



WOOLWICH PARENTS

Handbook

2023-24

What this booklet will cover

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Welcome to Woolwich!



You've made the decision to send your child to boarding school as you believe that it's the very best opportunity for them and, indeed, we believe that it is.

Your child will make lifelong friendships, learn independence and resilience, receive an outstanding education and have the opportunity to enjoy the excellent facilities that we have at Gordon's.

Boarding is great fun. It's worth being mindful that as well as experiencing the normal wobbles and excitements associated with going to senior school: learning new subjects; managing life on a bigger campus, trying new sports, dealing with friendships, enjoying all the exciting opportunities, they are also going to be experiencing the additional 'unknowns' of being away from home - mostly, for the first time.

This handbook has been written to offer some helpful advice and tips about how best to prepare your child (and yourself/yourself) for their first year away from home in Woolwich House.

We are not substitute parents but an addition. Boarding only works if the child, the parents, indeed the whole family and the school are all in it together. The boarding houses and boarding staff are not a replacement family – they are additions to life's rich tapestry.

A boarding house at Gordon's is a place where a child can make life-long friendships; develop character and resilience; and importantly, make the most out of all that an outstanding education offers. We are not here to replace parents, rather than to provide a logically detached support network that can guide and advise students to the best path.



Preparing your child for boarding (practically)

Independence is key. Independence is good. Independence isn't always easy.

Before they get here please ensure your child can do the following on their own and without being reminded:

- Brush their teeth
- Wash their face
- Shower at least once a day
- Brush their hair
- Fold their uniform at the end of the school day
- Pack their bag for school
- Keep their room tidy
- Pack and unpack a suitcase
- Change their bedsheets
- Recognise the labels on their clothes



It may be that your child has had help with this while they've been at primary school but, in order to support them in managing the jump to boarding, they will benefit from knowing how to do the above by themselves.

We've witnessed children who are struggling with homesickness, how to manage their new technology and organise their prep. Usually because they've never had to pack their own bags before, things are made that little bit more challenging as they just don't know where to get started.

So please do make sure that they learn to do the above, and can do so confidently, before they get here in order to make their transition as smooth as possible and to boost their confidence.

Preparing your child for boarding

(emotionally)

When discussing boarding with your child:

- Please be realistic about what boarding involves: being away from home for long periods of time.
- Acknowledge that homesickness is, initially, quite possible, but that support is provided and IT WILL PASS, allowing them to have a brilliant time at school. We promise!
- Be positive to your child about the wonderful opportunities that boarding offers, by pointing out some of the following:
 - All of the activities in which they'll be able to get involved!
 - How busy they'll be!
 - TUCK!!!
 - All of the exciting new things that they'll experience!
 - Having a sleepover EVERY night with their friends!
 - How they'll learn how to make pancakes! And noodles. And cupcakes etc

Have faith in your child's ability to manage; they are naturally adaptable and inherent survival experts. You can reassure them that they're no different from all of the other children that have managed it before them. Avoid the promise that you'll pop up if there's a problem. This makes things so much worse, not just for your child but for the other children in house as it unsettles them by making them miss their parents, when, previously, they may have been enjoying being with their friends. This all may feel counter-intuitive (we all want to make our children feel better if they're upset/ sad) but all research (and our own expertise/ experience) shows that, if we all unite in saying that your child is here to learn and enjoy the myriad opportunities on offer, and that things will get better, they will accept what they're being told, get involved, and start to enjoy it!

Do ensure that your child stays over at friends' and/or relatives' houses, school trips, summer camps etc. as often as possible between now and their arrival with us, so that they know that they can get through time away from home.

Do reassure your child that you're so excited about everything that they're going to experience, learn and enjoy and that you are looking forward to hearing about it during your phone calls. Avoid saying 'How do you think I'm going to feel?' as your child is very likely to worry about you and want to come home. Similarly, avoid telling them what you and their other siblings are doing in the first few weeks. Hearing about what's going on at home may make them think they're missing out and focus their mind on all that's going on at home. Instead, ask them about their day.

