

Year 8: Time to Put Down Roots

Year 8 is often “the forgotten year”: the excitement of Year 7 has passed and GCSEs still feel far away, so some students' motivation dips. Yet Year 8 is the year when the habits started in Year 7 **take root**, independence grows and interests begin to take shape. At many schools GCSE options are chosen in Year 9 (at some, in Year 8), and the exploring done this year lays the groundwork for those choices.

“Success is being better than you were yesterday.” — Anonymous

Every flower blooms in its own time

No two flowers in a garden are alike. Some bloom on the first day of spring, others in midsummer. Some love the sun, others the shade. But they are all flowers, and each one blooms in its own time.

Our children are the same. Settling into a new school, new routines and sometimes a new language or country can take time. Taking longer does not mean falling behind; it means putting down roots.

Our job is not to compare them with someone else's garden, but to make sure they never go without water, sunlight and patience.

Three goals for this year

1. Going deeper: making the habits started in Year 7 stick (reading, a regular activity). **2. Independence:** managing their own homework, time and some household responsibilities. **3. From exploring to choosing:** noticing which subjects and careers they enjoy, and getting ready for GCSE options and DofE (Year 9).

“The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second best time is now.” — Proverb

Why now? What do universities and employers look for?

Year 8 grades aren't asked for directly in any application either. But what universities and employers want is built from habits and experiences gathered over the years:

University	Employer / Apprenticeship	The AI era
Academic results: GCSE and A Level (or equivalent) grades. Interest in the subject: reading, projects and competitions beyond school. The 3 UCAS personal statement questions: 1) Why do you want to study this course? 2) How have your subjects and education prepared you? 3) What have you done outside education, and why are these experiences useful?	Core skills: communication, teamwork, problem solving, reliability, initiative, digital skills. “Can you give me an example?” Interviews test skills through real examples (the STAR method). Experience: volunteering, responsibility, work experience. Apprenticeship applications ask the same questions.	What stands out: curiosity, creativity, people skills, critical thinking and using AI well (checking information, citing sources). In Year 8 this means: non-fiction reading, progress in a regular activity, a digital skill, regular volunteering, and entries in Unifrog.

A good answer to question 3 (“What have you done outside education?”) years from now starts today. Doing something is not enough; writing down what was learned matters too.

12 core skills

Unifrog, the careers platform used by many schools in England, asks students to record which skills they developed in each activity under these 12 headings. The suggestions in this guide are matched to the same skills.

Skill	What it means	Year 8 example
Reading	Understanding a text and picking out information	25 minutes of reading a day, a non-fiction book
Writing	Expressing ideas clearly and in an organised way	A competition entry, an Activities log
Numeracy	Working confidently with numbers	IXL, budgeting the family shopping
Planning	Setting goals and mapping out how to reach them	A weekly study plan, getting ready for DofE
Listening	Taking in information and ideas accurately	Parents' evening, a second job interview with an adult
Speaking	Explaining your ideas out loud	Debating, school council, a presentation
Teamwork	Working with others towards a shared goal	A team sport, regular volunteering
Leadership	Motivating and guiding others	Being a Year 7 buddy, captaincy
Problem solving	Finding a solution to a situation	A coding project, maths
Creativity / Innovation	Coming up with new ideas	A video, game, web page or artwork
Independence	Working effectively on your own	Travelling to school alone, cooking a meal
Adaptability / Resilience	Adjusting to change and keeping going after setbacks	A new experience outside their comfort zone

At school and at home: what to work on

"An investment in knowledge pays the best interest." — Attributed to Benjamin Franklin

What?	How?	Skills it builds
Weekly study plan	Write homework and revision into a weekly plan; use the school planner	Planning, Independence
25 minutes of reading a day	At least 1 non-fiction book a month (science, history, biography); twice a week in the home language if you have one	Reading, Writing, every subject
Maths	The school's platform + IXL Year 8 Maths (2 × 20 min a week); Corbettmaths 5-a-day	Numeracy, Problem solving
Self-testing	After reading, close the book, write down what you remember, then check (one of the most effective ways to study)	Independence, Reading
Note-taking	In class, the main idea + key words; 5 minutes of review in the evening	Listening, Writing

Digital project	A game in Scratch or Python, video editing or a web page	Creativity, Problem solving
Using AI well	Use it to explain topics and generate practice questions, not to write homework; follow the school's rules	Problem solving, Independence
Competitions	UKMT Junior Mathematical Challenge (Years 7–8), writing and science competitions	Numeracy, Adaptability / Resilience

Outside school: what to try

The five areas below follow the sections of the **Duke of Edinburgh's Award (DofE)**, the best-known programme for young people in the UK. DofE Bronze usually starts in **Year 9**: finding a regular activity this year for the Volunteering, Physical and Skills sections gives a big head start in Year 9.

