

Going to Boarding School



A Wellbeing Guide for New Boarders



Support for Us

Providing training and resources on
young people's mental health

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Introduction



Starting boarding school is a big step. You might be feeling excited, worried, confident, or a combination of those things! Whatever you feel, or even if you don't feel much at all, it is perfectly normal.

Moving into a boarding house means adjusting to new routines and a new environment, meeting lots of new people (and learning lots of new names!), and becoming more independent. This new independence can be very rewarding, but also can bring challenges while you settle in.

This guide has been created to give you practical tips on how you can prepare before you arrive, settle in quickly, and know where to turn if things feel difficult.



Before you go

Take a tour

You may have already accepted a place in boarding, or you might be deciding which one to go to. If you haven't already, it's important that you tour the boarding house. Nowadays, schools often have a virtual tour – while this is useful, we recommend you have a personalised tour where you can ask questions and get a real feel for the place. This could be in person, or on a video call. The best time to do this is when boarding students are there, so evenings or weekends. Ask for your tour to be hosted by a member of the boarding staff – the admissions team are super helpful but might not know the specifics of what a “day in the life of a boarder” actually is.

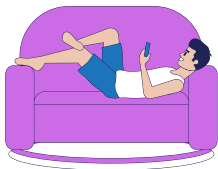
Useful questions to ask on your boarding tour:



How is laundry managed?

You might be expected to do some, or all, of your own laundry, to increase your independence. In this case, you will be shown how to use the machines.

Usually, machines are free but sometimes you will need to bring coins, or get set up on an app.



What does free time look like?

You might be expected to do some, or all, of your own laundry, to increase your independence. In this case, you will be shown how to use the machines.

Usually, machines are free but sometimes you will need to bring coins, or get set up on an app.



When can I contact my family/friends from home?



Whilst in boarding school, you will have access to your mobile phone. There might, however, be times you are not able to call home. This might be during evening study periods, close to bedtime, or during compulsory activities. Having a plan of when you will, and can't, contact your family can help combat homesickness.

What are your rules around devices?



Boarding rules are designed with your best interests at heart. This might involve things like no phones during homework time or WiFi enabled devices, including phones, smart watches and laptops, to be handed in at bedtime. They might ask you to install parental apps on your devices too, to keep you safe from online harm.

Do you have a handbook?

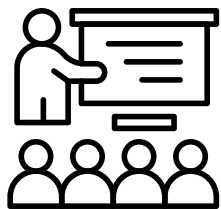


Don't worry if they don't have one – we have you covered. Refer to the "What to Pack" and "Support Networks While Boarding" sections of this guide.

Your school might have a handbook, or guidebook, to help you prepare. It will outline daily routines, expectations, and your key contacts at school. Familiarising yourself with routines before you get there will make you feel a lot more comfortable when you arrive!



What does your new student orientation look like?



It is likely to include icebreaker games to help you make friends quickly, a tour of the local area and meeting key staff. Ask about the start and finish times. You might want to delay moving in until the last minute due to nerves, but it's best to be there for the whole thing. Being nervous about ice-breakers is very natural; try to push through it. However, if you experience significant anxiety, mention this to boarding staff so that they can make reasonable adjustments to the orientation.

On the tour, you will hopefully meet another boarding student. They are best qualified to tell you what a “day in the life” of a boarder is at your particular school. We can provide you a more general guide; see “a Day in the Life of a Boarder” section.



Before you go

Practice some life skills

Boarding schools often expect you to have some basic independence skills before you arrive; you will then build on them as a boarder. It is a good idea to get ready, by learning about washing your own clothes, making your own bed, waking yourself up in the morning and some basic snack preparation. Ask a trusted adult, such as a parent, relative or teacher, to help you with any or all of the below

Remember: you don't need to be perfect – just familiar.

Snack preparation



Whilst in boarding school, you will have access to your mobile phone. There might, however, be times you are not able to call home. This might be during evening study periods, close to bedtime, or during compulsory activities. Having a plan of when you will, and can't, contact your family can help combat homesickness.

Laundry



Boarding staff will show you how to use their specific washing machines when you arrive. In some cases, your laundry might be done entirely for you. But it is always useful to understand what a “care label” is in your clothes, and whether your clothes need to be washed at a specific temperature, can't go in the dryer, or require dry cleaning only. Learning this skill can help you avoid making common mistakes like shrinking your clothes.



