

'Please send me away to school, Mum!'

When *Sue Carpenter's* daughter begged to be packed off to boarding school, it raised many issues (and not just the expense). Would the opportunities offered outweigh her own anxieties?

It horrified me when friends first mentioned that they were thinking of sending their daughter Georgia, then eight years old, to boarding school. Having met plenty of emotionally stunted adults who had been prised from the family home at a tender age, I saw it as an archaic practice. What was the point of being a parent if you sent your children away?

The notion had extra significance for me, perhaps, in that my daughter Simi spent her early life in an institution in Nepal. I met her when she was eight months old. Then, and during subsequent visits, she seemed pensive and shut down. I worried about taking her away from all she knew, but a fellow adopter convinced me that a mother's love would always be better than life in an institution. It was not until she was nearly three, after much bureaucratic hassle and personal scrutiny to determine my fitness to be a parent, that I finally adopted her and she came home to live with me in London.

Simi was, noted my mother at the time, determined to be part of our family from day one. She bounded into our lives, tinkling with laughter, embracing every opportunity that was open to her. Within months, she was chattering in English. Not once did she look back. I was told to expect grieving for the life she had left behind, but there has been none. I've come to realise that



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Simi only feels down when she is thwarted from her mission to live life to the full. She has flourished at our local state primary school in South London and made loads of friends. We are part of a community. So the idea of sending her away to an institution seemed crazy. Yet now Simi is ten years old, what am I doing? Sending her to boarding school. Correction: I am capitulating to her petitioning to let her go to boarding school.

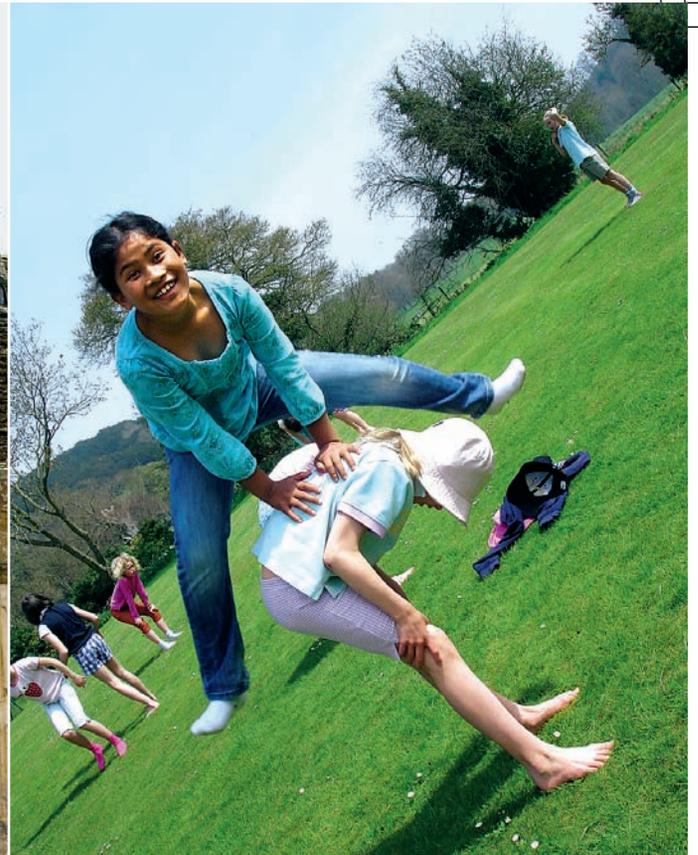
You see, this isn't any old boarding school. It's Hanford prep school for girls, an adorable throwback to an Enid Blyton era, set in a Jacobean manor and beautiful grounds in Dorset, where

pupils canter over the downs before breakfast and do scripture classes in the box-hedge garden.

It wouldn't have crossed my mind to look at a prep school if it hadn't been for Simi's aforementioned best friend. Her mother is a Hanford old girl and governor, and horse-loving Georgia was already sold on the place. I knew the area from childhood and several good friends live nearby. In March 2009, one of my country friends mentioned that she was going to the Hanford open day. So, for fun, Simi and I went along. It was a beautiful spring day, and as we wandered through the walled garden, watched girls put their ponies through their paces and listened to a concert in the chapel (in which the composer Sir John Tavener's daughter shone), it was easy to be seduced.

Over tea in the panelled hall, I was delighted to find that an acquaintance who had also adopted her daughter from Nepal was now the school nurse. Then I spotted old friends whose daughter had been at nursery school in London with Simi. I felt instantly part of the fold. 'It's like a big family,'

SUE CARPENTER



An all-encompassing education, clockwise from opposite: Sue and Simi in the grounds of Hanford School; Simi arrives for her first term; playing leapfrog; with fellow pupil Sofia – girls are allowed to bring their own horses

dismissed the boarding option since Simi was so young. Besides, I couldn't afford it. I had some savings, money left to me by my parents, but very little income. Over the past seven years, I had let my freelance work slip, allowing my mind to be diverted by Simi and her homework, activities and social life.

