



# ‘THEIR CHILDHOODS ARE BEING STOLEN’

The headmistress of one of London’s most exclusive schools, Lucy Elphinstone talks to **Lucinda Everett** about the fight against the “cult of perfectionism”, intensive tutoring and why we should allow children to fail

Portrait by Ming Tang-Evans



For many, the capital's independent day schools are among London's most powerful organisations. Candidates outnumber places, leaving children taking multiple entrance exams, parents paying whatever is required, and head teachers with little incentive to challenge the status quo.

Thankfully, some do. And perhaps none more so than Lucy Elphinstone, head teacher at the £6,970-a-term Francis Holland School in Sloane Square, whose alumni include Jemima Khan, Sienna Miller and Cara Delevingne among them.

Since Elphinstone came to the school in 2012, she has transformed the school's ethos and spoken out about everything from children's faltering mental health, to the pressures of London's changing scholastic landscape. It's the latter that Elphinstone starts with when we meet in her office, her voice still fervent after a long day.

"Certainly not every child is getting into the school they want

to and there is great anxiety surrounding applications," she says. "London's demographic has also changed; more than half of our pupils are international. Children come in with varying degrees of English and are going through an application process based on English, which

*"We're making a statement that what is going on is damaging children, and asking other schools to join us"*

is incredibly hard for them."

Parents that can afford it, Elphinstone says, are looking to boarding schools. But many are turning to tutoring.

"I'm not against tutoring in all its forms," she tells me. "But I worry about tutoring to get into a particular school. There's an

elitism, it seems, in getting your child into a certain school, whether the child will thrive there or not. And then, having shoehorned them in, parents worry they won't cope unless they continue with tutoring. Some children are being tutored every night. Their childhoods are being stolen."

Elphinstone is so concerned that she and the other heads in The London Consortium have changed their schools' shared application process. From 2019, the English and maths exams (which children often arrived for "terrified, having been tutored to within an inch of their life") will be replaced by a

verbal, non-verbal and maths skills test, "similar to the one children have every year in junior schools," plus a reference and interview.

"We're hoping to influence how much tutoring goes on," says Elphinstone. "We're making a statement that what's going on is damaging children, and asking other schools to join us." But it will be an uphill battle. "Some tutoring agencies are offering 'replicas' of the consortium test to practice on. We haven't even made the test yet."

Tutoring isn't the only blight on children's mental health, says Elphinstone. Girls' issues in particular often stem from perfectionism. "From a very early age, they're praised for being neat, dressing nicely. 'Good girl', we say, and she becomes programmed that she needs to hear 'good girl'. That she has to achieve. Performance anxiety is now developing as young as eight. Girls need to learn that they cannot always do everything perfectly. That good enough is good enough."



**RACING FOR A PLACE** Above: Competition for London's schools is fierce, but changes to the application process will hopefully make it less stressful



**COMFORT ZONE** Above: Giving students diverse activities outside the academic requirements at Francis Holland, instills confidence and allows children to fail, something that Elphinstone believes is vital in the fight against the "cult of perfectionism"



Social media is greatly adding to the problem, with users' Photoshopped pictures creating a "cult of perfectionism". But Elphinstone perceives another, very different challenge.

"This is controversial but it's the question of gender issues. A head recently told me that 34 girls in her school identify either as boys or as gender fluid. It's not a big school and that's just not biologically possible, from what I understand. On top of all the worries girls have, now they're almost meant to worry about whether they're actually a girl."

"I will come under pressure but I'm holding the line in trying to say there is a difference [between men and women]. My aim is to help girls grow into young women and understand what that means."

To combat the threats to children's mental health, Elphinstone has developed a unique school ethos, including a surprising approach to achievement.

"We tell the girls that their value doesn't lie in their achievements: 'nothing you do

will make us love you more, or less. You're loved'. That sort of language is perhaps unusual in school," she says.

In a bid to abolish 'Little Miss Perfect', girls are instead taught to be brave and resilient, and to fail. Elphinstone (who ran multiple businesses before moving into teaching) also insists they learn adaptability for the "many careers" they will have, including how to set up their own business. They're even taught to wing it.

"A few people have said that's teaching girls how to lie," says Elphinstone. "It's not that. It's just sometimes we don't need to reveal that we're underprepared or frightened. One of my mantras here is 'do it scared'."

Elphinstone models this by pushing herself out of her comfort zone and "frequently failing in front of the girls". She falls over playing netball against them, and goes on summer adventures, returning with tales of botched travel plans and failed mountain climbs.

"It's not that I try to mess things

up. But they think 'oh she's a Cambridge graduate, she's clever' and then they see that that doesn't mean that I don't make mistakes. And when I do, and I'm not humiliated, they learn how to carry those mistakes."

The girls can try (and fail in) over 60 clubs, from pottery to horse riding to the Exploration Society, which sends them on a progressively more challenging expedition every year. Elphinstone got the idea from bringing up her own four children in rural Scotland. "It helped them to be a bit braver because you get cold, wet and muddy in Scotland quite frequently!"

Mental health problems are tackled head on, or even prevented, thanks to mindfulness – days start with mindful silence, and girls learn tools to manage anxiety – and counselling. Francis Holland is one of only a few independent senior schools to work with the charity Place2Be. They offer one-to-one and group counselling, and lunchtime drop-

in centres where "girls can go and talk about any issue before it becomes something major. It's a visible place in the school because we want girls to feel that it's just like going to get an aspirin for a headache," says Elphinstone. Unusually, parents also have free access to the service. "We're helping parents to support their child and the whole family is being healed."

And it's working. In the six years since Elphinstone's arrival, incidences of self-harm have dropped to almost nothing, and recognised eating disorders have halved. This Spring term, more girls attended Place2Be than ever before.

Despite the results, there will be naysayers. But Elphinstone is a model of her own approach. "I'm tough and old and wrinkly enough to cope with attacks when they come. I don't care because I see the benefits of what we do here. Our junior school motto is 'Have a go, be brave, bounce back'. That's all I'm trying to be – a little bit braver." ■