Area	Year 8 examples	Skills it builds	Tip
Physical (sport & dance)	Progress in their current sport (belts, team selection, competitions) or a new one: Climbing, Rowing, Fencing, Athletics, Swimming, Dance	Adaptability / Resilience, Teamwork, Independence	DofE asks for 3–6 months of regular participation in this section; build the habit now.
Skills	Musical instrument (graded exams), Coding, Film & video making, Photography, Cookery, Language skills (including a home language), Public speaking, First aid, Chess	Creativity, Problem solving, Independence	A student who sticks with a skill for a year will find the DofE Skills section easy.
Volunteering	Regular volunteering: a food bank, school events, peer buddying, faith or community group events, local clean-ups, fundraising	Teamwork, Leadership, Listening	Volunteering at the same place once a month is worth more than one-off events.
Expedition	Army Cadets / RAF Air Cadets (from Year 8 and age 12), Scouts, long family walks, map reading	Leadership, Planning, Adaptability / Resilience	The best preparation for the DofE Bronze expedition: route planning and walking experience.
Residential	School trips, Cadets/Scouts camps, sports camps, language or science summer schools	Independence, Teamwork, Adaptability / Resilience	A 2–3 night camp in Year 8 builds confidence for longer programmes later.

Full list: more than 440 activities (sport, arts, science, volunteering...) and the skills each one builds are included in the UKER guidance pack.

Digital life and social media

"A word once spoken cannot be taken back." — Proverb

Most Year 8 students turn 13 this year, and 13 is the minimum age on most platforms such as TikTok, Instagram and Snapchat. Setting rules together works better in the long run than banning things:

- **A family digital agreement:** screen-free times (meals, the hour before bed), phones out of the bedroom at night, which apps are allowed; set privacy settings together.

- **Digital footprint:** everything written or shared online is permanent, and schools, universities and employers may see it later. Before posting, ask: “Would I be comfortable if my teacher or my grandmother saw this?”
- **AI:** getting AI to write homework stops learning and may break school rules. Good use: asking it to explain a topic, generate questions, or check what you've written.
- **If something goes wrong:** if there's an upsetting message or bullying, your child shouldn't fear “If I tell Mum or Dad, they'll take my phone.” Listen first, then sort it out together with the school.

An early look at GCSE options

At many schools GCSE subjects (options) are chosen in Year 9; some schools do it in Year 8. Find out your school's timetable now. No decisions are needed this year, but these make the choice easier:

- Noting which subjects make time fly and which they find hard (February task).
- Looking at which careers and university courses their favourite subjects lead to (Unifrog Careers and Subjects libraries).
- English, Maths and Science are compulsory for everyone; there are usually 3-4 optional subjects. Many schools recommend a foreign language and history or geography (the EBacc).
- A GCSE in a home language can often be taken as an extra GCSE even if the school doesn't teach it (see the languages section).

Unifrog: through your school or UKER

“Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom.” — Aristotle

Unifrog is the careers and applications platform used by many schools in England. If your school uses Unifrog, your child logs in with the account the school provides. If your school doesn't provide Unifrog, you can request an account from UKER (ukegitimrehberi.co.uk). Year 8 students see these age-appropriate tools; other tools are under “All tools”:

Section	What is it for?	A small step for Year 8
Interests profile	Interests quiz (Holland model); careers and subjects that match	Retake it at the start of the year and compare with Year 7
Quiz profile	Summary of all results, including the Personality and Work environments quizzes	Complete 2 new quizzes this year and talk about them as a family
Careers library	Hundreds of career profiles: what the job involves, pay, routes in, subjects needed	Favourite 5 careers and note the subjects they need
Subjects library (“All tools”)	Which university courses each school subject leads to	Early preparation for options: 2 favourite subjects
Know-how library	Guides and videos (online safety, health, careers)	Read the online safety guide
Read, Watch, Listen (“All tools”)	2,000+ books, TED talks, podcasts and documentaries	One suggestion a month (see the monthly list)
Courses	Short online courses: career tasters, virtual work experience	At least one “Career taster” course a year
Activities	Activity log: type, who was there, what was learned, which skills	10+ new entries this year (20+ over two years)

Interactions

Meetings, trips and workshops recorded by the school or an adviser

Students don't add these; tell a teacher if something is missing

Tip: Be specific in Activities entries (e.g. “We collected 40 parcels for the food bank”). From Year 9 the Skills tool and the options tools become more prominent. Your school may use a different platform (e.g. Xello, Start); the idea is the same: explore, record, update regularly.

