

NOVA PARENT GUIDE

02

7+ and 8+ Preparation

A practical guide for parents preparing for competitive entry



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WHO THIS GUIDE IS FOR

This guide is written for parents who already understand the 7+ and 8+ system and are now focused on preparation. Your child may be at a prep school or a strong state primary. You know your target schools and you understand the timeline. What follows is depth rather than orientation: what separates a good candidate from a competitive one, and where marks are actually lost.

W E L C O M E

Before you begin

You are already committed to the independent school admissions process. Your child is at a prep school or a good state primary. You know which schools you are aiming for. You understand the timeline. What you need now is a clear, expert understanding of how to prepare your child to perform at their very best.

This guide is written for parents like you: informed, engaged, and determined to give your child every advantage without crossing the line into pressure. We assume you already know the basics of 7+ and 8+ admissions. What we offer here is depth: insight into what separates good candidates from genuinely competitive ones, where marks are typically lost, and how a structured preparation programme should develop over 12 to 18 months.

Nova Education is a specialist 7+ and 8+ preparation provider. Our tutors include experienced teachers and practising examiners who have marked papers, set questions, and seen first-hand what distinguishes the children who succeed. Our programme is built around 16 original course books written specifically for these assessments. We do not promise places. We do promise expert preparation that targets the exact skills schools are testing.

The Nova team

What this guide is, and is not

This guide is designed for parents who are already familiar with the 7+ and 8+ system and who want to understand how to maximise their child's chances through structured, specialist preparation.

This guide is not a collection of practice papers, nor does it guarantee admission to any school. Every assessment is different, and every child is unique. The guidance here reflects our professional experience and should be adapted to your child's specific needs and target schools.

How to use this guide

Read this guide in sequence, as each section builds on the one before. Take notes. Consider which insights apply most directly to your child's situation. At the end of each section we suggest a practical next step.

01

What Makes 7+ and 8+ Assessments Competitive?

Supply, demand, and why capable children underperform.

Understanding the stakes

If you are applying to a well-regarded independent school in London, you are entering a competitive field. At some schools, three or four children apply for every place. At the most selective, the ratio can be higher. These are not exaggerated figures designed to alarm you. They are simply the reality of supply and demand in a city where many parents value independent education highly.

But competition is not the whole story. The children who succeed are not necessarily the most naturally gifted. They are the ones who have been properly prepared: who understand the format, who have built the required skills systematically, and who can perform reliably under exam conditions.

School performance and exam performance are not the same thing

This is a critical distinction that many parents overlook. A child who is doing well at school is not automatically ready for a competitive 7+ or 8+ assessment. School performance is measured against age-related expectations. Exam performance is measured against a field of highly motivated, well-prepared children.

A child may be top of their class in Maths and still struggle with 7+ Maths if they have not developed the speed, accuracy, and problem-solving flexibility that the assessment demands. A child may write lovely stories at school and still lose marks in a timed writing task if they have not practised planning, structuring, and completing a piece within a strict time limit.

Schools are not failing when this happens. They are teaching a broad curriculum for all children. 7+ and 8+ preparation is a specialist activity that sits alongside, not instead of, normal schooling.

A COMMON MISTAKE

Reading a strong school report as evidence of exam readiness

A school report tells you how your child compares to age-related expectations. It tells you nothing about how they compare to the field applying for the same places. The two measures answer different questions, and only one of them is the one you are asking.

Why even capable children underperform

There are several reasons why capable children do not perform to their potential on assessment day.

Unfamiliarity with the format. A child who has never seen a Verbal Reasoning paper will lose time simply understanding what is being asked.

Time pressure. Schoolwork is rarely done under strict timed conditions. Children who have not practised working quickly may leave questions unanswered.

Exam anxiety. Even confident children can freeze in a formal assessment setting if they have not experienced mock conditions.

Gaps in specific skills. A child may be strong in number but weak in mathematical reasoning, or creative in writing but inaccurate in grammar and punctuation.

Poor exam technique. Not reading the question carefully, not showing working, not checking answers. These are not ability issues. They are habit issues, and they can be fixed.

