

by Antonia Hoyle

JENNIFER DODSWORTH felt a mixture of excitement and trepidation on her daughter's first day at primary. Yes, four-year-old Jasmine was lucky enough to be attending the most coveted school in the area, but deep down her mother knew she wasn't entitled to be there.

Why? Because the family live five miles away, which puts them firmly outside the over-subscribed school's catchment area.

Jennifer and her husband Richard had resorted to subterfuge to procure their daughter a place. They hatched a plan — as Jennifer sheepishly puts it — to use Richard's mother's address, which was on the same street as the school.

In order to do so without attracting attention, Richard changed all official records of his residence at the family home before re-registering himself as living at his mother's.

After their application had been successful, he promptly reinstated all his records back to their home — while continuing to live in their own property throughout.

Underhand? Undoubtedly. But the Dodsworths aren't alone in adopting spurious methods to

secure their child's entry to their chosen school. As the admissions deadline passed last week, a report found that competition for spaces is so stiff that more than 100 primary schools nationwide only admit pupils living within 300 yards — or a two-minute walk away.

A rising birth rate, fuelled by migration, means that one in eight children will miss out on their first choice of primary — with London and Birmingham among the worst affected areas.

As a result, more and more parents are being driven to desperate measures. The number of investigations into suspicious applications rose almost 11-fold between 2008 and 2013.

A recent survey claimed as many as 18 per cent of parents have fraudulently rented a property near to a school so they are — on paper at least — within its catchment area. Many more

pretend to be religious in order to get their child into a faith school.

Other parents use even more underhand tactics. Almost half have chosen a specific nursery because they think it will help them win a place at their chosen primary school — despite the rules to the contrary.

'Primary school places are a postcode lottery and if you live in an urban area with a growing population in England it is incredibly difficult to get your child into a good — or even a not so good — school,' says Ed Rushton, founder of school checking service FindASchool.

Jennifer Dodsworth, 30, an HR business manager, discovered this in autumn 2011 when trying to find Jasmine, then only three, a primary school near her home in South Shields, Tyne & Wear.

'Our closest schools didn't have good reviews,' says Jennifer. 'We wanted to give Jasmine the best possible start in life.'

Harton Primary School — five miles away on the other side of South Shields — had a 'Good' Ofsted rating and offered altogether better prospects.

'It had a lot of money invested into it and everyone wanted their children to go to there,' says Jennifer.

It also feeds into an excellent senior school, which meant Jasmine would have the chance to excel throughout her academic career.

So, Jennifer suggested that Richard, 36, an operations manager and her husband of seven years, register as living at his mother's address.

As Richard filled in the necessary forms to take himself off the electoral roll and report his change of address to his bank and the DVLA, Jennifer admits their consciences were pricked.

'We knew it was underhand and it was totally out of character, but we researched what we were doing to make sure it wasn't illegal and convinced ourselves that we'd done nothing wrong,' she says.

In fact, the legal implications of the Dodsworth's behaviour are far from clear. Many authorities are unsure whether lying to secure a school place is an offence under the Fraud Act and the chance of prosecution is virtually non-existent. To date, only one council has attempted to bring a prosecution against a mother for lying about an address on her child's school admission form, though the case was eventually dropped.

NOR — to the fury of those who *do* play by the rules — will the child in question lose their school place if caught out, though lying parents are warned they face that risk. 'Ultimately, if a four-year-old has already started school, they are unlikely to be taken out,' says Rushton. With precious little comeback, it is no wonder so many parents are taking chances.

Jennifer and Richard had to break the news to his mother that her son was 'moving in'.

'At first, she thought we were genuinely trying to fiddle the system,' says Jennifer. 'But when we explained our reasoning she was supportive. We didn't stand to gain anything from the Government except our daughter's school place.'

Which, many might argue, is precisely the point.

The process was not straightforward. 'The school's admissions team said they weren't convinced by our application because Jasmine was still registered at our address.'

'They were obviously on to us a bit, which made us nervous, but we were halfway through the process so we thought we might as well carry on.'

'We had to offer further proof that Richard was the legal guardian of Jasmine. So we changed our child benefits claim from my name to Richard's as well.'

Two months later, they were offered a place. 'We were delighted, but didn't go shouting from the rooftops as a lot of parents were disappointed their children had not got in,' says Jennifer.

'But other mums on Facebook groups were discussing the possibility of using the same sort of methods we had used to get their children into a good school, so I knew I wasn't alone, though I felt a bit bad.'

Jennifer spent the next few months drilling her daughter, now seven, not to blow their cover.

'I told her to say she lived at her grandmother's house and that she walked to school if anyone asked so she would collaborate the story.'

But then Jennifer knew she had to come clean to the teachers in order to receive correspondence, so on the



Hunt for places: Amabel with daughter Adelaide (top) and Emma with six-year-old Harriet

third day of term she sent in Jasmine with a letter that explained the family had moved since applying for her place and provided the school with their 'new' address.

'I didn't want to tell the school in person in case they realised what I was up to,' says Jennifer. 'I worried I'd done something wrong and shied away from the situation.'

The school has seemingly accepted her explanation and she insists other mothers — who slowly learned the truth as Jasmine's reception year progressed — have empathised and that many are similarly duplicitous.

'No one has judged. Of Jasmine's four closest friends, three don't live in the catchment area either,' says Jennifer. 'I don't know how they got in, except that one has grandparents in the area.'

After Jasmine started school, Richard moved his details on the electoral roll, bank and driving licence back to their home address.

