students' needs vary considerably. These schools mistakenly adopt a one-size-fits-all approach, which often lowers expectations for many students who could progress further academically, both to grade level and well beyond. So not surprisingly, high quality research shows that students attending very homogeneous schools, with children all of one race (all white, all black) or all poor, achieve inferior academic results *compared to their peers in somewhat more diverse schools*.

The second trap is this: extremely diverse schools that do not have a strong quality backbone to support an individualized approach to education can fail for many children, too. More and more, these schools are catching and riding the wave towards differentiated learning, which as you'll see in our chapters about school quality, is critical to individual children's academic success.

In summary, the academic effect of peers is not always what parents have imagined. It's often not the peers that are the challenge, but the response of the school to its student population. Use our Great School and Great Fit tools if you want to ensure that a school does the most for your child academically, regardless of who else attends the school. (An important note: high quality research about peer effects has been conducted almost exclusively in student populations of white and African-American students. We look forward to sharing more information about other growing populations in the United States when high quality research is available.)

When is This a Priority for Your School Hunt?

You will need to decide what aspects of the student community are Must Haves for you. Research has consistently indicated that the seven Great School Quality Factors we explain in later chapters have a far more positive and potent impact on student achievement than a student's peers. You simply can't judge a school's quality based on what kinds of students make up the school community.

But you may have strong social preferences unrelated to your child's academic learning. These may be a stronger factor in your school choice if your ability to influence your child is limited or your child is very susceptible to peer influence.

I Want My Child to Attend a Certain School, School Type or School Design

What It Is, Why It's Important

Some of you may be embarrassed to admit it, but you would never send your child to a private school even though you can afford one. Others of you feel certain that no public school could offer the quality of education, or social contacts, you want for your child. Still others have it nailed down even further: the school you attended, your alma mater, produced the very best years of your life and you want your child to have the same experience. Or conversely, some feel you would never send your child to the school you attended; it was an awful place for you, and you'd never subject your child to that! Or you might have a bias towards a particular *design*, such as traditional, Montessori, or International Baccalaureate. Carefully consider whether you have strong feelings about a particular school, school type or design, including:

- ✔ Bias toward a certain school
- ✓ Bias against a certain school
- ✓ Bias *toward* a certain school *type*
- ✓ Bias against certain school types
- ✓ Bias *toward* a certain school *design*
- ✓ Bias against certain school designs

Whatever your bias, it's healthy for you to be candid with yourself about it. Remember that there are several school *types*:

- District public schools
- Public magnet schools

Does the Grade Span of Your Child's School Matter?

Among the schools available to you, you may find varying grade spans. Some stick to a three-part model: elementary only (grades K–5 or 6 typically), middle only (grades 6 or 7–8), and high only (grades 9–12) or something quite similar. But some schools serve students in grades K–12, others K–8, K–3 or other configurations. And more and more schools include a pre-kindergarten year. Does it matter which grade span you choose?

Here's the scoop. The traditional grade breaks are largely based on social maturity and behavior changes typical among children. Indeed, even K–12 and K–8 schools often divide students into different campuses to avoid mixing of children in very different social phases. In a high quality school, grade breaks will matter little for academics, as Chapters 11 and 12 explain. But *you* may have preferences about whether your delightfully naïve 7-year-old should be exposed to overly-confident, worldly 13-year-olds. If so, make a note of it when considering Social Issues.

Perhaps more important to many a parent considering selective or limited-admissions schools, both public and private, is concern about getting your child admitted in later grades if you do not enroll in the earliest years. See the box *Up Your Odds: Understanding the Admissions Game* in Chapter 17 for more about that.

- > Public charter schools
- > Private religious schools
- > Private independent schools
- ► Home schooling

And there are many school *designs*, which *may be used in any type* of school, including:

- ► Traditional
- ► Montessori
- ► International Baccalaureate
- ► Core Knowledge
- ➤ Many, many others! See pages 172-73 for more.