What schools are really selecting for

Schools do not simply want the children with the highest raw scores. They want children who will thrive in their environment. This means they are looking for:

- Academic potential: the ability to learn, reason, and apply knowledge
- Consistency: strength across all assessed areas, not brilliance in one and weakness in another
- Resilience: the ability to cope with challenge and pressure
- Curiosity: a genuine interest in learning, not just test performance
- Social skills: the ability to interact confidently and considerately with adults and peers

Understanding this changes how you prepare. It is not enough to drill Maths and English. You must also build the confidence, resilience, and social skills that schools value.

KEY POINTS FROM THIS SECTION

- ✓ Competition is real, but it is manageable with proper preparation.
- ✓ School performance and exam performance are not the same thing.
- ✓ Capable children underperform for reasons that can be identified and addressed.
- ✓ Schools select for potential, consistency, resilience, curiosity, and social skills.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Make an honest assessment of your child's current position. Are they genuinely competitive, or are there gaps that need addressing? The Nova Entrance Readiness Assessment will give you an objective, detailed picture.

02

The Four Skills Areas

What schools are really testing, and where the hidden challenges lie.

This section examines each of the four assessment areas in depth. We explain what schools are really testing, what distinguishes strong performance from adequate performance, and where the hidden challenges lie.



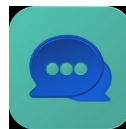
English

Comprehension and writing



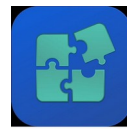
Mathematics

Fluency, problems, reasoning



Verbal Reasoning

Patterns and logic in words



Non-Verbal Reasoning

Shapes, space, and rules

English

Comprehension

Comprehension at 7+ and 8+ is not simply about understanding what happened in a story. Schools use comprehension to test:

- Literal understanding: the ability to identify explicit information
- Inference: the ability to read between the lines and understand implied meaning
- Vocabulary in context: the ability to deduce the meaning of unfamiliar words from surrounding text
- Textual evidence: the ability to support answers with references to the passage
- Critical engagement: the ability to express opinions and reactions with reasons

WHAT EXAMINERS ACTUALLY LOOK FOR

The difference between a good answer and a weak one is depth

A weak answer states what happened. A good answer explains why it happened, what it suggests, and how the author achieved an effect. The child who adds that second layer is the one who moves from adequate to competitive.

Writing

The writing task tests more than creativity. Schools are looking for:

- Structure: a clear beginning, middle, and end

- Ideas: imagination and originality, but also relevance to the prompt
- Technical accuracy: grammar, punctuation, spelling, and sentence variety
- Vocabulary: precise and interesting word choices
- Presentation: legible handwriting and appropriate layout

Many children lose marks not because they cannot write, but because they have not been taught to plan. A child who spends five minutes planning will produce a more structured, coherent piece than a child who starts writing immediately and runs out of ideas halfway through.

Mathematics

The Maths paper tests three things:

- Calculation fluency: speed and accuracy in the four operations
- Problem-solving: the ability to apply mathematical knowledge to unfamiliar problems
- Mathematical reasoning: the ability to explain thinking, spot patterns, and work systematically

Common topics include number and place value, the four operations, fractions at a basic level, measurement of time, money, length, weight and capacity, properties of 2D and 3D shapes, simple graphs and charts, and multi-step word problems that require reading comprehension as well as calculation.

The children who perform best are those who can read a word problem carefully, identify what is being asked, choose the right operation, show their working, and check their answer. These are skills that can be taught and practised.

Verbal Reasoning

Verbal Reasoning tests transferable thinking skills using language. It is not a test of vocabulary alone, though a strong vocabulary helps. It is a test of the ability to recognise patterns, make logical connections, and work systematically with words.

Common question types include:

- Codes: if $A = B$ and $B = C$, what does C equal?
- Sequences: what comes next in this pattern of words?
- Analogies: hot is to cold as fast is to what?
- Odd one out: which word does not belong?
- Missing words: complete the sentence with the correct word
- Alphabetical reasoning: positions of letters, forwards and backwards

Verbal Reasoning is rarely taught in schools, so children who have not encountered it are at a significant disadvantage. Familiarity with question types, combined with systematic practice, produces dramatic improvement.

Non-Verbal Reasoning

Non-Verbal Reasoning tests spatial and logical reasoning using shapes, patterns, and diagrams. Question types include:

- Identifying the odd one out in a sequence of shapes
- Completing a pattern or sequence
- Recognising rotations, reflections, and transformations
- Understanding codes based on shapes

Not all schools include Non-Verbal Reasoning, but those that do are testing a child's ability to think visually and logically. These skills can be developed through structured exposure and practice.