Making your own bed

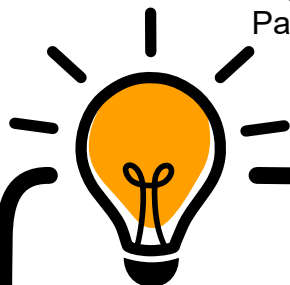


In the run up to your departure, if you don't already do this, it's a good idea to make your own bed each morning. You will likely have to "strip your bed" by taking the linens off each week for washing, so learning how to do this is key. It can be a bit tricky to put a duvet cover on for the first time, but practice makes perfect.

Waking up



You probably won't be allowed to keep your mobile phone at night time and so learning to use an alarm clock is a very useful boarding skill. Boarding staff can and do assist with wake ups for the school day, but it is common to fall back to sleep and you certainly don't want to be late. Boarding staff have lots of pupils to take care of, and if you miss their knock at the door in the morning, you need to have a backup. Particularly during exam periods, where being late can have significant consequences!



In boarding schools, you are typically expected to wake up around 7am.

If starting school soon, you can get into the practice of waking up early now by going to bed early and setting an alarm clock a little earlier than you currently wake up. For example, if you currently wake up at 11am, set an alarm for 10am and then slowly work down to 9am, then 8am and then 7am. This is so that, in the days before school start, you wake up at 7am so that your body is adjusted come the first day of school.

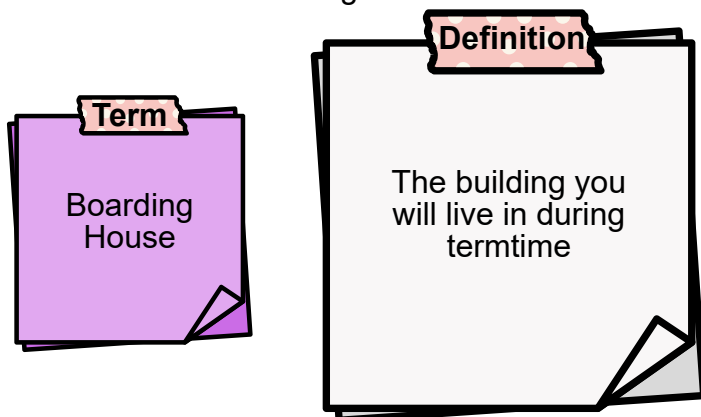
Remember: you don't need to be perfect- just familiar



Learn the jargon

Every boarding school has its own vocabulary. Learning some of these terms can help you feel confident from day one.

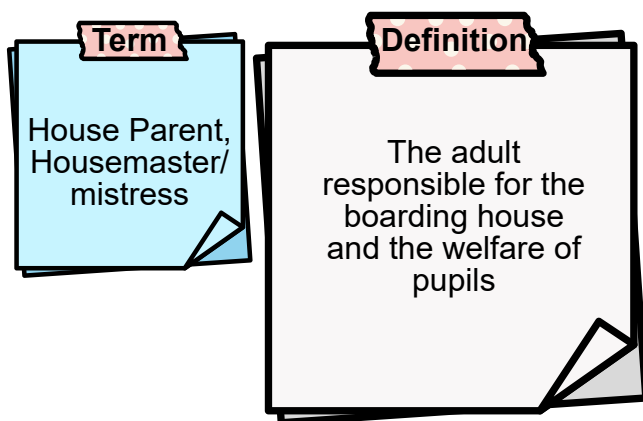
Here are some commonly-used terms in English-speaking boarding schools



Bonus information

Spaces in the boarding house include the “common room”, also known as a living room or rec room, which is a place to hang out in your free time, attend organised activities or meetings.