Children love consistency and they'll benefit from having activities (no matter how low-key) to look forward to when it can feel hard returning to school after exeats/half term/holidays.

What to bring



Bring as little as possible! When you allow your child to bring too much that they don't need, all that happens is that there's more for them to lose/tidy/hide what they do need and this WILL add unnecessary stress to your child's experience of boarding.

What they will need (please don't bring any more than this):

- Uniform(all named)
- PE kit (all named, 2 sets if possible)
- PJs, dressing gowns & slippers (that can be worn outside, in case of a fire: fleece-lined crocs spring to mind – all named)
- Home clothes plus coat, hat and gloves for colder months
- 2 x zipped net bags for laundry (named)
- School bag & pencil case (named)
- Toiletries (named)
- 2 x sets of bedding (named)
- Photos, pictures and bits for their noticeboard to make their room feel like home

PLEASE MAKE SURE THAT EVERYTHING IS CLEARLY LABELLED! Sew-in tapes and name buttons are ideal, otherwise with a Sharpie pen. Please name in the neck for tops and in waistband for bottoms. We are forever surprised by what students fail to recognise as their own. This applies to uniform and home clothes.

Routines

Boarding houses run on a fairly strict routine to ensure that all students have enough time to work, shower, play, read, sleep etc and one of the hardest transitions can be adjusting to this routine. Children love consistency so if bedtimes and routines at home are dramatically different from in boarding, this can make transition, sleep and technology use, all the harder for the student.

Bedtimes for the first two terms are 9pm to ensure that all students are getting enough sleep so we would suggest trying to enforce a similar bedtime routine in the lead up to coming back to school after any holiday to make that transition all the easier.

Similarly we have 15 minutes of quiet reading time before bed each evening so getting your child into the routine of reading independently before bed will help with that transition and is known to help with getting to sleep easily.



The phone call ... a cheeky offload



When your child gets in touch, please be aware that they may exaggerate a little bit. This is perfectly normal and rather lovely, except when it leaves you worried. Please understand that this is just what children of this age do. We will have a good idea of what's what and, if there's a problem, we'll be in touch. Always feel that you can email or phone but please consider whether what your child is experiencing is a very real, ongoing issue, or if it's possible that they may have, just this once, exaggerated a tiny bit.

Every day, we hear students telling parents that they got NOOO sleep (despite having heard them snore at 10.00) or that they've got NOOO friends (despite having seen them with students at break and lunch and sitting with a bunch of friends, on their beds, at night time) or that they've had nine preps (even though only three are due in the next day and they have time to do three and then the other six, during allotted prep times) etc. Your children do this in order to offload, process what's happened throughout the day, and then get on with all of the other 'stuff' that makes up their busy day.

As a result of these phone calls, though, we've had countless parents in tears on the phone, telling us, for example, that they have just spoken and that the child has said that they have no friends and that they hate boarding. While the parent's been on the phone, we've been watching that same student running around house, playing/ sitting on their bed chatting with friends etc. Please understand that all they're doing, in the vast majority of cases, is offloading. Then they feel better and get on with the rest of the evening.

Unfortunately, the consequence can be that you're left in a very anxious state, particularly as you're not here to see what's what, and your first inclination is to email or phone us. You are always welcome to do so but please understand that there's a difference between 'I got 17 preps today' and 'I ate lunch on my own, today' (there could be a number of reasons, such as they had a club which finished a little later than others) and 'I'm really sad. I'm finding it hard to make friends. I've tried various things and I just haven't worked out how to do so'.

The former may not warrant an email/ phone call but the latter certainly does and we will do absolutely everything in our power to support your child with any challenges that they're facing. Happy kids learn best, so it's in everyone's interests to keep things positive. Finally, your children will have ups and downs and need to experience a range of situations, as we all learn from challenges (and enjoy the celebrations so much more when they come). Have faith in your child's ability to manage, to be resilient and to cope when things aren't perfect (this is all part of growing up) and to come up with solutions to everyday challenges for themselves.

Please also trust our years of experience to know when there's a real problem. And likewise, you must get in touch when there really is a problem and we can work together to support your child through it.

Understanding the year

What can your child expect this year?

