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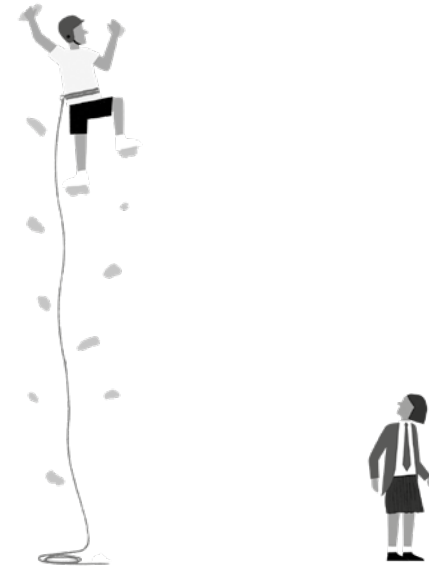
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THE BIG STEP



Throughout our lives we go through all sorts of changes, or what we call ‘transitions’. We might move house or decide not to eat meat any more and become vegetarian.¹ One of the biggest transitions any of us will go through, though, is the leap from primary to secondary school. If you’re already at secondary school then you can jump right past this part of the book and land on the next section because you’ve made it – HURRAH! But if you’re in your last few years of primary school, this is for you.

The first you heard about the next step in your education journey would probably have been a few years ago, when the older kids in school – so sophisticated, grown up and mature – left the primary for a day and went to the secondary school up the road. Your school fell eerily quiet. Tumbleweed blew through the corridors. Break time was strangely empty. It was a bit, well, odd. When the older kids came back the next day (for a couple of weeks afterwards until the summer holidays, anyway), it felt like order was restored.

But your transition from primary to secondary school will actually begin much earlier than you might think, and your



¹ Or switch from an Android to an iPhone. A big life decision I’m sure you’ll agree ...



schools and teachers will be working together to ensure you are completely prepared. You need to know that you're going to the right place, your parents or guardians are happy with it and you have someone you can speak to if you are at all worried. The last thing anyone wants is for your first half term to be full of

'Oh nooo, what have I DONE?'



moments. Schools want you to go there, but you need to know that it's the right place for you first, as do your folks.

That's why what's called 'transition' starts really early. I'm not talking about newborns doing algebra or scholarships being given out to kids on the back of a good finger painting in nursery. But early enough so that you're ready and can get it right from the start.



TASTER SESSIONS

Sometimes schools will run 'taster' sessions, even when you're only seven or eight, but the main stuff will usually start in the year before you leave school. You might get invites to a load of open evenings and a taster day up at the local secondary. Teachers and kids might also pop down to your place to speak to you about what goes on there, what they think of it and the opportunities you'll get. Sometimes children will come and deliver some sessions in music, sports, drama or dance (or anything else, actually), so you can get a feeling for the ethos of the school.

When you're invited to stuff, my advice is this:



Go.

And.

Do it.





Even if your family has been going to the same school for the last 15 generations and your great, great, great (you get the picture) great-grandad who was a caveman and founder of the place and won 'Best Cave Painting' in 1278 BCE, it's still really important that the school you pick is right for **YOU**.

Open evenings are fun, too. You're not daft, I know, so I probably don't need to tell you this, but I will anyway. If the school puts pâté on toast on in the French department, is re-enacting the Big Bang in science and has a range of children who appear to be professional musicians rehearsing a full opera in the music department, I think you know that isn't exactly how *every* day is going to be. There are a great number of days at school when it won't be anything like that. In fact, it might be quite - dare I say it - *boring*. Not as in falling-asleep-in-lessons boring, but in the sense that you'll go to school, have some lessons, learn some stuff, see your friends and go home. That's why you need to go through a load of open evenings and get to the root of the issue: in which one of the schools you visit can you see yourself being most happily bored on *those* days?² Who are the people to help you cut through it? Which corridors feel comfortable? Can you imagine yourself there? Can you look into the future and see yourself happy in those buildings, with those people, for **FIVE** long **YEARS**?