You may feel a bias because of family pressures, particularly if you live in the town or city where you grew up. For example, it might simply be easier for you to opt for the school your siblings have chosen for their children or that your parents have supported with financial gifts. If choosing a certain school is indeed a Must Have, make it so. But you will need to make sure that your anointed school does not fall far short on any of your child's Must Haves and do a thorough quality exam, too. You will need to ensure that you accommodate for the school's shortcomings. You will feel only regret down the road if you realize that family or personal loyalty led you to put your child in a school where he was destined to be a fish out of water. On the other hand, if you ensure that your very creative child focuses her non-school activities (and some out-of-school friendships) on creative interests, then sending her to your traditional alma mater might be just fine. And so on.

If your child's best fit school is a type or design you had not considered, being *aware* of your bias might actually help you overcome it in the best interest of your child. Research has *not* consistently shown one *type or design* of school to be superior in quality – consistently producing students who achieve more than other students whose parents have similar incomes and education levels. The seven Great School Quality Factors have a much greater effect on student learning than the type or design of school.

Nonetheless, you may hold biases from your personal experience. Your feelings may be entangled with your values about teaching method, classroom behavior management, social peers for yourself and child or other aspects of school culture. You may, in fact, be able to find several schools that fit your needs and wants without adhering to the precise school, school type or design you had in mind. If you feel a bias about a certain school, school type or design, take time to jot down in words, or to discuss with your spouse or a trusted friend, *why* you feel that bias. As you become savvier about assessing school quality and fit issues, you will better be able to put this "gut" feeling into words and analyze it to see whether your bias still holds true.

When Is This a Priority for Your School Hunt?

We say: clarify your biases and include them in your decision process. If you would choose a certain school (or type or design) over a different one of better quality and fit, make this a Must Have. Or, note it as a Nice to Have in the event of a tie. Rest assured that it is better to be honest about what you want and need as a parent and family. Trust yourself to reconcile your bias with your child's needs and quality issues later.

PRACTICAL MATTERS

If logistics and finances are not big factors for you, then you might wonder how any parent could, in good conscience, pick a school based solely on these factors. But many of you will find one or more of the following circumstances strongly influencing your school choice:

- Dual careers limited time with child
- ➤ Multiple jobs limited time with child
- > Long work hours for the working parent (even when the other stays at home)
- ► Single parenting
- ➤ Multiple children
- ► Long distances (rural areas)
- ► Long commutes (crowded urban areas)
- ► A budget already stretched too thin

Most families have some restrictions on time, not to mention money, which will place constraints on school options. Certainly there are exceptions. Some families drive long distances and perform budgeting feats to place their children in the perfect school. But this should be necessary only if your child has unusual needs or if your area has very limited school options (of poor quality or poor fit).

Take stock of the practical constraints on your family and include them in your school hunt. For most families, practical matters will be Nice to Haves that you will be willing to bend if a school of superb quality and fit comes along. But if there are logistical elements that are truly Must Haves, by all means include them in your school search! Most of the practical matters are straightforward. Money is the one exception, and we will help you think about this one in some detail. But first, let's tick through the others so that your school hunt list will be complete.

The practical matters you will want to consider include these:

- Child Care: Do you need child care before or after school, during holidays and vacations, or during the summer?
- ➤ Schedule: Do you have constraints on your schedule, because of your work, your other children's schedules or other activities? Consider both daily schedule and yearly calendar.
- **Transportation:** What are your transportation needs, before and after school?
- Location: How important is school location? Is proximity to your home or work important?
- > Your Other Children: What other conflicts with (or impact on) your other children are you concerned about (logistical or otherwise)?
- ► *Money:* How much money is available for your family to pay for school and related expenses?

Child Care

For this you need to ask yourself what your current and future child care needs are likely to be: what kind of care does your child need, when, and how much you can afford to pay? Then you must consider all the *sources* of child care available to you. Finally, you will want to compare your best non-school option to school care, in terms of quality, convenience, time covered and cost.

Child Care Needs:

- Consider what coverage you need in the hours before and after school, as well as holidays, vacations and summer.
- > Consider all of your children's needs if you have more than one child.
- Consider any changes you are planning to make in your work or other activities that will affect child care needs.
- ➤ What services will you need from your child care provider? This may depend on the ages of your children and the amount of time they spend in care. Do you just need a safe environment for an hour or so of free play each afternoon? Or are educational environment and developmental appropriateness issues? Help with homework and time to do it? Structured activities or free play?
- > Will your child need transportation to and from care?
- ▶ How much can you pay for the child care that you need?