Autumn : first half of term

Before your child arrives:

- Excited because he/she/they are going to Hogwarts...
- Anxious – what if he/she/they don't like it/ doesn't make any friends?

On arrival:

• Overwhelmed by everything. Don't worry. We have a lot of support in place, both practical and emotional and, if you've done everything as suggested to help your child prepare, they'll cope so much better than otherwise!

• They can feel homesick (which can manifest as tummy aches/ headaches/ nausea, but mainly tears, which isn't a sickness). Don't worry. If you've done as suggested, this will make your child's transition so much easier. And we have lots of experience and strategies to help. It will pass and they will LOVE boarding.

• Worried about managing prep on their own. But if they've got used to this, as suggested earlier in this booklet, then they'll be fine, plus we help with timings etc.

• Thrilled to be making their own bed and tidying up their mess. Again, if you've done as suggested, they'll be fine.

• Happy about being able to organise themselves. Especially if they've been supported in doing so before they arrive in September.

• And, of course, delighted to be making new friends. But worried that everyone else will know everyone else and that they'll all have a best friend. And then, over time, making new friends. All really important and an essential part of growing up and learning who they are.



Autumn : second half of term

- Quite disappointed that it's not Hogwarts.
- Still a little homesick (worse after exehats and half-term); please see above.
- Astonished at how there's always more laundry to do!
- Excited about coming home for Christmas.

Spring : first half of term

- Very disappointed that it really isn't Hogwarts.
- Chuffed about getting new dorms but a little anxious about change.
- Frankly, disappointed that chores take so much time, as does making the bed, as does tidying the dorm.
- Proud about being able to organise themselves.
- Sometimes, still a little unsettled that friendships can be a bit wobbly. However, acknowledging that this is all part of growing up and part of finding out who they are.
- Surprised at the fact that Woolwich is so strict. Having just found out that, in the senior houses, they get their phones for 72 hours a day (!) and never, ever have to do prep (!!), your child will now be chomping at the bit to go to their senior house where there are NO RULES!

Spring : second half of term

- Despite being utterly fed up of how, in Woolwich, there's NEVER ENOUGH PHONE TIME, feeling, nonetheless, a little frightened and anxious about going to senior houses.

Summer : first half of term

- Pleased that they've made it to the third term.
 - Surprised at how quickly it's gone!
 - Fine with going into a new dorm.
 - Change can be unsettling, but they've dealt with it before and have always navigated their way through it.
 - Accepting that they've had some friendship fall-outs but, actually, remembering that they did at primary school, too, and that this is a normal part of growing up.
- Very smug that they can now do their laundry/ change their bed/ do house chores/ tidy up/ pack their bags in no time/ use their iPad etc.



Summer : second half of term

Over the moon! Yippee! They're leaving Woolwich! They're SOOO strict. Woo hoo! Students get their phones for 96 hours a day in their senior house. They're ready to move on. They've made it! (But we'll come back to visit you...)

Why is it useful to know the shape of the year? So that you can see that, every year:

- All students experience the same anxieties and excitements.
- All students find boarding a little overwhelming at first but really do settle down.



- All students may experience some friendship issues but these really do resolve themselves. And then go wrong. And then resolve themselves. And this is all very normal. Parental (and even staff) involvement in the squabbles of 11-year-olds seldom yields positive outcomes.
- All students will have bad days.
- All students will have good days.
- You'll be on the receiving end of the phone calls of both.

And, now that you see the shape of the year, you can put the inevitable wobbles into a wider context. This will help you to manage them and, in turn, help your children to manage them.

A few additional bits and bobs ...

Our ethos

Everything that we do in Woolwich is underpinned by 'Positive Education', kindness and the understanding that mistakes are made in order for learning to occur. We always assume good intentions from the outset. This is an approach that aims to draw on children's character strengths in order to help them to thrive.

The approach acknowledges that life presents both good and bad, and that we all need to learn how to manage ourselves and learn when presented with difficulties, which in turn helps us to become more resilient. One of the greatest things about 'pos. ed.' is that it engenders a way of thinking and being that prevents one from acquiring 'learned helplessness' or 'victim mentality' and, instead, encourages independence.