'We didn't hear a word from the council,' says Jennifer, but admits — ironically — that their tactics have

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Desperate measures: Jennifer and daughter Jasmine

with children from good backgrounds,' says Emma, managing director of a climbing company from Sandon, Essex.

'All five local schools I visited felt large and cold. I wanted an environment for Harriet where she could be nurtured and get the support she deserved. The only way you can get into a good school is by registering next to it.'

So Emma put herself on the electoral role at her mother Yvonne's house near Chelmsford, Essex, in autumn 2013, so Harriet could go to a school rated 'Outstanding' by Ofsted in September 2014.

'There were only 19 pupils to a class and the reception teacher had been there for 12 years.'

'I knew instinctively that Harriet would be happy there,' says Emma, who's separated from Harriet's dad David, 41, a furniture store manager.

But it meant an 11-mile commute through winding country roads twice a day.

'If I went on the main roads the rush hour traffic meant the journey took an hour,' says Emma.

'I had to leave at 7.45am every morning and Harriet has missed play dates and parties after school because we're not able to stay.'

'The other mums couldn't believe I would travel so far and when Harriet started I felt like an outsider. But it was worth the sacrifice.'

'At the schools I could have sent her to the children seemed glued to computer games.'

'I wanted a countryside environment where children were free to play outdoors. Harriet is thriving. It is the best decision I have ever made.'

Amabel Gilding went one step further and moved in with her mother when her two choices of school — both within a mile of her Norwich home — were denied.

Instead, four-year-old Adelaide was allocated a place at a school rated 'Unsatisfactory' by Ofsted, with up to 90 pupils per class.

'I was upset, horrified and in tears,' says Amabel, 25. 'This school was in such a horrible area that someone was murdered round the corner recently.'

'There was no way I was prepared to send her there. How could any parent? Yet if we wanted to stay in Norwich, we had no choice.'

SO SHE and her husband Cory, 24, an engineer, moved 20 miles to her parents' sought-after village of Pulham, Norfolk, so Adelaide could attend the Church of England school there.

'It was wonderful, but the price of property made renting in the area impossible,' says Amabel, who married Cory last July and is heavily pregnant with their second child.

So, their only option was to move in with Amabel's mother Antonella, 47, and stepdad Colin, 39.

'Cory, Adelaide and I had to share a bedroom. As a newly married couple it was tough. I didn't want to leave the city and Cory had to find a new job.'

'Mum is lovely, but it was a shock to the system having someone continually checking on us.'

Last summer, her parents took out a £40,000 loan to convert the out-buildings of their house into a two-bedroom cottage for Amabel's family to live in, with building work expected to finish in six weeks.

'It's hardly an ideal start to married life, but it's worth it,' says Amabel. 'Adelaide is so happy at her new school and I'd do anything to ensure she gets the education she deserves.'

From lies and deceit to self-sacrifice, parents are going to extreme lengths to provide their children with an acceptable — if not excellent — education.

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backfired now they are actually trying to move house.

'We are struggling to increase our mortgage because we can't prove that Richard has lived in this property for more than five years,' says Jennifer.

'But Jasmine is top of her class. You have to do whatever you can when it comes to what's best for your child.'

APPLYING for schools is a stressful business, with 40 per cent of parents saying it made them feel anxious. Almost a fifth start considering their options before their child has even turned one.

It seems the rise of 'tiger parenting' — in which parents are hellbent on the pursuit of excellence when it comes to their children — means they are no longer prepared to plump for whatever state school the postcode lottery throws up. And

the £5 billion that the Department for Education announced in 2013 to fund extra school places barely seems to have made a dent in the money needed to accommodate their desires.

Catherine Evans baptised her four-year-old twins Dylan and Amelia when they were three months old so they could attend their local faith school — despite not being religious herself.

'I don't feel bad about it at all — my children's education is important and if you don't say your children are baptised on the enrolment form they have less chance of getting in,' says Catherine, 34, a stay-at-home mother whose two older children, Hannah, 14, and Cerys, 11, were also baptised so they could attend Town Church primary, three miles from the family home in Aberdare, South Wales.

'There are several other schools closer to us, but the ratings aren't as good. At Town Church school, the teachers have been there a long time and there are lots of activities.'

They include assembly prayers and a weekly church service, but that didn't put off Catherine. 'My parents baptised me purely so I could go to the same school and I'm not religious. They don't force it on you.'

She and her husband — from whom she separated two years ago — first had to persuade their local vicar of their godly intentions.

'When I said I was baptised, he didn't ask any other questions. If he had, I'd have told him my reasoning, though it probably wouldn't have gone down well,' she says.

She's not wrong. So many people are assuming a religion to get into popular faith schools that some churches have started taking 'registers' at weekly services to assess the authenticity of parents' beliefs.

The heavily oversubscribed St Luke's Church of England primary school in Kingston, Surrey — affiliated with the parish church — is a case in point, with pushy parents attending church services purely to get a place. 'Playground hysteria set

Pictures: NORTH NEWS / LUCY RAY / JIN VISUALS

in,' says the church's vicar, the Rev Martin Hislop, who started insisting that parents attend two services a month for 12 months before school admission.

'Some families were not staying after signing the register and others irritated my parishioners by talking through the services.'

In the end, he decided to change the school's admission rules — to base it on proximity to the school rather than religious belief.

Emma Woodthorpe, 36, was so desperate to send her six-year-old daughter Harriet to a school with like-minded children from similar backgrounds that she registered as living at her mother's address to be within her chosen primary school's catchment area — a 45-minute commute from her home.

'I wanted her to go to a school