Child Care Sources:

- Your current care: what type of child care are you using now? Can you keep using this same source after your child begins (or changes) school?
- ► Day care center
- Family home day care (small group of children at someone else's home)
- > Nanny, your own or shared with another family
- > Relatives, neighbors or friends
- > Church, temple or other religious institutions
- School
- What are other sources of care in your city or town? Seek out your local child care resource and referral agency. Many cities have them now, and they can be a terrific source of information about what's available to you.
- ➤ How much would each of your options cost? How much does your favorite option, aside from school care, cost? This will give you a clear number to compare as you look at schools and the care they provide.

To the extent that you will have child care needs not met elsewhere, you must decide whether it is desirable (Nice to Have) or essential (Must Have) for school to provide your child with care. Include this in your *Personalized Great Fit Checklist*.

Schedule

You will need to consider both your daily and yearly schedule needs. If your other children are in schools with an early or late schedule, then having your third child in one with a similar schedule might be ideal (particularly if you work or have many other activities to fit into your day). On the other hand, some stayat-home parents are *happy* to have their children in different schools with different daily and yearly schedules, because this gives them precious time alone with each child. You will need to decide what factors prevail and how important each is in choosing a school. Things to consider include these:

- ➤ Timing of morning and afternoon transportation for child(ren), especially with regard to multiple school schedules and conflicts with parents' work
- Impact of schedule on children's extracurricular activities (e.g., late schedule leaves less time for most activities)
- Desirability of having time alone with each child, on daily basis and during holidays and vacations
- Desirability of having time for your children to be together (for your benefit or theirs), daily and during vacations
- Impact of schools with differing vacation schedules on your family's vacations (especially if you like to travel *during* typical school year)
- > Other schedule issues you may have.

Transportation

Think about what you can provide in the way of transportation for your child. Then you can determine what assistance you need from your child's school.

- ➤ Can your child walk to school (with or without you)?
- > Can you drive your child to school?
- > Would a neighborhood carpool meet your transportation needs?
- ➤ For older children, are there alternative transportation means available, such as city bus or subway?
- > Are your morning and afternoon transportation needs different?
- Do you have time constraints, such as a certain time by which you need your child to be picked up in the morning or dropped off in the afternoon?
- > Does your transportation need to be coordinated with your child care?

Having considered the above questions, do you need school busing or other school-provided transportation? If so, what are your Must Haves and Nice to Haves in terms of timing, cost, pick up and drop off location?

Some of you may have strong feelings about one mode or another of transportation. Put your feelings into perspective when you consider your child. While some of you may have found carpooling a great way to ruin neighborhood friendships (how many of us make our best buddies when we're sleepy or worn out?), it saves gas and parent time. Carpooling also lets your children develop relationships with other adults. Children also have a chance to get to know other children who live nearby, even when they are not exactly the same age or best pals.

Busing has negative connotations for many parents, too. You may be concerned about the amount of time your child may spend on the bus. But riding on a school bus, even without a seat belt, is significantly safer than riding in a car (*and* environment-friendly). Many (but certainly not all) children enjoy the unstructured social time with a variety of other children that a school bus ride provides. Others find the lack of structure unnerving. A child who is the target of teasing may find the limited adult supervision typical on school buses excruciating. A socially outgoing child, or even a quiet but self-confident one, will be fine on a safe school bus in most instances.

Location

Location can be a significant factor if you begin to consider very far away or very close alternatives or if you have severe time constraints. A less-than-perfect school one block away might be preferable to an almost perfect school an hour's commute from home. Of course this depends on *just how different* the two schools are in quality, fit, and distance, and on how crunched *you* are for time. Your child's time is an issue, as well, since time on the bus or sitting in carpool is time that could be spent on favorite extracurricular activities, homework, exercise or good old fashioned down time. The extra time you have in the afternoon *may*, in some cases, allow you to accommodate for a nearby school's weaknesses.

