

Where's the catchment?

Kevin Harcombe gives prospective parents the grand tour, some of whom only narrowly avoid a damn good thrashing...

It's the time of year when parents of four-year olds tour local schools to see which one they fancy. I use the term 'tour' advisedly because, in some cases, I get the impression visiting schools is an alternative day's entertainment when they're bored with the park and don't want to splash out on a visit to the zoo.

Most parents who choose to send their children to my school live in catchment, know of the school's reputation and may already have had children go through or, in some cases, attended the school themselves. Quite frankly, they're a fantastic group – generally trusting and supportive and I feel lucky to have them. There are a few parents, however, thankfully in a minority and who never ultimately apply to my school, who can turn the most placid and reasonable headteacher (i.e. me) into a seething Basil Fawlty.

These parents are distinguished by their unerring ability to ask questions that sound more like accusations. "Why haven't you had an Ofsted for five years?" is posed with an air of suspicion, as though I'd broken into Ofsted HQ at the dead of night and, dangling from the ceiling on wires, laser-erased my school from their to-do lists. I explain patiently that they monitored us remotely and, because results were OK, decided there was no need to come calling. Mum purses her lips and raises her perfectly plucked eyebrows in an expression of

scepticism. Dad, with studied nonchalance, stares out the window and whistles. Meanwhile, their child is busy removing wall plug blanks and poking his tongue into the socket whilst flicking the switch on and off.

"He's full of curiosity and so ready for school," mum explains proudly, which translates as, "He never bloody sits still, is interfering with my daytime TV and I can't wait to palm him off on someone else."

"Do you have bullying here?" another enquired as though it were a facility, like hot dinners or computers. "Oh, very much so, we have state of the art bullying and have won awards for it," I don't actually reply. A colleague was asked if her school was unpopular because she still had two places left out of 420. Another was told, "I'd heard your school was really bad so I've come to see for myself." Worthy declaration of impartiality or car-crash voyeurism?


Of course, quite rightly, they are comparing schools to find the best for their child, but some of the things they think are important can seem picky, especially when you're on the receiving end of an ill-informed comparison: "Carpets aren't as clean as St. Wayne's," one frowns, "and why are the children allowed to leave their chairs? At the new Free School the children are never allowed to leave their chairs without written authority – in Latin." Perhaps I should spend more of the school budget on carpet shampoo, slippers for the

kids, or get tongue-boy to lick it clean with his amazing electrical clapper.

When one pronounced, with sadness, what a pity it was we were so close to the main road and it wasn't much of a view for the children, it was only with the greatest self-control I bit my tongue and refrained from paraphrasing Basil Fawlty: "What do you expect to see from a town-centre classroom? Hmm! Herds of wildebeeste galloping majestically across the plain!?"

As they leave, having passed a pleasant hour at my expense, they say stuff like, "Thank you very much, we really enjoyed that. We've already visited Dunlearnin' Academy this morning and are off to Tweek Village Infants this afternoon."

"How lovely! Let me know how we do," I call cheerily, as I wave them off with both fingers.



"He never bloody sits still, is interfering with my daytime TV and I can't wait to palm him off on someone else"



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kevin Harcombe is a Teaching Award winner and headteacher at Redlands Primary School, Fareham. To read more articles by Kevin, visit the Teach Primary website teachprimary.com