10 tips for parents (Year 8)

“Do not be afraid of growing slowly; be afraid only of standing still.” — Chinese proverb

- **The “Year 8 dip” is normal:** if motivation drops, don't panic; restart with small, short-term goals.
- **Hand over responsibility:** gradually leave homework tracking to your child; check in once a week.
- **Effort, not results:** instead of “What did you get?”, ask “What did you do differently?”
- **Changing friendships:** friendship groups can shift at this age; listen without judging.
- **Screens and sleep:** more than 9 hours of sleep is recommended around age 13; phones out of the bedroom at night.
- **Don't over-schedule:** leave free time and rest rather than a packed calendar every day.
- **Stay in touch with school:** prepare questions for parents' evening together with your child.
- **Talk about jobs:** “what I did at work today” chats at the dinner table widen your child's world.
- **Home language:** keep up books and conversation in your home language if you have one; this is a good year to start thinking about a GCSE in it.
- **Don't compare:** every child has different interests and moves at their own pace.

Resources: which platform? Where can I find books?

Which online platform? Little and often

This is the question parents ask most. The rule is simple: **use no more than 3 platforms:** the one your school provides + IXL + one free resource for revision. Too many platforms means none of them gets used regularly.

Platform	What for?	Cost	How to use it in Year 8
Your school's platform	Sparx, Hegarty, Seneca, Educake etc. homework	Paid by the school	Always first: complete all set homework
IXL	Year 8 skills practice in Maths, English and Science; instant feedback	Membership (can be requested from UKER)	2–3 × 20 min a week on that week's class topics
Oak National Academy	KS3 video lessons + short quizzes	Free	Rewatch a topic that was missed or not understood
BBC Bitesize (KS3)	Short explanations, videos and tests	Free	Topic revision, a quick review before tests
Corbettmaths	Maths videos and “5-a-day” questions	Free	A daily maths habit with 5 questions
Duolingo	Foreign language practice	Basic version free	10 min a day in the language learned at school

Unifrog	Career exploration, activity log, Read-Watch-Listen	School account; otherwise can be requested from UKER	1–2 tasks a month (see the monthly checklist)
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Where can I find books?

- **School library:** the easiest route; ask the librarian for suggestions suited to your child's age.
- **Local council library:** membership is free. If a book isn't on the shelf, it can be reserved from another branch.
- **E-books and audiobooks:** borrow them free with the same library card through your council's app (Libby or BorrowBox).
- **Second-hand:** charity shops, Oxfam Books and online second-hand booksellers are great value for children's books.
- **Books in your home language:** many council libraries have world-language collections (ask your library); community centres and supplementary schools often lend books; visits to family abroad are a good chance to stock up.
- **Swap with friends:** a “book swap” with families of the same age is both cheap and motivating.

Two languages, one advantage

“To have another language is to possess a second soul.” — Attributed to Charlemagne

For children who speak another language at home, being bilingual is one of their biggest advantages. Strengthening the home language through reading and writing deepens family ties today and opens academic and career opportunities later:

- **GCSEs in home languages:** exam boards such as Pearson Edexcel and AQA offer GCSEs (and often A Levels) in many community languages, including Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Polish, Russian, Turkish and Urdu. If your school doesn't offer one, your child can sit it as a private candidate. Some students take it early, in Year 9 or 10; Year 8 is a good time to start strengthening reading and writing.
- **In the eyes of universities and employers:** a second language is concrete evidence of communication, cross-cultural understanding and adaptability. The Unifrog talk *Grow Up, Learn Another Language* (Gaston Dorren, TED) covers this.
- **Practice at home:** 20 minutes of reading in the home language twice a week; a short piece of writing once a month (5–10 sentences about a book, or a letter or email to a relative); learning a short poem by heart; audiobooks.
- **Start at the right level:** if reading in the home language is weaker than in English, begin with easy books (jokes, folk tales) and read aloud together.

Month-by-month checklist

“Little drops of water make the mighty ocean.” — Proverb

Each month: 3 small steps (Academic · Activity · Growth & Careers) + 1 suggestion from Unifrog's Read, Watch, Listen + 1 book. If you speak another language at home, add a book in that language too. The calendar is flexible: if you finish a month early, move on; if you fall behind, just carry on in order. Tick the boxes together with your child.