You may prefer a school close to work rather than home. If you work outside the home, you will have extra time at work – and no less with your child – if you can pick her up from a school near your work.

Location also will also affect other Fit Factors, such as having neighbors and friends in school, your involvement in activities at school, transportation and child care. Only you can decide if closeness is a Must Have or merely a minor convenience. Consider these questions:

- ▶ Does location matter to you, and why?
- ➤ Do you prefer a location close to home, work, or your other children's schools?
- Does your child's school location impact your transportation or child care needs?

Your Other Children

If you have more than one child, you most likely will have touched upon the most obvious multi-child issues in the social and other logistical sections. The practicality of dealing with multiple schools as a parent, of ensuring transportation, of differing daily and perhaps yearly schedules may drive some of your school decision-making.

If you have children who are far apart in age, you may be dealing with multiple schools anyway. Unless you opt for a K–12 school with a single campus, or luck into appropriate schools with similar schedules located near each other, you're going to feel like a professional juggler before it's over! Of course, if you've juggled baby plus toddler plus older child already, you're no amateur. Your life is already full of twists and turns. You will have to decide whether having each child in a better quality, better fit school to meet their individual needs is worth a bit more complexity.

Living in a Sibling's Shadow

For any of you who followed a well-known older sibling to school, you know that an older sibling can cast a large and looming shadow in the mind of the younger. Most children yearn to find and express their individuality, and this pursuit most certainly is valued and encouraged in our society. But it can be hard for a child to find his own path when one has already been cut by a sibling; it means working harder to be himself than to follow along.

On the upside, siblings can offer personal, social and academic support to each other when they attend the same school at the same time. They are a ready-made chat in the hallway or at lunch time that puts both at ease. They can be on-the-scene trouble-shooters when problems arise. They are the people one can tell about the A+ right away without feeling like a bragger, or cry to about the unexpected F with no fear of rejection. If your children support each other, having them in the same school can be a treat.

However, if one sibling – no matter how smart or successful – makes the other feel small, constrained, less capable and empowered than the other would feel elsewhere, then having them in different schools where they can blaze their own trails may be the better decision. Sometimes, an extremely successful child can induce those feelings in a sibling unintentionally. Similarly, if you have a child who has had severe behavioral or academic problems, you might consider other schools for younger siblings. Siblings cast shadows both positive and negative. You won't want your younger child to feel hesitant about shining more brightly than the older one. Avoiding the good kid, bad kid comparison is easier when children are in different schools altogether.

We are not denying the many practical benefits to you as parents of having your children in the same school. If your children show many of the same interests, needs and talents, or they are quite self-confident about their different interests and talents, by all means consider the same school. But if you have a child, older *or* younger, who casts a very strong shadow, then consider the impact on your other children of having them in the same school.

Money

If you want to consider private schools for your child, you will need to spend some time determining just how much you can afford to pay. Will it be worth the expense? In some cases yes and others no. (See box *Does Paying More Get More for Your Child?*)

Your job for *now* is to determine how much money you can contribute towards your child's education, *if* needed. You'll benefit from this exercise even if you think you cannot afford private school. It will free you to consider more appropriate options, and at the end of the day you will be better for knowing exactly why you made the school decision you did. And even if you decide not to go private, you will know what funds you can make available for outside-of-school programs that meet your child's needs.

Most private schools have some scholarship students and students whose parents work extra to afford private school, so don't assume you will be alone if you stretch to afford one. (Of course, if you are dripping with money from the sale of your soaring start-up or the family till, you may not need to bother with this exercise, unless you want to get some perspective on your child's classmates!)

Many of you are already spending money on your child's education and schoolhour care. Any funds you currently spend on the following items can be rolled into one lump and reallocated for your child's education:

- Child care during school hours
- Child care immediately before and after school
- > Preschool tuition, fees, donations and gifts
- > School tuition, fees, donations and gifts
- School supplies for home
- Educational toys for home
- ► Extracurricular activities
- Educational outings and travel
- ► Clothing for your child
- Breakfast and lunch for your child

Don't let the money tail wag the quality and fit dog. Choose a school for quality and fit first, not the price tag.