One of our favourite elements is that children are supported through their experiences and, when they make mistakes (which we all do!), they are never shamed. Instead, they're encouraged to stop, discuss, reflect, learn and move on. So, be reassured. We'll embed 'pos. ed' and support your children as they become resilient young men and women.

In the first half of the autumn term, the focus will be settling into boarding and learning to organise themselves. After the autumn half-term, students may return a little more homesick than in the first half-term (week 3 of each half of term is also a time when students tend to get homesick) and so we'll be focusing on how to navigate through that.

After Christmas, the focus will be on friendships as, once they've settled into boarding life and have established themselves, the students' focus tends to move onto friendships. These are a real strength of Woolwich and the house team works on supporting them to be friends with everyone in house and to make the most of communal living. We remind them of the qualities and characteristics of what makes a good friend and encourage them to develop these.

Special consideration for service families



At Gordon's we are very proud to be able to support so many service families and provide a place where students are able to experience a stable education having often moved around many schools until now.

Boarding brings a sense of belonging that many children have not experienced before and that sense of community provides fantastic opportunities to form strong and lasting friendships.

In our experience service children have had the opportunity to develop unique skills of resilience and adaptability to change which often makes the move to boarding and secondary school easier for them.

However we have also seen children who sometimes find it harder to form those lasting friendships having moved around so often and who have become very good at masking any issue by pretending that everything is ok.

A service child's security and sense of identity often resides very firmly with their family (far more than non service children) and this can sometimes make the transition away from family and into boarding that much harder (for both children and parents).

As a school we understand the unique challenges that come with being a forces family and are here to support and work together to make your child's journey as smooth as possible.

We would encourage you to communicate with us as much as possible with updates about family events that may affect your child, such as a parent being deployed or a house move. These events can be unsettling for children when they are away from home so we always make sure that the school community is aware of anything that may have an impact. We are here to help and the more information we have the better able we are to offer support.



The phone thing ...



Social media and video sharing platforms are an exciting and firmly embedded way for young people to experience connectivity.

Most apps, such as Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok etc, have a 13+ age recommendation, limit, sign up restriction or similar, and all this is well and good; however, in our experience, almost all students coming into Woolwich will have at least one if not all of these apps.

Some are designed to be as addictive as possible. And many of them have reporting features, but no real control over what is posted and what the users are exposed to.

Instead of sharing all the potentially harmful content that exists online we think it's better to regulate use in Woolwich by what can be accessed via the school's Wifi and maintaining ongoing conversations and education about safe online usage.

Students will always take risks and online is a convenient and easily-masked risk-taking platform. Students are less likely to report any online abuse, bullying or inappropriate messaging because they often feel shame, are worried they will lose access to their phones or will be punished for having images or abusive messages on their phone. We cannot always be looking over a student's shoulder to make sure they make the right decision, but we can be on-hand if they experience anything online that makes them feel uncomfortable. We encourage conversation rather than punishment.

There are a few apps that can enable parents to monitor what their children are accessing online. Apple have the Family Sharing App and other phones have similar apps that can enable a variety of levels of control and supervision for parents. We would recommend you having one of these apps alongside a few key messages to chat through with your child before they arrive in Woolwich.





Messages

- You can always come to an adult if you need help.
- What would you do if X, Y or Z happened?
- Remember that not everyone is who they say they are online.
- Keep your personal information safe.
- Be respectful to others online.
- Think before you post.
- Remember to ask if it's ok to...
- Remember not everything online is true.
- The things people post online might not always show what their life is truly like.
- Recognise how going online makes you feel and take a break when you need to.

Birthdays

Being away from home for your birthday is always tough so we make sure we give every student a fun birthday in the house.

We will purchase a cake for that student to enjoy with the whole house and £10 will be recharged back to your bill unless you would prefer not to.

Alternatively parents are welcome to bring in cakes or treats of their own for their child to share with their friends!



Visiting the house

We love to have parents pop in to say hi when they are collecting their children and always welcome family into the Woolwich home.

