

Finding YOUR Community At LA Private Elementary Schools

Description



If all goes well, hopefully many of you will have a child starting private school this fall. It's an exciting time but also a big adjustment for kids and parents alike. After all, this is LA, where meeting other moms can be a Sisyphean task under the best of circumstances. Private school is no different (at least it wasn't for me and a lot of my friends). If you're like me, you may find that trying to establish friendships with other moms can be difficult. And, if you're like me, you'll care because it will impact your child's ability to establish friendships in the lower grades.

Finding a sense of community at The Willows has been much harder than I expected. I often get the feeling that the only thing I have in common with other moms is the fact that we have kids at the same school. Sometimes that can be all that's needed to establish a group of friends for you and your kid. Other times, it's just not enough to feel like there's a true sense of community.

I've learned that the issue of "community" at your child's school is one that means different things to different people.

Some moms will say, "I don't want to hang out with parents at my kid's school, I have my own friends."

Others will expound on the virtues of having a close group of friends at their kid's school, saying "we love our school because we feel such a sense of community with the other families."

But what is "community" at a private school? For me, it's moms who get together for coffee or lunch. It's dads who get together for "guys night out" or organize a group of kids to play on the same sports team. It's about being able to call a mom in your kid's class to ask advice or just vent without being judged. It's families who have dinner together. It's about a mom calling to say, "I saw your daughter

on the yard today and she looked so happy. It's more than a quick "hi" at morning drop-off. It's knowing each others' names.

I was talking with a Willows mom recently and she brought up what she perceives as the school's lack of community. Her kids are not in the same grade as mine. She was lamenting the lack of community, but she told me it does allow her family to maintain their privacy. "Nobody is in your business, because nobody is interested," she said. "True." I responded. What she's talking about isn't a clique. It's the opposite of a clique.

It's not that I want the epitome of a sorority. But, community at my kids' school is important. I want my kids to feel like they belong to a community of families. It hasn't happened overnight, but I have made a few good mom friends at school. My kids have made some good friends too. But, it hasn't been easy. It's taken time.

Our first year at The Willows was difficult for a number of reasons. My daughter was bullied by a girl in her class, which made her transition more difficult than it would have normally been. It was (and still is) a geographically fragmented 4th grade. This has been one of the biggest obstacles to building a sense of community with other families. The other obstacle, quite honestly, is that my daughter's grade has a lot of parents who fall into the category of "I don't want to hang out with parents at my kid's school." Some of them still don't know each others' names after having kids in the same grade since kindergarten. Friendships, in my opinion, tend to be superficial among the majority of moms. Many have older siblings and are busy with their activities.

The lack of community in my daughter's grade has been the single biggest challenge with our school. I had hoped for a closer knit group of families. Now that my kids have finished 2nd and 4th grade, it's less important than it was the first few years. By this age, my kids are picking their own friends. By secondary school, I imagine I'll be looking for other qualities in a school like academic offerings and athletic programs.

I was baffled by the mom who had been saying to me for the past few years, "let's get the kids together for a playdate." We had one playdate set up several years ago. She cancelled five minutes before I left the house to drive my daughter to her side of town. She asked again this year, I contacted her, but they weren't available. I told my daughter this is a "school friend" not a playdate friend. I'm equally baffled by moms who are "too busy" to say hello to other moms in the class.

I'm in a parenting group run by parent educator Betsy Brown Braun. When I brought up this issue in the group, she gave me very reassuring advice: "Christina, it doesn't matter whether your daughter's friends are from school or not, it just matters that she has friends."

A mom who is new to the school this year confided in a friend of mine that she and her child were having trouble meeting families (and kids) at the school. I immediately called her and we had lunch with our kids. To me, that's what a community is about.

This might be a good topic to think about when you pick a school. If I had it to do over again, I'd make sure to ask the question of the parents at the school and anyone else who might know: "Does your school have a strong sense of community?" What kind of events does the school have to give parents a chance to get together? Do kids do playdates? How many of the kids have older siblings? Does the school emphasize community? If so, in what ways? Do parents here develop meaningful friendships?

Ultimately, if you want a school where there is more than the mere illusion of community, you'll have to find a school where that exists. Or, create it yourself once your child is there. The latter is much harder.

Don't get me wrong. There's a lot to love about The Willows school. The strength of its community, in my experience, isn't its strongest attribute. And, it varies by grade and even by class.

To its credit, The Willows made an effort to help moms get to know each other. "Willows Wednesdays" was a new event for parents to meet for coffee each week. I don't know if this event will continue since turnout was low. But, it's a recognition that more can be done to facilitate community. After all, our school has the word "community" in its name. The Willows Community School.

Let me know what you think. Do you think all or most LA private elementary schools are fragmented and disconnected like I've described? Will a sense of community be at the top of your priority list when you look for a school? Does "community" matter once your kid is in elementary school?

Here's a great article called "The Other Mothers" on the [Power of Moms](#) blog. The perfect piece as you begin to meet other moms in the private school world. Then if you want a really good laugh, read the popular Bloggess as she talks about [mommy business cards at the park](#).

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