Over the next year, the Hanford question cropped up intermittently. Simi and Georgia passionately wanted to go. We parents were keen but apprehensive. As we neared Hanford's open day this March, we realised it was now or never. The girls were ten years old and had grown up enormously. Simi often insisted on doing the ten-minute walk through the park to school by herself. We decided that if one went, the other would have to go too. As soon as Simi sensed there was a genuine possibility that she might go, she stepped up her lobbying.

'So, Mum, have you filled in the forms?' became her breakfast refrain.

As we careered towards crunch time – we'd agreed that the girls should start in the summer term, if at all, to make the most of the riding and swimming – I entered a slough of indecision and fear. One morning, I awoke with something akin to terror, a tangible ache in my heart, imagining no Simi getting into my bed in the morning. If she went away, would I feel bleak and unmotivated, as I sometimes used to before I had her?

'Darling, imagine not being able to snuggle ➤

said my friend. 'Quite bonkers, but the girls absolutely love it.'

Another mother told me she'd seen the handyman walking across the grounds with a mattress on his head.

'Dare I ask?' she ventured.

'Girl stuck up a tree,' he nodded.

Oh yes, we were charmed, but the idea of Simi going there seemed unfeasible. My country friend (whose daughter, a couple of years older than Simi, found Hanford far too uncool) enthused about my moving to the country, but I feared I would feel isolated as a single woman. And I



◀ up in bed together in the morning.' I've never been one to hold back on emotional blackmail.

'I still want to go, Mum.'

'But darling, we do everything together. Don't you think we'll miss each other?'

'Yes, but I can always phone you.'

Simi was clearly ready for her next life step, but was I? The whole idea seemed like madness, since she was perfectly happy at her primary school, which has an outstanding Ofsted report and is free.

I tried weighing up the pros and cons. Was private school the right way to go in our modern times? I didn't go to prep or public school, but my brothers did. They certainly had a better education, but I've done all right. I've seen products of the private system who've fared brilliantly, and those who frankly seem to have wasted their parents' money. I'm not driven by status or political ideology. I just want to give Simi the best foundation and all-round experience she can have.

Hanford certainly offers that. With its high staff to pupil ratio (classes of ten instead of the primary school's 30), children shine academically as well as in sport and music. But might it turn Simi into a narrow-minded snob? Given the unflashiness of the school and Simi's ebullient personality and eclectic life experience, I think not. Besides, I see Hanford as a buffer zone rather than an irrevocable step into the private system. It only goes up to year eight (age 13), by which time I'll know whether I want Simi to continue in the private sector and if I'm able to afford it.

And there's another important pro factor. One old girl recalled a wonderful sense of freedom and autonomy within safe boundaries. Can we give that to our city children? I am in a constant state of guilt about my failure to provide every possible activity for Simi. She's very musical and very active. I've chosen music over sport because we can't fit in both. At Hanford, they do it all, and still have time for mucking out ponies and old-fashioned play.

Yet still it seemed like a pipe dream. Why fix what ain't broke? I can chew over a dilemma for years and remain stuck. In the absence of a wise parent, I turned to Simi's oracle cards, which offer inspirational guidance for all of life's questions. I asked: 'I know Hanford is right for Simi, but is it right for me?'

'Hello, Goodbye' was the card I picked at random. You may fear change, it counselled, but when you let go, new, positive things will come into your life. It's what I needed to help me take the leap of faith, just as I had when I'd adopted Simi. Life wouldn't be the same as pre-Simi days. I still had her, and now I'd have to be extra-motivated to earn enough for the school fees.

At Hanford's open day this year, Georgia's family and I went along to make our final



Freedom and fun, clockwise from right: Simi puts her bed through its paces in her dormitory; in the school's extensive gardens; with other pupils climbing their favourite tree; in the grand dining hall



Simi has never looked a gift horse in the mouth. And that's what I now see Hanford as – a magical (if expensive) gift, a *Girl's Own* adventure

decision. This time it was spitting with rain and there was a distinct farmyard whiff about the classrooms. But the charm remained. Girls aged 13 were playing clap-hands chanting games and leapfrog. Simi and Georgia raced off with the pupils, dipping into classes and checking out the dorms.

'So, Mum, can I go?' asked Simi, eyes shining.

As we drove home, I had a light-bulb moment. I didn't have to find a small fortune to keep Simi there until year eight. She could go for a term and a year, to the end of year six, and then we'd review the situation. If I met the challenge to make back the fees (starting with selling the novel that I'd finally have uninterrupted time to finish), then she could stay till she was 13. And if not, well, there is always our local comprehensive.

I told Simi my idea.

'Yesss!' she cried.

Even if it's for only a year?

'Fine!' she said. Simi has never looked a gift horse in the mouth. And that's what I now see Hanford as – a magical (if expensive) gift, a *Girl's Own* adventure where she can be an enthusiastic child instead of being catapulted prematurely into sharp-edged London coolness. She'll learn to ride and, I hope, make equal strides in the arenas of music, sport and academia. Who knows, she may even learn to pick up her clothes off the floor. ▣