The dining room might be known as the canteen, cafeteria or mess hall (which has origins from the military)



Bonus information

They may also be called “boarding supervisors” or “boarding care staff”



Term

Resident
Tutor

Definition

Most boarding
houses have live-
in teaching staff to
help you with
homework and
study in the
evenings

Bonus information

They might be a
gap-year student.
It is very common
to have them from
countries like
Australia, New
Zealand, and
South Africa

Term

Matron

Definition

The person who
helps with
day-to-day care of
pupils, medication
and minor illnesses,
laundry issues and
other support

Bonus information

There is usually a
school nurse too,
or even a school
doctor

Term

Duty staff

Definition

The staff member(s)
responsible for
pupils on a
particular day

Bonus information

There will most
likely be a “duty
office” and “duty
phone” – this is
where you go, or
who you call, if
you need help
from adults.



Term

Prefect

Definition

An older pupil,
given duties to
lead and support
other pupils

Bonus information

Sometimes there
is a lead prefect,
called "Head of
House"

Term

Prep
or
prep time

Definition

The dedicated study
or homework time

Bonus information

This is usually on
weekday evenings
after dinner, but
can also be on
weekends in some
schools

Term

Registration
or
reg

Definition

A regular check-in
where duty staff
take attendance

Bonus information

The minimums are
breakfast time,
dinner time and
before bedtime,
which might be
called
"curfew check"



Term

Exeat

Definition

A weekend where pupils are permitted to leave school with their parents or guardians

Bonus information

Some schools do compulsory exeats where the whole boarding house closes for a weekend

Term

Curfew

Definition

The time you are required to be back at a specified time; e.g. your bedroom, or returning to boarding after free time leave

Bonus information

Typically, the older you get, the later your curfew is



“Types” of boarding school pupils

It's handy to know what “type” of pupil you are! Some pupils live at home and commute into school each day. They are known as day students.

There are even categories for boarders. You might be a full boarder, living there every day of term until the school breaks, including weekends. Or, you might be a weekly boarder and travel home for weekends. Or, you might be a flexi boarder. Flexi boarders might stay a few nights a week, or stay for a one-off spell of 2 weeks while their parents go on holiday.

There are also international students or domestic students. International students have citizenship (a passport) of a different country to the one they board in, and so they need a student visa from the government to study. Domestic students are citizens of the country they study in.



Friendships form across the different types, and making friends with a day pupil can be an excellent way of exploring your new town or city. They may even invite you to their home for a family meal!



What to pack

This section will recommend some essential items to pack with you for your new boarding adventure. Your school may also recommend some specific items; this is just a general guide. Why not show them your intended packing list and see what they suggest you might need to add on?



Essential items

- Your school uniform and sports kit (including shoes)
- Casual weekend clothes
- Sleepwear
- Underwear and socks (min 7 pairs of each)
- A coat and a waterproof jacket
- Comfortable shoes
- Toothbrush and toothpaste
- Shampoo (and conditioner if you have longer hair)
- Shower gel (or soap and a container for your soap bar)
- Hairbrush/comb
- Antiperspirant/roll-on deodorant (spray deodorant are often forbidden due to fire risk)
- Other personal hygiene items, e.g., sanitary towels, dental floss
- Study items (stationery, notebooks, laptop if your school is 'Bring Your Own Device', commonly known as BYOD)
- Refillable water bottle
- Easy to use alarm clock (with batteries if needed)
- Headphones and ear plugs (see room sharing section)



Comfort Items

A great way to settle in quickly into your new surroundings, is to pack some familiar items from home to help personalise your space. Some examples include:

- Favourite blanket and familiar pillow
- Photos of friends or family
- A small soft toy, or a small keepsake from home (e.g. ornament)
- A book you enjoy reading
- Your favourite mug

Medicines

If you take any medications or dietary supplements, it is important that you remember to take these. It is crucial to declare these to the school nurse or matron. This includes both medication prescribed by your doctor and “over-the-counter” medicines, such as pain killers.

“Over-the-counter” medicines and first aid items like plasters, can be given to you by boarding staff.



Anything you do not declare may be temporarily, or permanently, confiscated. This isn't because they don't trust you; it's a legal requirement for them to know every medicine in the building. It's to keep everyone safe.



What not to bring

Most items you shouldn't bring are common-sense. Your trusted adult can help you figure out what these things are, and if you are unsure, ask.

Banned items always include alcohol, drugs, knives, pornographic material, cigarettes and vapes. Even if you are 18 and can buy these items legally, you will not be allowed to have them in a boarding environment.