Does Paying More Get More for Your Child?

Will paying more money get your child a better education? Maybe. Maybe not. High quality, unbiased research says there's little relationship between school cost and quality. There's little evidence that tuition-charging private schools, on average, teach children more than free public schools do. And public schools with more money to spend don't necessarily outpace schools with less (for similar students).

That said, money well spent – for example, to clarify high educational standards, to monitor individual student progress, to ensure that every student actually learns in school – improves quality. In fact, a wealthy school, private or public, that focuses its money on real quality and Fit Factors important to the stated mission can achieve phenomenal results for its students and their families. But the fact is that some wealthy schools, public and private, fritter away funds on flashy, parent-enticing gimmicks that do not improve student learning. Many well-established private schools, with their easy flow of student siblings, alumni children and new families looking for a sure thing, fall victim to the same complacency that haunts many public schools with captive audiences. No doubt, many private schools use their financial resources to provide exceptional quality for every child admitted. But some well-established schools begin to believe the myth that selective admissions make a student body homogeneous, allowing a cookie-cutter approach to instruction.

Sadly, we have heard parents tell tales of their children – highly gifted in academics, creativity, or the arts – whose gifts were left to rot on the vine despite a high tuition bill. Similarly, students who struggle, perhaps admitted by virtue of alumni or sibling status or with an undiagnosed mild disability, are asked to seek tutoring from outside sources instead of having their needs met at school. And so on. It simply takes too much effort to meet these children's needs consistently at school when that school has become complacent about individual children's learning.

No matter what you pay, many of you will want to know that your child is getting the best you can afford. How can you tell whether it's worth the money for private school? In some cases, it will be the best money you ever spend and the greatest gift you ever give your child. In others, it's a waste of your money and a loss for your child. Fortunately, you will have resources parents before you have not had. The seven Great School Quality Factors and your *Personalized Great Fit Checklist* will help you make an excellent assessment of your Target Schools' strengths and weaknesses. You will be able to compare schools directly on the factors most important for your child and family, and you can make a clear-headed decision about whether and when the extra money for private tuition will in fact buy a superior education for *your* child.

An Example

Let's assume that Ann, a widow, is paying \$4,000 per year for her son Roger's full time child care, \$600 for his clothes, \$400 for his lunches on school days, plus an additional \$1,000 for school supplies, educational toys and educational outings. So, she is paying a total of \$6,000 for these items altogether.

A great quality private school offering the traditional approach that Roger needs is on Ann's way to work. The private school tuition is \$8,000, seemingly out of reach on her wages. However, books are included in tuition. Uniforms are required, dropping Roger's annual clothing needs to \$350. And Roger qualifies for a partial needbased scholarship that will cover \$3,500 of tuition and a school lunch pass. Ann's mother, who felt uncomfortable keeping Roger by herself all day when he was younger, is happy to keep him from 3:30 when the bus drops him off until his Mom gets home at 5:30. If Ann's spending on school supplies, educational toys and outings stays steady, then her spending will actually decline by \$150.

	Ann's Preschool Spending	Ann's Private School Cost
Tuition/Fees	\$0	\$8000-\$3500 = \$4500
Child Care	\$4000	\$0
Clothes	\$600	\$350
Lunches	\$400	\$0
School Books	\$0	\$0
Supplies/Toys	\$1000	\$1000
Total	\$6000	\$5850

If Ann had assumed that the private school was out of reach, then Roger – and Ann – would have lost out!

Steps to Determine How Much Money You Have for School

Your goal is to determine three facts about your family:

- 1. *Current* School Spending: How much are you paying for school-related child expenses *now*?
- 2. *Target* School Spending: How much could you *comfortably* pay, without unwanted changes in work or debt, once your child starts school?
- 3. *Maximum* School Spending: What is the *most* you could pay, with acceptable changes in work and debt, should your best quality, best fit school require it?

