IB PARENTS SURVIVAL GUIDE

What IBDP parents wish they had sooner!



So what exactly is the IB Diploma?

I am Siân, and I have worked with IB Diploma students for many years. Over that time, I have seen the same frustrations come up again and again for families. That is exactly why I wanted to create something simple and clear for parents.

If your child has just started the IB Diploma, or is about to, you have probably already heard a string of letters that mean absolutely nothing to you. EE. TOK. CAS. HL. IA. It sounds less like a school programme and more like a government department.

This guide will cover:

- The six subject groups
- How the points work
- Higher Level and Standard Level
- Theory of Knowledge (TOK)
- The Extended Essay (EE)
- The Group 4 Collaborative Project
- CAS: Creativity, Activity and Service
- Internal Assessments (IAs)

You are not behind. Nobody explained it to you because everyone assumes someone else already did.

This guide is here to change that. Each page covers one part of the diploma in plain English, with a small question at the end to help you connect it to what is actually happening at home.

By the end, you will have a much clearer picture of what your child is working with every single day.

The six subject groups

The IB Diploma is not like picking A Levels or any other system where students just choose whatever they fancy. Every student has to take one subject from each of six groups. Think of it as a deliberate mix that stops anyone from dropping everything they find difficult.

The diagram below shows how they are sorted:



The idea is that every student leaves with a broad education, not just depth in one area.

Which of these subjects did you take yourself, or which ones interest you most? And is there anything in your child's choices that surprised you?

How the points work

The diploma is marked out of 45 points.

Six subjects, each marked out of 7, give 42 points. The final 3 points come from two extra components called *Theory of Knowledge* and the *Extended Essay*, which we will come to shortly.

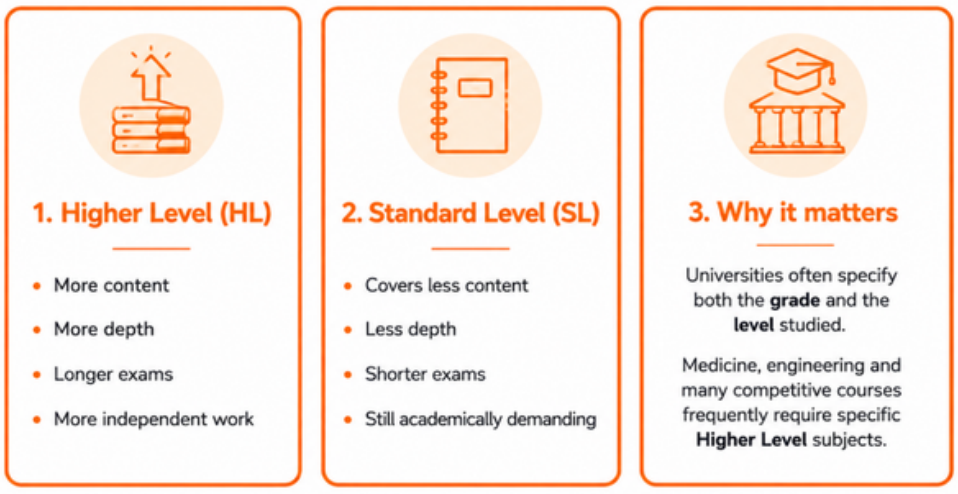
To pass, students need a minimum of 24 points, as well as meeting the other requirements. Most universities in Europe sit somewhere between 28 and 38. Highly competitive programmes ask for 38 or above.

One thing that catches a lot of families off guard: a 5 or 6 in the IB is genuinely a strong result. Students used to being marked out of 100 can feel deflated by a 6 out of 7. Try to remind them (and yourself) that the scale is different here.

Do you know what score your child's first-choice university typically asks for? It is worth finding out early so everyone has the same goal in mind.

Higher Level (HL) and Standard Level (SL)

Every student takes at least three subjects at Higher Level and the rest at Standard Level.