KEY POINTS FROM THIS SECTION

- ✓ Each subject tests different cognitive skills. Preparation must address all four.
- ✓ The gap between good and excellent performance is often in depth, technique, and planning.
- ✓ Verbal and Non-Verbal Reasoning are rarely taught in schools and require specific preparation.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Review your child's recent schoolwork and any practice papers they have completed. Identify which of the four areas seems strongest and which seems weakest. This will inform your preparation priorities.

03

Where Do Children Typically Lose Marks?

The patterns our examiners see again and again.

This section draws on our tutors' experience as examiners and teachers. We have marked hundreds of papers, and the patterns of lost marks are remarkably consistent. Understanding these patterns allows you to target preparation precisely.

English: comprehension

Incomplete answers. Children often write one word when the question asks for a sentence, or a sentence when the question asks for a paragraph. They do not read the instruction carefully.

Lack of textual evidence. When asked to explain why a character behaved in a certain way, children often give their own opinion rather than supporting their answer with evidence from the text.

Superficial responses. Children identify what happened but do not explain why it matters, what it suggests, or how the author creates an effect.

Poor time management. Children spend too long on early questions and rush the later ones, or they spend too long on comprehension and leave insufficient time for writing.

English: writing

No planning. Children start writing immediately and lose their way. The piece lacks structure, wanders off topic, or ends abruptly.

Weak technical accuracy. Spelling mistakes, missing punctuation, and grammatical errors cost marks even when the ideas are good.

Limited vocabulary. Children reuse the same simple words rather than varying their language.

Illegible handwriting. Examiners cannot give marks for what they cannot read.

Mathematics

Not showing working. Even if the final answer is correct, marks are often awarded for method. A child who writes only the answer may lose half the available marks.

Misreading the question. Children see familiar words and assume they know what is being asked, without reading carefully.

Arithmetic slips under pressure. A child who can add perfectly at home makes careless errors in an exam. This is usually a concentration issue, not a knowledge issue.

Leaving questions blank. Children get stuck on one question and fail to move on, or they run out of time and leave the last section untouched.

Verbal Reasoning

Unfamiliarity with question types. Children lose time trying to understand what is being asked rather than answering.

Spending too long on one question. Verbal Reasoning papers are often tightly timed. Children who do not know when to move on run out of time.

Guessing randomly. Without a systematic approach, children guess and often choose answers that are obviously wrong to a trained eye.

Non-Verbal Reasoning

Missing subtle pattern changes. Children spot the obvious pattern but miss the second, more subtle rule.

Not working systematically. Children jump from shape to shape without a clear method, leading to confusion.

Behavioural factors

Rushing. Some children work too quickly, making careless errors they would not make at home.

Anxiety. Nervous children may freeze, misread questions, or forget material they know well.

Not checking work. Children finish early and sit idle rather than reviewing their answers.

Losing concentration. Long assessments test stamina as well as skill. Children who have not built concentration endurance may fade in the later sections.

WHAT EXAMINERS ACTUALLY LOOK FOR

Lost marks are rarely about knowledge

The most important insight in this guide is that marks are lost to technique, timing, temperament, and habit far more often than to gaps in what a child knows. Every one of those four is addressable through structured preparation. That is why a diagnostic matters more than a practice paper.

KEY POINTS FROM THIS SECTION

- ✓ Most lost marks are not due to lack of knowledge.
- ✓ Technique, timing, and temperament are the main causes of underperformance.
- ✓ An experienced examiner can spot these patterns before they cost your child a place.

YOUR NEXT STEP

If your child has already completed any practice papers, review them with these patterns in mind. Can you identify which issues apply to your child? This will help you focus preparation on the right areas.

04

The 12 to 18 Month Preparation Journey

Three phases, from foundations to full mock conditions.

A properly structured preparation programme follows a clear progression. It is not random practice. It is not last-minute cramming. It is a steady build from foundations to refinement, with regular assessment to ensure no gaps develop unnoticed.

