



## Patricia Carswell looks at the pros and cons of joining the PTA

**“It’s** only a couple of meetings a term - hardly anything, in fact,” trilled the clipboard-wielding alpha-mummy in charge of the PTA as she backed me into a corner. Before I knew it I’d been signed up, promising myself that I wouldn’t get too involved; I’d confine myself to a bit of light tea-pouring and the occasional constructive suggestion.

Ten years and two schools later, I am vice-chairman of the Friends’ Association and am spending more time than is sensible organising the latest fundraiser. I have become That Mother - the one who corners newcomers and tells them what fun it all is. I even have my own clipboard.

I nearly fell at the first hurdle, though. My PTA blooding was at a *chichi* pre-prep in west London, where my introductory duty was to organise the first coffee morning of the year. This, I discovered, was akin to a daytime version of *Come Dine with Me*. What was laughingly described as “coffee” involved a lavish assortment of home-baked delicacies, served on hip crockery in gleaming kitchens. The most glamorous mother served bellinis.

After days of anxious preparation, my baking just about passed muster but my home scored poorly. “My sister used to live in one of these little houses,” announced one mother dismissively as she sized up my kitchen.

These experiences may have been peculiar to that school; if you’re contemplating getting involved, it’s essential to find out what sort of outfit the PTA is. Most have a purely fundraising function, so you can expect to find yourself organising summer fairs and promises auctions, as well as badgering local businesses to cough up prizes for the raffle.

Others, less commonly, act as a conduit for parents to communicate with the Head and staff. You’ll have to be prepared to field suggestions of varying degrees of battiness and coherence and present them to the committee without laughing. UN-level diplomatic skills will be an advantage.

Whatever the function, the main gripe among PTA members is the workload. Sarah Ebner, author of *The Starting School Survival Guide*, says,

“Some parents are really enthusiastic about joining the PTA and getting involved. However, be warned: there is always a shortage of volunteers. This means that if you do offer to help at an event, the chances are that you will be asked again. It can take over your life.”

Lancashire-based mother Helen, 42, a PTA stalwart, agrees: “If you have a school with a supportive staff and well-supported events it’s great, but if you

have staff and parents who don’t really care it can be really disheartening. I’d be honest if anybody asked me whether they should get involved and tell them to be prepared for lots of hard work and very little thanks!”

Eleanor, 44, from Monmouthshire, served on the PTA both at a primary and a prep school and believes that the job is easier at independent schools.

“At private schools you’re not constantly ringing people up and trying to get them to do everything; when you’re organising an event you can ring the maintenance team and the catering manager. In council-run schools, you physically have to do every single thing yourself; it’s so demanding.”

Whatever the school, what will make or break your experience will be the personalities involved. Rachel, 37, had a brief stint on the PTA at her son’s prep school in Surrey: “There were constant power struggles. All the women were ex-corporate types who obviously hated the fact they were no longer boardroom ball-breakers.”

Yet for all the complaints, the benefits of being a Friend of the school are undeniable. It’s not just the perks, although VIP seating at the carol service and prize-giving are a welcome recompense for long days on the cake stall. The fact is that joining the PTA brings you into the very heart of the school in a way that hanging around the school gates simply can’t achieve.

“Being on the PTA can be enormous fun if you’re with a great bunch of people, like I was,” says Helen, dismissing the notion that PTAs are full of cliquy do-gooders. Eleanor is similarly enthusiastic. “I’ve made some really good, firm friends and it’s a way to meet the person behind the teacher: you see the Head when she’s kicked off her shoes.”

So when the moment comes when That Mother approaches you, here’s my advice: don’t believe her when she says it’s just a couple of meetings a term, it’s a big investment of time and it can be as maddening as it is enjoyable. But don’t turn on your heels and run. Giving something back to the school really is rewarding. And who knows? One day you might even get a clipboard to call your own. 📎

### Tips from Sarah Ebner:

- **Do offer to help when you can; your children will benefit from the things the PTA organises.**
- **Don’t use the PTA as a forum for bad-mouthing the school or for getting special access to the headteacher. That’s not its aim!**