Some things are less obvious, but it is to keep you safe. Ask your school for the specific list of banned items, but as a general rule, this will include:

- Prescription medication not prescribed to you, medicines not in English, or medicines with no label for instruction (e.g., in pill boxes)
- Candles, lighters or matches due to them being a fire hazard
- Hair dye, as it can cause damage
- Chewing gum is sometimes not allowed as it can damage property

Electronic appliances

Schools have their own rules around electronic appliances. Generally, they will not allow you to bring a mini fridge, rice cooker, air fryer, portable heater or portable air con. This is for health and safety but also as they will provide everything you need. Boarding schools have standards to meet as required by law to keep your room well ventilated/heated and so you should speak with a staff member if it is too hot or too cold in your room.



If you arrive at boarding and realise you have a banned item, speak with a staff member right away. Failure to do so could result in a school sanction.



Understanding homesickness

Homesickness is completely normal; in fact, it's the most common experience to have in boarding. A lot of people expect that it comes in your first few days. It can come at unexpected times too, which might surprise you. For example, it might come after a few weeks, when the initial excitement of a new environment and new friends wears off. You might not expect to experience it at all if you chose boarding school, don't always feel happy at home, or are moving to boarding school with some friends you already know. This section is designed to help you through homesickness, whenever it may come.



- You might feel tearful
- You might miss family members, pets, friends or former teachers
- You might want to go home
- You might have difficulty sleeping or a low appetite
- You might feel sad, low, or unmotivated

When you are experiencing these signs, there are 5 things you can do to manage it



Managing the signs

When you are experiencing these signs, there are 5 things you can do to manage it:

1. Give it time - it is important to remember, feeling this way is not permanent. Most homesickness gradually reduces over time as you get more settled into new routines.
2. Talk about it – homesickness is more easily managed when shared. Keeping feelings hidden can make them feel bigger than they are. Your boarding school might have some prefects who are going to be great sources of comfort – after all, they have experienced what you are going through now.
3. Stay connected – regular contact with the people you miss is crucial. But remember, a regular planned phone call is going to help more than constant messaging.
4. Build new routines – healthy habits can make you feel more settled. There is lots of routine in boarding, but there might also be a lot of free time on weekends making you unsettled. Your regular call home can be part of your new routines, you could also attend a new social club, read before bed, or go on some evening walks. You could even pick up a new hobby – structured weekend activities are great for trying something new.
5. Bring “home” into your new living space – as mentioned on the recommended packing list, those familiar items can be a real source of comfort. You can also listen to familiar music or watch your favourite TV show to give yourself a sense of familiarity.



Sharing a bedroom



Not all boarders share a bedroom. Lots of boarding houses now have private rooms, but it is often a privilege for older boarders to have a private space, and younger ones to share. For new boarders, it is a great opportunity to make friendships and have the true “boarding experience”. So, if you have the choice, give sharing a go.

It's completely normal if you feel unsure about sharing, particularly if you have your own room at home. You're moving from a familiar space at home to a shared environment with someone who may have different habits, routines and preferences. With some preparation, patience, and above all, kindness, room sharing can be one of the most fun and memorable parts of boarding life.

What to expect

Every roommate relationship is different. Some people become good friends immediately, others take time to settle into a rhythm. It's crucial to approach the experience with openness and respect. Successful room sharing means:

- Learning your own habits as well as your roommate's – you might be a night owl and they might be an early bird, or vice versa
- Communicating honestly
- Being flexible and willing to compromise
- Holding and respecting boundaries



Preparing to share

It's time to think about your own habits. The people you live with at home can help with this. Think about what time you like to go to sleep, how tidy you are, and whether you need silence or some background noise to relax. While this is part of who you are, you will need to be able to compromise. Boarding staff will have minimum expected standards for tidiness if you are naturally quite untidy; if you are meticulously organised you might not be able to hold your room mate to the same high standards. You are only responsible for your own belongings being organised; a shared room works best when you each take individual responsibility. Constantly tidying up after someone can violate a boundary and can build resentment.

If you are noise sensitive, it's a good idea to bring earplugs for night time. Light sleepers may have a difficult time adjusting to things like snoring, late night trips to the bathroom, and even tossing and turning in bed. If you like background noise, your roommate may not feel the same way, and so headphones for your music, videos or games are essential.