² You know the ones I mean. You wake up - the sky's grey. You go to pour your cereal and the box is empty. You stub your toe leaving the house. You have PE (outside) and it's cold (and raining), and you've got a headache. Your bus is also late and you have a load of homework due, which you haven't done. And you just don't want to get started on Eeeeenglish - EUGH.

You could even (if you're super-organised) set up a spreadsheet where you mark loads of schools against things that are important to you out of ten. For example:

- *Warmth of the welcome - were people 'nice'?* 7/10
- *What were the students like? Did you meet any? Did they help you out?* 6/10
- *What was the building like? Can you see yourself 'fitting in'?* 8/10
- *What's the journey there and back like from home? Did it take you 17 hours and mean you needed to swim across a river to get there?* 7/10

Count up your scores and have a look at what comes first. Even once you've had a look around, don't decide then. It might be like a bolt of lightning³ and you might just know, but it's more likely that you'll have a couple of schools in contention. That's why it's important that you have a look early. But whatever you do, choose a school because it's right for you, not because your best friends are going there. There could be a particular school for performing arts, for example, and you may **REALLY** fancy going but none of your friends are. Would you be happy knowing that you didn't give it a go

³ Though I hope not, as that could hurt.



just because your mates weren't? For these sorts of decisions, a big cup of tea, the biscuit tin and a chat with your family around the kitchen table might be needed.

All these options and decisions might sound great, but if you live somewhere with only one secondary school nearby and there aren't lots to choose from, then don't worry. Find things out about that school early and talk to those lovely people inside it – whether it's a friend's older siblings, students or teachers at the open day. They'll want to help you and make sure you're feeling good about the time you're going to spend inside those walls learning loads of fantastic things. Any questions you have, just ask them.



Your last year at primary school will soon come around, and then it truly will be decision time. Some schools need you to do an exam before you go in (an 'entry exam'), but a lot will just need your mum and/or dad or lovely person you live with to send a form off (or do it online), and then you wait. And wait ... and wait ... and wonder whether you've got the school you want.⁴ And then you'll find out! Hopefully (and for most people), it will be good news, and the secondary school you chose will come through,⁵ but there is the odd occasion when it doesn't.

If it does, brilliant. If it doesn't, don't worry. Have a look back at that spreadsheet and have a think about the good bits of the one you've been given. All schools have their strengths and their bits that people would like to be better, and it might end up suiting you more. The world has a funny way of sorting things out for people and you might find the school you really didn't want is actually the perfect place for you after all.

⁴ But don't worry about it – once it's sent, there's nothing more you can do!
⁵ BUT WOULDN'T IT BE SO MUCH MORE INTERESTING IF THE HOGWARTS SORTING HAT GOT INVOLVED? That would be just magical.




TRANSITION

From the day your letter comes through,⁶ your transition begins. Slowly, though. It's not like you're trying to set a new land speed record and be there in full uniform every single day before you start. This is the point at which, if you're worried about something, you should ask. Get your folks to drop the school an email and put your mind at rest. Check out the school website and social media feeds: really get a taste of what's to come for you in the next few years.

Exciting, Isn't it?



At some point you and everyone in your class (and year) will go off (usually for a day) to try out their new schools – you included. This is a transition day – it could be called other things, but it's basically the day that most people at the end of primary school will spend in their new secondary school



⁶ And again, sadly not like Harry Potter. There will be no large man on a flying motorcycle delivering an enchanted letter to you. Unless the postal service in certain parts of the world is different to what it is in the UK.