Choosing the right subjects at the right level in Year 1 is one of the most important decisions of the whole diploma. It is worth understanding early.

Do you know which three subjects your child is taking at Higher Level? Do those choices align with what they are hoping to study at university?

Theory of Knowledge (TOK)

TOK is the one that tends to get the blankest looks at parents' evenings. Even teachers struggle to explain it quickly.

Here is the short version. TOK is a course that runs throughout both years and asks students to think about knowledge itself. Not just what we know, but how we know it, and whether that changes depending on the subject or the culture. It sounds abstract because it is, but it builds some of the most useful thinking skills students will take beyond school.

It is assessed through a written essay and the TOK exhibition. Together with the Extended Essay, it contributes up to 3 bonus points to the total score.

Here are a few questions your child might actually discuss in TOK class...



In TOK, a confident answer with no questions is often worth less than an uncertain answer with great thinking. It rewards curiosity over certainty.

The Extended Essay (EE)

The Extended Essay is a 4000-word independent research project that every student completes over the course of the two years. They choose their own topic, usually related to one of their subjects, and work on it under the guidance of a teacher supervisor.

It is the closest thing to university-level work most students will have encountered before leaving school. And here is the thing. The best ones are rarely the ones that sound the most impressive. They are the ones where a student started with something they were genuinely curious about and found the academic angle within it.

Over the years, I have seen brilliant Extended Essays on the mathematics behind skateboard ramp design, the chemistry of why sourdough bread rises, the psychology of why horror films are enjoyable, and the economics of reselling limited-edition trainers. When a student cares about the question, it shows on every single page.

Many students find it one of the more stressful parts of the diploma, not because it is impossibly hard, but because it is long, self-directed and easy to leave until it feels too late.

Does your child have a topic yet? If not, a useful conversation starter is simply asking them what they are curious about outside of school. The topic is often hiding in the answer.

The Collaborative Sciences Project

This is the one that barely gets a mention at information evenings, which is a shame because it can take up a surprising amount of time (and as a Science Teacher, I love it!).

The Collaborative Project (Group 4 Project) is a compulsory science activity where students from different science subjects work together on a shared investigation. The focus is on the process of working as a team across disciplines rather than producing a specific result. It is not graded in the traditional sense, but participation is a requirement of the diploma.

If your child takes any science subject, this will appear somewhere in their schedule. It is worth knowing it exists so it does not come as a surprise.