Building a positive relationship with your roommate

Small talk can go a long way when you first arrive, without the conversations becoming too intense. You could ask whether they have been away from home before, if they have siblings, where is home. Then add in the simple things – sleep schedule, study habits, and how they like to organise their space. You don't need to cover everything all at once, just begin the conversation. Friendship takes time and this applies especially to roommates. You don't have to be best friends immediately (or ever), and you don't have to spend all your time together. Small acts of kindness will go a long way – offering help or asking how they are feeling is a great way to do this.



Boundary-setting

There are plenty of rules to follow in boarding. Personal boundaries are a little different – they're individual ways to make sure both people feel comfortable. You might not have had to do this before, so please see the examples below of how to communicate a boundary:

Sleep routines: "I like all lights off when I go to sleep at 9:30pm. Boarding staff say we are allowed to read a little at bedtime. If you do this, could you use your bedside lamp instead of the main light"

Noise: "I don't mind listening to music during the day, but after dinner, I would prefer you to use headphones"

Belongings: "You can use my hairdryer any time, but please put it back in the drawer after you've used it"

Visitors: "Your friends are welcome to come into our room, but they should knock first in case I am getting changed"

Your individual space: "I like having a clear study desk, please could we agree to not put things on each other's desk?"

The above are just some examples of how to communicate a boundary. Yours may be very different. What matters is feeling heard and respected. Ask boarding staff for help if you don't feel your boundaries are being respected.



Keeping safe

Your body belongs to you and you decide what feels comfortable. Boarding school should always feel safe, and for most people it will be. However, it's still important to understand your rights and what to do if something doesn't feel right.

Even when sharing a room, you still have personal space. This includes your bed, your belongings and your body. You are allowed to say no to anything that makes you uncomfortable.

It is never OK for another pupil to touch you in a way you don't like, touch you anywhere private (or ask you to touch them), try to get into your bed, make comments about your body that make you feel uncomfortable, or show/send you inappropriate images or videos. If any of these things happen, it is not your fault. You should tell an adult right away. This could be boarding staff, the school nurse, a trusted teacher, or the independent person/listener. If you aren't sure whether the behaviour was wrong, but it made you feel uncomfortable, you should still speak to an adult. It is their job to keep you safe.



Who can you talk to?

Just because you are gaining some independence, it does not mean you have to deal with everything independently. You are not on your own. The most important skill you will learn at boarding is actually interdependence. Interdependence is knowing when to lean on others for support, and when to do things by yourself. Having a support network is what being a human being is all about! Your support network will include:

- Friends and peers: friends your age can provide good support for the daily “ups and downs” of life, because they understand what you’re experiencing
- School counsellor: for things bigger than the usual “ups and downs” of life, or persisting issues, it’s best to speak with a trained adult. Many schools have specialist wellbeing staff who provide confidential support, and will only break confidentiality when there is a risk to your safety (or someone else’s)
- Boarding staff: they can help with getting you settled, managing homesickness, friendship issues, stress, or the more practical things like using the washing machine. They are adults with lots of lived experience and can give you all sorts of practical advice, or point you in the direction of someone who can help. They are there to listen and nothing you are experiencing will be unusual to them
- Academic staff: they can help you with any concerns around your understanding, workload, or study habits. They can give really helpful revision methods that you might not have tried before. They can also help you if you feel you need more support; for example, if you have a suspected learning difference like dyslexia



- Medical team: from feeling under the weather to worries about a persistent issue or a change in your body you're not sure about, there should be a school nurse or even a school doctor to help you. They are medical experts and can advise you on changes that are normal during your teenage years, such as your skin, voice, or body shape. They can assist in organising specialist appointments for you too, like seeing a dentist/orthodontist or optometrist. You never have to feel embarrassed about asking for their help or advice, they will be confidential and discreet
- Trusted adults at home: Parents, carers, guardians and other family members can still be a source of guidance and comfort to you when you're living away. You may even find that your relationships improve when you're away from home, as you appreciate each other more and the normal disagreements in the home (like making a mess or oversleeping) aren't taking place

When things go wrong

You might have a problem at boarding that you don't wish to discuss with boarding staff, for example, you might want to make a complaint. Or, you might have an issue where you would rather speak to someone you don't know at all, but is trained to respond appropriately. Every boarding school in the UK must have an "Independent Person" or "Independent Listener". This is a trained, and police-vetted adult, who volunteers their time to help young people navigate the challenges of boarding and adolescence in general. Their contact details should be clearly displayed in boarding and you may even meet them in person during your induction period. If you aren't sure who they are or how to contact them, ask boarding duty staff or a prefect. You don't have to tell staff why you're contacting them.