Phase	Months	Objective
1 Foundation building	1 to 6	Secure core skills and identify gaps
2 Skill development	7 to 12	Stretch ability, introduce exam formats, build speed
3 Refinement and practice	13 to 18	Refine technique, build confidence, simulate exam conditions

Phase 1: foundation building, months 1 to 6

English. Ensure reading fluency and comprehension at age-appropriate level. Build vocabulary through wide reading and discussion. Develop writing stamina: the ability to write several sentences or a short paragraph with accuracy.

Mathematics. Secure calculation fluency in the four operations. Ensure understanding of place value, fractions, and measurement. Introduce simple word problems.

Verbal and Non-Verbal Reasoning. Introduce question types gradually. Build familiarity without pressure.

Assessment. Baseline diagnostic at the start. Informal checks every four to six weeks.

Phase 2: skill development, months 7 to 12

English. Move from literal comprehension to inference and analysis. Introduce planning for writing tasks. Develop sentence variety and vocabulary range.

Mathematics. Increase complexity of word problems. Introduce multi-step problems. Build mental arithmetic speed.

Verbal and Non-Verbal Reasoning. Systematic practice of all question types. Develop strategies for working quickly and accurately.

Exam technique. Introduce timed sections. Teach the habit of reading questions carefully and showing working.

Assessment. Mid-programme review with formal progress report. Adjust the programme based on results.

Phase 3: refinement and practice, months 13 to 18

All subjects. Focus on weak areas identified in Phase 2. Increase timed practice. Introduce full mock assessments under realistic conditions.

Exam technique. Teach time management strategies. Practise checking work. Build mental strategies for staying calm.

Confidence. Ensure the child feels prepared, not pressured. Celebrate progress. Maintain balance with rest and other activities.

Assessment. Mock assessments every two to three weeks in the final term. Final review before the real assessment.

IF YOU HAVE LESS THAN 18 MONTHS

Not every family has the full runway. If you are starting later the programme can be compressed, but the principles do not change: diagnose, target, practise, refine. A shorter programme requires more intensive focus and may need additional sessions each week.

Balancing preparation with childhood

Even in the final phase, your child should have time for play, sport, music, friends, and rest. A child who is exhausted or resentful will not perform well. The best preparation maintains balance.

KEY POINTS FROM THIS SECTION

- ✓ Structured preparation follows a clear three-phase progression.
- ✓ Regular assessment ensures gaps are caught early.
- ✓ The final months should be about refinement and confidence, not cramming.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Map your child's current position onto this timeline. How many months do you have? What phase should they be in? If you are unsure, the Nova Entrance Readiness Assessment will place your child precisely on the map.

05

How Should You Measure Progress?

What good progress looks like, and the red flags that matter.

Why measurement matters

Vague reassurance is not enough. "He is doing well" or "She seems to be improving" does not tell you whether your child is on track to be competitive. You need specific, measurable evidence of progress in each skill area.

What good progress looks like

Area	What good progress looks like
English	Comprehension answers that move from literal recall to inference and analysis. Writing that becomes more structured, technically accurate, and imaginative. Vocabulary that expands and becomes more precise.
Mathematics	Calculation speed and accuracy that increase steadily. Problem-solving that becomes more confident and systematic. Fewer careless errors and better checking habits.
Verbal and Non-Verbal Reasoning	Familiarity with all question types. Increased speed without loss of accuracy. Systematic approaches rather than random guessing.

A COMMON MISTAKE

Four red flags worth acting on

Plateauing, meaning no measurable improvement over six to eight weeks. Inconsistent performance, strong one week and weak the next. Emerging gaps, a new weakness that was not present at the start. And loss of confidence or enthusiasm, which usually precedes the other three rather than following them.

The Nova reporting structure

At Nova we believe parents deserve precise, actionable insight. Our reporting system includes:

Session Note. After every session, your tutor records what was covered, how your child responded, and what to focus on next. You receive it the same day.

Progress Report. At each review point, a detailed review of the skills covered, showing what is secure and what needs further work.

Mid-Programme Review. A comprehensive review halfway through the programme, with a detailed written report and parent discussion.

End-of-Programme Report. At the end of the programme, a formal report on what your child has achieved and what comes next, with a Nova certificate.

This is not vague feedback. It is documented, specific, and discussed.

The value of external benchmarking

School reports compare your child to age-related expectations. They do not tell you how your child compares to the competitive field applying for independent school places. A specialist assessment provides that external benchmark, which is essential for understanding whether your child is genuinely on track.