However, apart from at the beginning and end of terms when there is lots of luggage to collect/drop off, we do ask that parents do not go up to the dorms as these are the student's personal areas.




Communication

Please contact us in the first instance for all issues to do with your child. Please bear in mind that the days are very busy so we cannot necessarily respond to phone calls and/or emails straight away although we'll be in touch at the first available opportunity.

We will send out weekly newsletters through Firefly with updates about what has been going on in the house and important school events coming up, along with ad hoc emails for specific information. Gordon's is a fast pace, busy school and it may at times feel like you are being bombarded by messages from the school but it will all be important information so do try to read through everything if you can!

We hope your child will have a wonderful first year in boarding and we look forward to working with you to ensure the transition into Gordon's is as smooth as possible for your children.

Staff and contacts

email woolwich@gordons.school
mobile 07425 278399
instagram woolwichhouse 



Mr Sam Cooper
Head of House & Houseparent
Head of Boarding
English Teacher



Mrs Daisy Cooper
Head of House & Houseparent
Pastoral Mentor



Mrs Katherine Masterson
Assistant Head of House



Miss Kerry Fairbrass
Residential Graduate Tutor



Mrs Hollie Kellwood
Residential House Tutor
Maths Teacher & Numeracy Co-ordinator



Mrs Sarah Burrows
Residential House Tutor
Learning Support Assistant



Mrs Tina Lowe
Residential House Tutor
Sports Coach

Key dates

Autumn Term 2023

Inset - Tuesday 5th September 2023 (new Boarders arrive between 3.30 and 5.00 pm, New Parent Information Evening 5.00 pm)

New Student Induction Day - Wednesday 6th September 2023

First Day of Term - Thursday 7th September 2023

Exeat - Friday 22nd Sept / Saturday 23rd Sept / Sunday 24th Sept 2023 (Boarders leave at 4.00 pm on Friday)

Parade - Sunday 15th October 2023

Half Term Begins (1½ weeks) - Friday 20th October (Boarders leave at 4.00 pm)

Inset - Wednesday 1st November 2023 (Boarders return between 7.00 and 8.00 pm)

Lessons Resume - Thursday 2nd November 2023

Parade - Sunday 12th November 2023

Exeat - Friday 17th November / Saturday 18th November / Sunday 19th November 2023 (Boarders leave at 4.00 pm on Friday)

Last Day of Term - Friday 15th December (Boarders leave at 12.15 pm)

Spring Term 2024

Inset - Monday 8th January 2024 (Boarders return between 7.00 and 8.00 pm)

First Day of Term - Tuesday 9th January 2024

Exeat - Friday 19th / Saturday 20th / Sunday 21st January (Boarders leave at 4.00 pm on Friday)

Memorial Weekend - Saturday 27th / Sunday 28th January 2024

Half Term Begins (1 week) - Friday 9th February 2024 (Boarders leave at 4.00 pm)

Parade - Sunday 25th February 2024

Exeat - Friday 8th March / Saturday 9th March / Sunday 10th March 2024 (Boarders leave at 4.00 pm on Friday)

Parade - Sunday 17th March 2024

Last Day of Term - Wednesday 27th March 2024 (Boarders leave at 12.15 pm)

Summer Term 2024

Inset Day - Monday 15th April 2024 (boarders return between 7.00 and 8.30 pm)

First Day of Term - Tuesday 16th April 2024

Exeat - Friday 3rd / Saturday 4th / Sunday 5th May 2024 (Boarders leave at 4.00 pm on Friday)

Public Holiday - Monday 6th May 2024 (Boarders return between 7.00 and 8.30 pm)

Parade - Sunday 12th May 2024

Half Term Begins (1 week) - Friday 24th May 2024 (Boarders leave at 4.00 pm)

Parade & Fun Day - Saturday 8th June 2024

Exeat - Friday 14th / Saturday 15th / Sunday 16th June 2024 (Boarders leave at 4.00 pm on Friday)

Annual Parade & Prize Giving - Saturday 6th July 2024

Last Day of Term - Saturday 6th July 2024 after the Annual Parade & Prize Giving