In some families, these three numbers will be the same: you are paying all you can now, and there is no tolerable way to increase your income. Or numbers 1 and 2 may be the same: you could obtain more money, but only by taking on debt or having a second job (or a stay-at-home parent going back to work unexpectedly). Only you can decide how far you are willing to push yourself and your financial security.

Take these steps to assess your finances (or use our *Heads or Tails Money Worksheet* on page 154):

- 1. Tally the *amount you are spending now* on your child's clothing, schoolhour food, child care, school donations, teacher gifts and other education and care-related expenses. This is your "Current" spending.
- 2. Determine how much "*extra*" *income*, above your current yearly income, you are likely to make each year between now and when your child graduates from high school. (You may extend this timeline out to cover multiple children and college years, if you like). "Extra" income is anything more than you are making now, but not including an average 3.5% annual increase in pay. Possible sources include:
 - ▶ Raises you expect that will exceed the 3.5% cost-of-living level.
 - Increases in the amount of work you or your spouse does. For example, if Mom or Dad is staying at home and earning no income now, but will resume work when your youngest starts kindergarten in two years, then that expected income will be "extra" for each year of work.
 - Other bumps up in income. If a parent is in a job in which pay goes up significantly after a certain number of years (e.g., by making supervisor, by making partner in a law firm), note the year that extra income will begin. You will need to make sure taxes have been subtracted from any income you add. The tax amount depends on your tax bracket, state income tax, and current tax laws. Subtracting 35% is a guideline for middle income earners. (For example: \$10,000 of "extra" income is worth \$6,500 after taxes are subtracted.)
- 3. Determine any "*extra*" *expenses*, above your current annual budget, you are likely to have each year between now and when your child finishes high school (or whatever time line you have chosen).
 - "Extra" expenses are ones you do not pay for out of your current annual income, and that are beyond what would be covered by a typical 3.5% pay increase.
 - Example extra expenses are college savings, retirement savings, new house down payment, roof or other major home repairs, having more children, allowance for medical and other emergencies, car or other major expenses not currently coming out of your regular annual income.

4. Determine what *expenses you are willing to cut from your regular spending.* Do not limit your thinking to education and child-related expenses only. Consider all of your spending. If packing your lunch for work four days each week would save \$1,000 each year, is that worth it? Do you really need two cell phones in your family? Do you watch TV enough to justify the full cable package? And so on. Only you can decide what lifestyle changes, if any, you are willing to make in your family.

The total you get after all that is your "Target" spending, though many of you will choose to spend far less in the end, of course.

To get your "Maximum," consider alternative sources of money, depending on which are both available and amenable to you. Examples:

- > An extra job for one or both parents
- Seeking overtime when available in wage-earning jobs
- > Employment at your school of choice in exchange for reduced tuition
- Selling assets you own (e.g., your extra car, stock)
- Scholarships, both need-based (depending on your family income and assets) and merit-based (for your child's achievement or potential)
- > Debt (e.g., a second mortgage, home equity line of credit, or credit card debt)
- ► Grandparents or other relatives
- School vouchers (in limited locations only)

Sometimes the question about money is "when?" rather than "how much?" For example, if a parent is in a job where pay starts relatively low but increases substantially later, your family might have enough money to pay for any school you want, but not soon enough to pay for elementary school. Or if a parent plans to return to work when children are in school, family income might increase substantially, but not *soon* enough for your oldest child's early schooling. In these cases, you will need to decide whether it is feasible and desirable to pursue a short-term source of money in the early years, remembering that you will pay both for school and interest if you take on debt.

Making Sense of it All

This chapter has covered a lot of ground, from social issues to practical matters. Add that to the other Fit Factors for your family, and to the child needs you've identified, and you're probably accumulating quite a list. But don't panic! In Chapter 10, you get the payoff – a clear sense of what you need to look for to find a school that fits your child and family.

No matter what, or whether, you pay for your child's school directly, be sure the school spends money where it counts – on quality and your top fit needs.