Parent and tutor working together

Progress reports are most valuable when they are discussed. At Nova we encourage regular communication between parents and tutors. You know your child better than anyone. Your tutor knows the assessment system. Together, you can make the best decisions.

KEY POINTS FROM THIS SECTION

- ✓ You cannot manage what you do not measure.
- ✓ Vague reassurance is not measurement.
- ✓ Nova's reporting system gives parents precise, actionable insight.

YOUR NEXT STEP

If you are currently working with a tutor, ask to see their reporting system. Is it specific? Is it documented? Does it cover all four skill areas? If not, you may not have the visibility you need.

06

When Is Specialist Tuition Worthwhile?

General tutor or specialist programme, and how to tell the difference.

What schools provide, and what specialist tuition adds

Schools provide a broad, balanced education for all children. They are not designed to prepare children specifically for 7+ and 8+ assessments. Even in prep schools, where some preparation happens, the focus is on the general curriculum rather than the specific demands of competitive entrance assessments.

Specialist tuition fills this gap. It targets the exact skills, formats, and techniques that assessments require. It is not a replacement for school. It is a complement.

A GENERAL TUTOR MAY BE ENOUGH

- Your child needs support with schoolwork
- The goal is confidence building
- They are catching up in one subject
- They are doing well and need light extra practice

A SPECIALIST PROGRAMME IS NEEDED

- You are targeting competitive schools
- There are specific gaps needing intervention
- Your child has never met VR or NVR
- You want documented progress reporting
- You want a tutor with examiner experience
- You want a managed curriculum, not ad-hoc sessions

The Nova difference

Nova is not a general tutoring service. We are a specialist preparation provider with the following distinguishing features.

Original materials. 16 course books written specifically for 7+ and 8+ admissions, not adapted from generic primary resources.

Examiner insight. Several of our tutors are practising 7+ and 8+ examiners. They know what examiners look for, what common mistakes cost marks, and how to build the skills that impress.

Structured curriculum. Every child follows a clear, progressive programme. There is no guesswork about what to teach next.

Trained tutors. Our tutors are trained in the Nova methodology, materials, and reporting system. They are not freelance tutors working independently.

Detailed reporting. Session Notes, Progress Reports, a Mid-Programme Review and an End-of-Programme Report give you complete visibility.

QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE COMMITTING TO ANY TUTOR

- ✓ What specific experience do you have with 7+ and 8+ assessments?
- ✓ What materials do you use, and were they written specifically for these assessments?
- ✓ How do you measure and report progress?
- ✓ What is your approach if my child is not making expected progress?
- ✓ Do you have experience as an examiner or in independent school admissions?
- ✓ Is there a structured curriculum, or is each session planned in isolation?

Investment considerations

Specialist preparation is an investment. It requires time, money, and commitment. The question is not whether you can afford it. The question is whether the potential benefit justifies the cost.

For many families the cost of a year of specialist preparation is modest compared to the value of a place at the right school. More importantly, the skills your child builds during preparation, confidence, resilience, and systematic thinking, benefit them long after the assessment is over.

KEY POINTS FROM THIS SECTION

- ✓ Not all tuition is equal.
- ✓ Specialist preparation requires specialist expertise, materials, and reporting.
- ✓ The right investment can make the difference between a near-miss and a place offered.

YOUR NEXT STEP

If you are currently using a general tutor, evaluate whether they are delivering the depth, structure, and insight your child needs. If you are unsure, the Nova Entrance Readiness Assessment will give you an objective comparison.

07

The Nova Preparation Programme

Our curriculum, our tutors, and how the programme is built around your child.

Programme structure

Every Nova 7+ and 8+ programme runs to 20 sessions: 10 themed units, each taught as Session A and Session B. It is offered in two strands, English with Verbal Reasoning and Mathematics with Non-Verbal Reasoning, and is built around 16 original course books.

Children work through the books with their tutor, session by session, building competence steadily. The programme is not random practice. It is a curriculum.

The Nova tutor profile

Our tutors are qualified teachers, many with backgrounds in independent school teaching or examining. They are selected for their subject knowledge, their ability to connect with children, and their understanding of the 7+ and 8+ system.