– and it will be a nervy one. It's natural! You're meeting the people you'll spend a **LOT** of time with over the next few years – some of whom you will meet for the first time on that day! You'll spend time with your new teachers and meet the important people who'll be there to help you out during that first week as you get lost after PE and think you've been abandoned by all of mankind when actually your classroom is just next door.⁷ You'll probably spend time in an assembly, do some work with your new form (yes, there will be people from other schools you will need to talk to at some point), and you might get into a few lessons to see the sorts of things you'll be doing. You'll also find out the **MOST** important thing: where the canteen is and how you get your food. You can't do the business in your lessons if there's no fuel in the engine!

After that you'll fly through the last few weeks at primary school – graduations, parties, proms, barbecues, sunshine, tears, leaving day, hugs – and then it's summer. Saying goodbye will be emotional – and those tears might be happy or sad or a mixture of both – but this isn't the end destination; it's just the next stop on the journey. As you leave the primary school gates for the last time, your teachers will be so proud of who you've become and they'll be excited to hear about how things are going in your next stage. It might feel sad to say farewell to those friends who aren't going 'up' with you too, but stay in contact so you can share stories in the future.



⁷ You might arrive all hot and sweaty and worried but it's FINE!



PREPARING FOR THE MOVE

Teachers know it's summer because the shops start with those enormous **'BACK TO SCHOOL!'** signs⁸ with backwards chalk-style letters on a blackboard,⁹ which is your chance to start shopping and preparing. Now, your parents aren't daft. They'll try to get away with buying one blazer that will see you all the way through secondary school. It'll be like a tent your entire family (and a passing travelling circus) could sleep in to start with, and they'll have the idea that 'you'll grow into it'. Every parent does it, so you're not alone. But before you go shopping -

find out what the uniform rules are!




⁸ Which is the worst. Students and teachers work really hard through the year. Then we reach that lovely day at the end of term when the sky is blue, the holidays are here, the ice creams are flowing, and teachers (sometimes) end up dancing on tables with the caretaker they've never actually spoken to but once stole milk from in the staffroom fridge. And then they wake up the morning after and the local clothes shop is doing '3 for 2' on white shirts with a picture of a really happy looking child. All of this before they've had the chance to even think about their summer holiday ... Completely THE WORST.

⁹ Do you even know what a blackboard *is*? I'm not even sure I remember them. I think they went out around the time of the Victorians. But some shops *still* think they're in schools!

If you need black shoes, buy a pair of *black shoes*. Trainers aren't shoes. Just like golf clubs aren't shoes and smelly, French mouldy cheese isn't shoes (though it smells like shoes when people don't wear socks). So buy black shoes. If it says black trousers, then black skinny jeans aren't allowed. And if it says that you're not allowed nose piercings, don't go and get a nose piercing a week before you go back. It won't be the best start. Think about things like your hair, too - if you make the creative decision to go for a cherry-red mohawk with your favourite singer's lyrics shaved into the sides the weekend before you start back, then check that you're allowed such a 'do'. Obviously, I don't want to be a total buzzkill. You should express yourself, and you'll find more on this and how you should embrace and love every part of yourself, even the bits that other people might think are 'weird', in chapter five (turn to page 67). But you do have to stick to the rules. All schools will be different but if you make a good start of it, then you'll absolutely fly.



MR BURTON'S FIRST DAY PREPARATION CHECKLIST



<i>Uniform: shirt, trousers/skirt, blazer and shoes all checked against the school's rules</i>	
<i>PE kit</i>	
<i>Equipment basics – pen, pencil, ruler, rubber</i>	
<i>School bag</i>	
<i>Lunch (have you packed your sandwiches or are you having school dinner?)</i>	
<i>A plan for how you're going to get to school</i>	
<i>A big breakfast on your first morning (but try to have breakfast every morning – it will kick-start your day!)</i>	



YOUR FIRST DAY

It's time to start! All that preparation is finally going to pay off as you walk into your new school. Now, your first day's going to be a mixture of things:

Excitement.
Worry.
Fear.
Anticipation.
Hunger ...





It won't necessarily be what will soon become a 'normal' day – there'll be tours, new books, new teachers, new people, lost bags, **MASSIVE** playgrounds, **ENORMOUS** older kids, and there might not actually be any lessons – but you've done it. You've started. You're off and running!