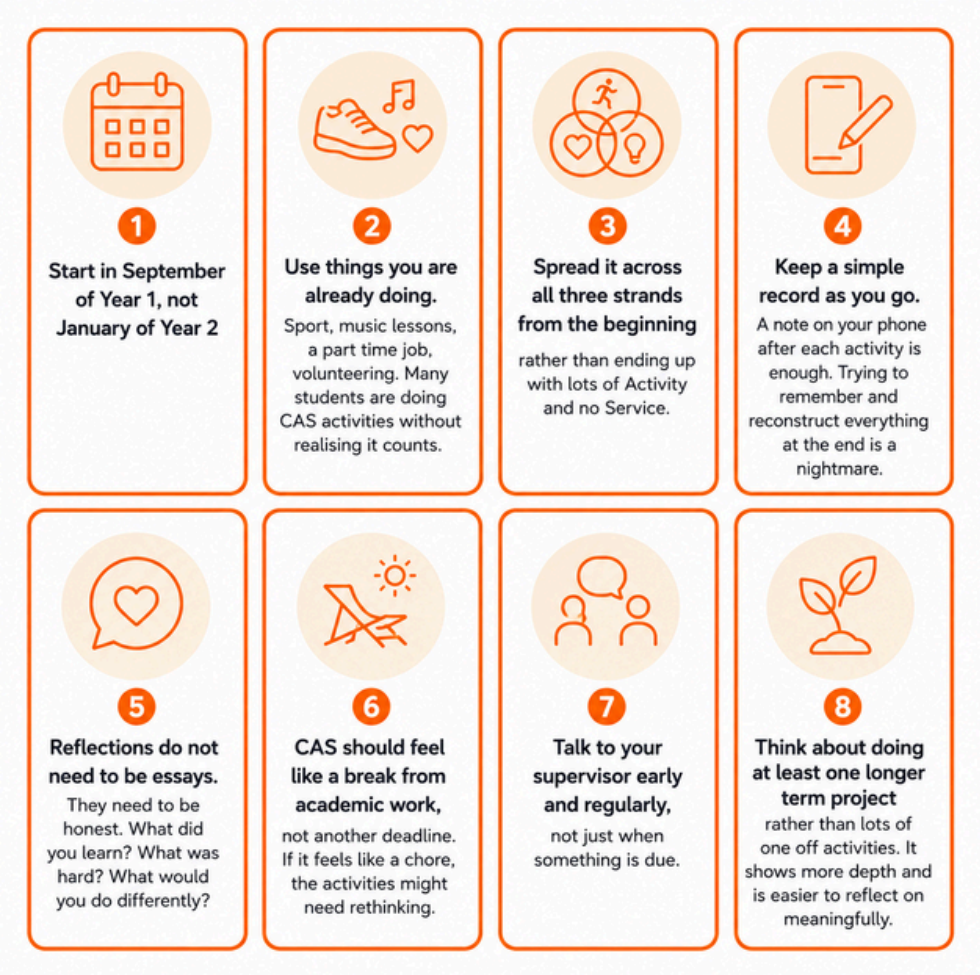
CAS: Creativity, Activity and Service

CAS does not add points to the final score. It also cannot be skipped. Both of those things are true at the same time, which is why students sometimes decide it can wait and then find themselves in a panic in Year 2.

Every student must complete a programme of activities across three areas throughout both years. Creativity covers artistic and creative pursuits. Activity covers physical exercise and sport. Service covers meaningful contribution to the community.

Students have to document their experiences, reflect on what they have learned and show evidence of personal growth. It is more thoughtful than it sounds. And it has to be spread across the full two years, not crammed into the last few months.

Here are some top tips on how to approach CAS:



Internal Assessments (IAs)

Every subject in the IB includes at least one Internal Assessment. These are pieces of coursework completed during the two years rather than in a final exam. Depending on the subject it might be a science investigation, a history essay, a geography fieldwork report, a language oral or an art portfolio.

IAs are marked first by the student's own teacher and then checked by the IB to make sure standards are consistent across the world. In most subjects they make up between 20 and 30 percent of the final grade.

Because they happen throughout the course rather than all at once, students can sometimes underestimate how much they matter. A weak IA in one subject can pull a final grade down significantly.

Final Thoughts

You now know more about the IB Diploma than most parents do at the end of Year 1. Genuinely.

The families who feel least stressed by the IB are usually the ones who understood the structure early and stayed curious rather than trying to take over. You do not need to know the syllabus. You just need to know enough to ask the right questions.

If you found this useful, come and join the Aha Study community on Facebook, where I share practical resources and answer questions for IB families every week.

Useful resources

If you would like to explore some of these ideas further, here are a few simple places to start:

Speak to your child's subject teachers or IB coordinator to get a clearer sense of expectations

Look at past papers and mark schemes to understand what good answers look like on the IBO website

How Aha can help

Study Reset

Two sessions to untangle the workload, identify what is getting in the way and build a realistic study system around the student's own schoolwork.

Ongoing Study Coaching

45-60 minute sessions, usually weekly or fortnightly. Students bring the real thing that is stuck, from revision and deadlines to coursework or getting started.

About Siân

An experienced IB teacher, Head of Science and certified coach, helping students build more independent ways of managing their learning.

Free resources and parent workshops

ahastudyhub.com/resources | Parent workshops

IB Parents community

Join IB Parents Support | Aha Study Hub

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