September · New year, new goals

- ☐ **Academic:** a plan for 2 areas to develop from the Year 7 report
- ☐ **Activity:** set a concrete goal in a regular activity
- ☐ **Growth & Careers:** retake the Unifrog interests quiz + compare
- ☐ **Watch (Unifrog):** Grow Up, Learn Another Language – Gaston Dorren (TED talk)
- ☐ **Read:** The Hobbit – J. R. R. Tolkien

October · Reading goes deeper

- ☐ **Academic:** 25 minutes of reading a day + 1 non-fiction book
- ☐ **Activity:** review activities: continue / stop / try something new
- ☐ **Growth & Careers:** log 2 activities in Unifrog Activities
- ☐ **Watch (Unifrog):** Where joy hides and how to find it – Ingrid Fetell Lee (TED talk)
- ☐ **Read:** Goodnight Mister Tom – Michelle Magorian

November · The digital world

- ☐ **Academic:** Maths: school platform + IXL Year 8 (2 × 20 min a week)
- ☐ **Activity:** make a digital product: a game, video or web page
- ☐ **Growth & Careers:** family digital agreement + online safety guide
- ☐ **Watch (Unifrog):** How I'm fighting bias in algorithms – Joy Buolamwini (TED talk)
- ☐ **Read:** Artemis Fowl – Eoin Colfer

December · Giving back

- ☐ **Academic:** 3 questions for parents' evening (written by the student)
- ☐ **Activity:** regular volunteering (3+ hours this month)
- ☐ **Growth & Careers:** write up the volunteering in Activities, with numbers
- ☐ **Watch (Unifrog):** Hunger isn't a food issue. It's a logistics issue – Esther Ndichu (TED talk)
- ☐ **Read:** A Long Walk to Water – Linda Sue Park

January · Goals and resilience

- ☐ **Academic:** 3 goals: academic, activity, personal
- ☐ **Activity:** a new experience outside their comfort zone
- ☐ **Growth & Careers:** Unifrog personality + work environments quizzes
- ☐ **Watch (Unifrog):** How to stay calm when you know you'll be stressed – Daniel Levitin (TED talk)
- ☐ **Read:** Dare to Be You – Matthew Syed

February · Subjects and careers

- ☐ **Academic:** 2 favourite and 2 hardest subjects + the Subjects library
- ☐ **Activity:** visit a workplace, campus or museum
- ☐ **Growth & Careers:** 5 careers + the subjects they need (Careers library)
- ☐ **Watch (Unifrog):** Inspiring the next generation of female engineers – Debbie Sterling (TED talk)
- ☐ **Read:** Women in Science – Rachel Ignotofsky

March - Make your voice heard

- ☐ **Academic:** a writing competition or presentation + IXL English
- ☐ **Activity:** a role in debating, school council, the school newspaper or drama
- ☐ **Growth & Careers:** a Unifrog "Career taster" course + log it
- ☐ **Watch (Unifrog):** The danger of silence – Clint Smith (TED talk)
- ☐ **Read:** Boy 87 – Ele Fountain

April - The outdoors and independence

- ☐ **Academic:** holiday flashcards + self-testing
- ☐ **Activity:** look into Cadets / Scouts; a long walk
- ☐ **Growth & Careers:** independence: the journey to school, shopping or cooking
- ☐ **Watch (Unifrog):** Great Barrier Reef – David Attenborough / BBC (documentary series)
- ☐ **Read:** The Explorer – Katherine Rundell

May - Leadership

- ☐ **Academic:** a 2-week plan for end-of-year tests (IXL / Oak)
- ☐ **Activity:** be a Year 7 buddy, a captain or take on a role in a club
- ☐ **Growth & Careers:** a second job interview with an adult + the Careers library
- ☐ **Watch (Unifrog):** Three lessons on success from an Arab businesswoman – Leila Hoteit (TED talk)
- ☐ **Read:** Murder Most Unladylike – Robin Stevens

June-July - Getting ready for Year 9

- ☐ **Academic:** report + a Year 9 goal; find out the options timetable
- ☐ **Activity:** choose 3 sections for DofE Bronze; a summer project
- ☐ **Growth & Careers:** Activities up to date (20+); a skills self-assessment
- ☐ **Watch (Unifrog):** Connected, but Alone – Sherry Turkle (TED talk)
- ☐ **Read:** Cosmic – Frank Cottrell-Boyce

The watch/listen suggestions come from Unifrog's Read, Watch, Listen library. If your school doesn't provide Unifrog, you can request an account from UKER or find the same content free on TED and BBC Sounds. TED talks are made for adults: we recommend watching together, talking about them and turning on subtitles if needed. The books are commonly recommended for Year 8 readers (ages 12–13); if one doesn't grab your child's interest, choose another for that month.

Would you like one-to-one support?

The UKER guidance programme offers one-to-one follow-up for each student, with monthly tasks, a skills map and an activity log. Find out more: ukegitimrehberi.co.uk

Sources: Unifrog student dashboard (Year 8 tools and the 12 skills); Army Cadets parent FAQs (armycadets.com); Duke of Edinburgh's Award activity list (dofe.org); UCAS personal statement questions (ucas.com). Information correct as of October 2026.