Every tutor is trained in the Nova materials and reporting system. They do not improvise. They deliver a proven programme and adapt it to your child's needs.

Personalisation

No two children start from the same place. Your consultation and, where helpful, the Entrance Readiness Assessment show us your child's strengths and weaknesses, and the programme is tailored accordingly. A child who is strong in Mathematics but weak in English will spend more time on English. A child who works slowly will focus on speed, and an anxious child on confidence.

Starting from evidence

Every Nova programme begins with evidence, not assumption. We establish where your child is before planning the teaching, and assessment continues throughout, so that time is spent on what matters, not on what is already secure.

In person, then online

The first three sessions of every Nova programme take place in person, in your home, so that your child settles quickly with their tutor. All later sessions are delivered online, with shared screens, digital whiteboards, and real-time feedback.

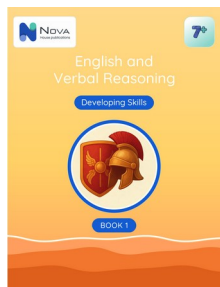
Parent partnership

We do not work in isolation from parents. You receive regular reports, and we encourage you to discuss your child's progress with us at any time. You are a partner in the process, not a bystander.

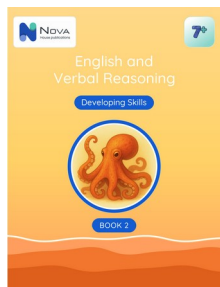
THE NOVA COURSE BOOKS

A curriculum, not a pile of practice papers

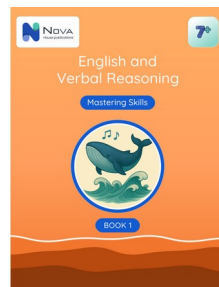
The 16 Nova course books are arranged as four sequences of four, one for each subject strand at each level. Developing Skills builds the foundations. Mastering Skills takes a child to competitive standard. Shown below is the complete 7+ English and Verbal Reasoning sequence, Book 1 through Book 4. The Mathematics and Non-Verbal Reasoning strand, and both 8+ strands, follow exactly the same progression.



Book 1
Developing Skills



Book 2
Developing Skills



Book 3
Mastering Skills



Book 4
Mastering Skills

EVERYTHING INCLUDED

Course books and all programme materials are included in the programme fee. There is nothing extra to buy.

KEY POINTS FROM THIS SECTION

- ✓ Nova offers a managed, structured programme, not ad-hoc tutoring.
- ✓ Our materials, tutors, and reporting are designed specifically for 7+ and 8+ success.
- ✓ We prepare children to perform at their best, whatever their starting point.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Book a free consultation

Ready to give your child the best possible preparation? Start with a free consultation with a senior Nova tutor. We will discuss your child's current position, your target schools, and your timeline.

Where the Entrance Readiness Assessment would help, we arrange one from there. It costs £125, and you receive a personalised written report, a one-page visual profile, three clear priority actions and a consultation with the assessor. If you go on to enrol in a Nova programme within 60 days of that consultation, the fee is credited in full against your first invoice.

There is no obligation and no pressure. Just clear, honest advice from people who understand this process from the inside.

TO BOOK YOUR FREE CONSULTATION

novaeducation.uk/nova-tutorials

Or email contact@novaeducation.uk

We look forward to meeting you and your child.



ABOUT NOVA EDUCATION

Who we are

Nova Education is an independent educational publisher and online tutorial centre in London, providing everything from curriculum support in Years 2 to 6 to selective school entrance preparation.

Our 7+ and 8+ programmes are built around 16 original course books, written specifically for these admissions and taught by qualified teachers, several of them practising examiners. We offer structured preparation, detailed reporting, and a personalised approach that treats every child as an individual.

Our mission is simple: to help children perform at their best, with confidence, skill, and resilience.

Stay in touch

Subscribe to our monthly email for tips, insights, and updates on the 7+ and 8+ landscape. Visit novaeducation.uk or follow us on Facebook.

SAFEGUARDING

All Nova tutors hold a current Enhanced DBS check and complete Nova's safeguarding induction before their first session.

This guide was published by Nova Education in September 2026. The information reflects our professional experience and should be adapted to your child's specific needs and target schools.

If you have feedback on this guide, or if there is a topic you would like us to cover in future, please let us know. We are always listening.

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