- 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 #3 Social Issues and #4 Practical Matters needs and preferences. Estimated Time: 10 minutes
- ➤ Use the Know Your Family's Needs table on page 375 to further clarify your family's Fit Factor #3 and 4 needs and preferences 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: 20 minutes
- Discuss your family's needs with your spouse or other parenting partner. Estimated Time: As needed
- Assess your family's financial situation and money available to pay for school and other education-related items. Use the *Heads or Tails Money Worksheet* on page 154. Estimated Time: 1 2 hours, or more depending on how good a grasp you have on your income and expenses
- Record your Must Haves and Nice to Haves on your Family Needs Summary (page 110). Estimated Time: 15 minutes

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Heads or Tails Money Worksheet

STEP 1: Determine your current spending on education related items for your child. If

you have multiple children, you will need to do STEP 1 for each child and add it up for each year.

Current Education Spending:	\$ Amount	
School or Preschool Tuition, Fees		_
Child Care During School Hours		_
Before and After School Child Care		
School Donations		_
School Supplies for Home	•••••	_
Educational Toys for Home		
Extracurricular Activities		
Educational Outings and Travel		_
Clothing for Child		_
Breakfast, Lunch for Child		_
T	OTAL \$	_ = Current Spending

STEP 2: Determine "extra" income above your current that you are likely to make each year between now and when your child graduates from high school. "Extra" is anything more than you are making now, not including an average 3.5% pay increase each year. Start with the year extra income will begin. Work in today's dollars; do not consider inflation. *Before you add income year by year, make sure taxes have been subtracted (-35% is a guideline)*.

Sources:

"Extra" income you earn now but do not spend Raises you expect above 3.5% Increase in amount of work you or spouse plan to do (new or more jobs) Other bumps up in income expected (e.g., promotions, making partner)

STEP 3: Determine "extra" expenses likely above your annual budget between now and the year your child will graduate from high school. "Extra" expenses are ones you do not currently pay for out of your annual income and that are beyond what would be covered by a typical 3.5% pay increase. Work in today's dollars; do not consider inflation.

Possible extra expenses include at least these: Savings for college and retirement New house down payment, new roof or other major house repairs Having additional children Allowance for medical or other emergencies Car or other major purchases beyond current spending

STEP 4: Determine what expenses you are willing to cut from your regular spending every year. Do not limit your thinking to education and child-related expenses.

Examples:

Pack children's and your work lunches 4 days per week Limit yourself to one cell phone per family, at most Limit your cable TV package to the basics And so on — think about expenses that are not meaningful to your family. *Amount we are willing to cut yearly:* \$_____

A CONFIDENT CHOICE Tool Heads or Tails Money Worksheetcontinued STEP 5: Do the math, year by year, to find your "Target" spending: Determine how much money you will have each year for education expenses listed in STEP 1. This is your yearly "Target" (though you may choose to spend less). Use this handy formula: Current Extra Extra Extra Yearly Available Amount

Expenses

Expense income Expenses cut (Target)

Cut

STEP 6: To find your "Maximum," consider extra sources of money to pay for school, including:

An extra job for one or both parents Seeking overtime when available in wage-earning jobs Employment at your private school of choice in exchange for reduced tuition Scholarships, both need based and merit based Debt: second mortgage, home equity line, credit card. Add debt interest to extra expenses. Grandparents or other relatives School vouchers (limited locations only) Assets you could sell (e.g., extra car, stock)

	Math Station								
Year	Your Child's Grade	STEP 1: Current Spending ("Current")	STEP 2: + Extra Income	STEP 3: – Extra Expenses	STEP 4: + Expenses Cut	STEP 5: =Yearly Amount Available ("Target")	STEP 6: + Extra \$ Sources? ("Maximum")		
1	К								
2	1 st								
3	2 nd								
4	3 rd								
5	4 th								
6	5 th								
7	6 th								
8	7 th								
9	8 th								
10	9 th								
11	10 th								
12	11 th								
13	12 th								

NOTES:

1. This worksheet provides an estimate only and is in current dollars. We assume that increases in regular income will cover yearly increases in expenses, including education-related expenses.

2. Private school tuition may increase at a rate different from overall inflation or your pay increases.

3. If your income will cover private school in later years but not early years, borrowing money for earlier years may be an option. Include estimated debt interest in your Extra Expenses. Alternatively, consider private school an option for middle or high school but not elementary.

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