Helplines

If you would like to speak to somebody about any difficulties you are experiencing and you do not wish to talk to somebody within the schools, helplines and web chats are available for support.

Childline

Childline is a free service for young people to talk to a counsellor about anything. The service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Childline is available to anybody who is 18 years old or younger.

Call 0800 1111

Via webchat: www.childline.org.uk

Shout Textline

Shout is a 24/7 text service for anybody in the UK who is struggling with their mental health.

Text SHOUT to 85258

HOPELINEUK

HOPELINEUK is a confidential support and advice service for children and young people under the age of 35 who are experiencing thoughts of suicide, or anyone concerned that a young person could be thinking about suicide.

Call 0300 102 2470

Text HOPE to 88247

pat@papyrus-uk.org

Via webchat: www.papyrus-uk.org



Weekend tips

Boarding life is very structured during the week. You have morning wake-ups, the routine of the school day, evening meal and study time, and bedtime. Its busy, and if you have sports or co-curricular factored in too, weekday free time can pass quickly. You might also have a weekly boarders' meeting to discuss everything happening at school and boarding.

Weekends can feel very different as you will be permitted to sleep later, have fewer compulsory commitments and sometimes even less meals (you might have a big brunch and evening meal instead of breakfast, lunch and dinner).

You might enjoy the extra freedom, or you might find this is where homesickness appears. At the beginning, if you find yourself feeling a little "lost", you are likely the type of person to benefit from keeping occupied. Make an effort to:

- Spend time outside of your bedroom, even if it's just going for a short walk outdoors
- Attend organised activities in the boarding house. If there isn't anything happening, ask boarding staff if they might organise something low-key, like a board game or jigsaw puzzle
- Stay socially connected – whether it's investing time into your new friendships, or catching up with those back home, weekends are a great time to socialise. Video or phone calls are better than texting.
- Try something new- If you see another boarder engaged in a hobby, such as crocheting, it could be a good opportunity to learn a new skill from them and make a new connection in the process.



Things no one tells you about boarding

- Everyone gets lost in the boarding house – even the staff! You will learn your way around eventually but there is no need to hide it. Everyone has been there.
- Sometimes you won't like, or want, the food – You might have tried the food already on a tour and been really impressed. Boarding school canteens have come a long way in modern times and generally serve up delicious, nutritious and varied meals from a global menu. But sometimes you just don't want or like what's on the menu. Eat a small portion and then have some snacks afterwards. have some emergency snacks for when you don't like the meal, or when you just don't fancy it.
- You will eat lots of toast – it is the most common boarding house snack!
- Friendships take time – you might not find “your people” right away. You might feel stuck with your roommate, or feel obligated to be their friend when they aren't really your type of person. As long as you treat people with kindness, honesty and respect, you will be fine. Be patient while things settle, and it is ok to have a wide range of friends. If you make a friend and they don't like you spending time with others without them, a boarding staff member can help you navigate this.
- Asking for help is a strength – you might think because you have read this guide in preparation, you should now have everything worked out. This is not the case – you may still feel overwhelmed or confused. Speak to your support network as often as you need and ask the questions you need answers to. And if you're struggling, tell someone early.



Final message

Starting boarding school is a significant life change. You may feel positively about some things and negatively about others; both are part of the experience. Some parts of boarding life may feel new or challenging at first – like structured homework routines or sharing spaces – but these same experiences often help you grow, stay organised, and enjoy more free time on weekends.

What matters most, is being yourself. You don't need to act differently to fit in or pretend to feel confident when you don't.

Boarding houses are designed to support every pupil, and staff are there to ensure you feel safe and valued. If something doesn't feel right, or you're finding something difficult, ask for help.

You're about to begin an adventure that you will remember for the rest of your life. You will learn independence and resilience. Take everything one step at a time, and enjoy this next step.