Of course, everyone's first day is going to be different. You might be going to the school where all of your friends and your siblings are, and where your mum is the head teacher. So it's literally the least scary day you've ever known. If that's you, brilliant, enjoy it. But remember that if you *do* know nearly everyone, it might be comfortable and feel great, but there will be someone who doesn't know anyone. The world needs more kindness in it, so make sure you ask people's names, push yourself to say hello (even though it's an **'OHMYGODICAN'TBELIEVEYOUTALKEDTOHIMYOU DON'T EVENKNOWHIMOHMYGODYOUARES BRAVE'** situation) and try to be the best version of you.

On the other hand, you might be the person who has to travel miles and miles to get to school. You might need to get a lift, then a train, then a bus and then walk – and once you arrive, you don't know anyone. If that's you, don't fear. While there will be a lot of stuff you're worrying about, this is a **BRILLIANT** chance to really stamp your mark on your own life and say: **'THIS IS THE PERSON I WANT TO BE!'** Be brave and talk to people. Making new friends is amazing, and schools are all set up to help you move around in the circles where you'll find people of your age, with your ambitions, and who are your type of people. Meeting new

people is fantastic and there aren't many times in life that you get the chance to start again completely, while still being allowed to keep hold of everything you like about the 'old' you. So you can still be friends with those people you used to play footy with (and you can still play footy with them too), it's just that you can get another group of mates who play a different sport, too. Who knows – those new friends could help you unearth a skill you never knew you had!

Whoever you are, and however many people you know or don't know, just remember: be nice, be positive and remember that every single person – even your teacher – is nervous and wants this to go well. They have to work with you for five years, too, and nobody wants five years of weirdness, awkwardness or difficulty. Ask teachers things, and throw yourself into your new school. You won't regret it. There's a saying that goes 'you only get one chance to make a first impression' and I can guarantee you that every single person at school – teachers, cleaners, caretakers, lunchtime staff, teaching assistants and everyone else – love to see kindness and a sense that you are interested in what they have to say. Even if it isn't the school you chose, give them a chance – they are very likely to prove themselves to you. They want to make it work for you.







MR BURTON'S FIRST DAY AT SCHOOL ...



My first day at secondary school was *terrifying*. I remember walking up in the rain, my skin uncomfortable and my pulse throbbing in my head. I also remember, really clearly, walking into the school and wondering where all these people had come from. I felt scared, nervous and alone to begin with ... and then things started. My teachers made it easy to meet people from other schools, and I quickly became more comfortable. The uniform, though: that was strange. It was thick and uncomfortable, and I felt it looked daft (even though there were thousands of others in it!).¹⁰ After worrying that every teacher was suspiciously human-like, and wondering when they would start to SHOUT AT THE TOP OF THEIR VOICES AND MAKE MY LIFE A MISERY, I started to realise that maybe, just maybe, this



¹⁰ I couldn't deal with the tie AT ALL. Although I did feel like I ran a huge multinational business because I was wearing one.



might be okay. As it turns out, it was - and I went back to work in a school, too!

The next 'first day at school' I had was as a teacher, and let me tell you: THAT WAS A HUNDRED TIMES MORE SCARY! Meeting my new form was just so terrifying and amazing that I struggled to even string a sentence together. They fired questions at me, parents called me to ask me stuff (and my voice did that thing where it went high for a second because I was nervous), and I didn't really know the answers. I was new, just like my students were. But I soon got into the swing of things, and it must have gone okay - I ended up keeping the form for five years!

So never, ever think that you're on your own at the start of a new term. Loads and loads of schools have got brand new teachers starting their first ever teaching jobs on the day you're starting at that school (they're called NQTs or Newly Qualified Teachers), and they'll *definitely* be feeling just like you are. Every other person in your form is feeling the same, too. Some people are just much better at hiding it!

