

## Supporting your child when they start school



Starting school is a critical period in the development of almost all children. Making the successful transition to school requires your child to have a range of emotional, physical and social skills as well as intellectual and language skills that allow them to understand expectations and interact with a range of people. Mums, dads and other carers play an essential role in helping to prepare your child for a happy and positive transition to the life of a school child.

### Children and learning

Children are born to learn. They have brains that are hard wired to watch others, copy and relate, to make connections and to look to understand.

We know that children reach milestones within a range of ages; it is not unusual for some children to be advanced in some areas and behind the average age in others. All children develop at different rates and in different ways, but if you are worried about your child's development, you should speak with a school or health professional.

### Starting school

Some young children may find starting school difficult. Children who were asked about what was hard for them when they started school said that they found the size of their class and their school overwhelming. They found the

playground especially hard to work out. The playground had less adult supervision than the classroom and they didn't understand the rules in the playground. They felt unsure of how to manage the larger school population.

Children starting school also said that they had difficulties in remembering important routes such as how to find the toilets, how to make their way through the playground and how to get back to their class when the bell rang.

Teachers were asked what they hoped children could 'do' before they started school and they generally answered that the children who coped with school 'best' were the ones who could:

- sit
- listen
- ask questions
- say what they needed
- follow simple instructions
- take turns and share
- play with others
- be independent in their ability to manage the toilet
- open their own play lunch and lunch containers
- eat their food without help.

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Teachers also reported that they hoped that children were able to control their emotions to the best of their ability for their age.

That's a big list of expectations, in fact the transition to school is a significant adjustment to a lot of changes - teachers, classmates, separation from parents and the known routines that have become manageable and familiar.

When children begin school, they are entering the next phase of their life, a phase that is less focused on their parents and a world where they begin to learn how to relate to a wider range of people and expectations.

### How you can help your child settle in to school

Preparing for school can begin months before the new school year begins. In fact, having time to prepare and get into helpful routines will ease the change for your child and allow them to gain a sense of control over the transition and a feeling of being ready.

Here are some tips that can help you and your child prepare for school:

- Let your child know what school is like. Drive past on school days when children are in the yard or in class. Point out the activities and speak about routines such as "when the school bell rings...".
- Talk about the exciting new things children do at school, such as sport, news time, playing on the equipment and learning.
- Read stories about starting school.
- Make a book about school with your child, using pictures of their school and teacher.
- Answer your child's questions about school in a positive way.
- Encourage your child to have 'play dates' with friends who will also be attending the same school.

### Practice school skills at home

Your child will need to be more independent now they are at school. You can practice some of the skills they need with them at home. Some things to practice include:

- Dressing themselves, managing to put their shoes and socks on and off again and putting on their jumper or cardigan.
- Having snack time at around the same time as morning play. Practicing opening the snack independently and putting the container back in a bag.
- Carrying their own bag to kindergarten or childcare.
- Encouraging them to express what they want to use words to explain if they are upset.
- Helping your child to be able to label feelings of sad, happy, scared and worried.
- Practicing making choices.
- Practicing the routine of going to the toilet, washing hands and managing clothes.
- Practicing asking questions and putting their hand up.
- Playing games that involve following instructions and remembering tasks.
- Practicing taking turns.

### Establishing a morning routine

A morning routine can be very helpful to minimise stress and ease the transition to 'school time'.

- Make a chart with your child of the routine to be followed on a school morning; it can be fun to take pictures of them doing each task as a visual reminder.

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- Have a few trial runs, use an egg timer so that your child begins to develop a concept of time.
- Praise your child for the effort they make in getting ready in the morning.
- Aim to make the mornings as stress free as possible - this means you will have to be organised too!
- If you can - aim to get to school 10 minutes before the bell rings so your child has a chance to greet friends and classmates and even have a play with them if there is time.

### Preparing to be a school parent

This is a transition for you too; most parents will feel excited and anxious as their child begins school. Just as they need to practice to prepare and get ready for school, you do too.

To make this time easier for you, you can:

- Attend the school orientation program and become familiar with key people in the school such as the principal, assistant principal and office manager.
- Let the school know if your child has special needs, allergies or has had a traumatic experience or loss.
- Have the school phone number in your phone and make sure the school always has up to date contact details for you.
- Beware of your own anxieties, practice being calm and relaxed.
- Be organised to reduce last minute stress, especially on the the first day.
- Have a positive attitude to school which will help your child too as well.
- Organise a pleasant activity to go to when you drop your child off at school.

When your child comes home you should ask them lots of questions about their day, such as "Who did you play with at play time?" and "What was the best thing you did today?".

### Separation

For some children, being separated from their parents and friends can be very difficult.

If your child is not used to being away from you, organise for them to spend some time at a friend or relative's house without you. Begin for short separations first and then build these up to longer times. Always pick them up at the time you said you would. Don't sneak out - say goodbye and repeat when you will return. If your child becomes upset, prolonging your leaving can make the situation worse.

### In the weeks following starting school

Some children settle in to school easily and some don't. Be patient and try to stay calm. Keep to predictable routines. If your child is distressed, it won't help them to settle in if you let them avoid school. If your child has persistent difficulties settling in, discuss this with your child's teacher away from your child.

You could try these strategies to help your child:

- Listen to what your child says is difficult.
- Reassure them that school is a safe place to have fun and learn.
- Help your child to be brave and encourage them to try new things.
- Teach your child to say what is bothering them and to think about ways to deal with the problem.
- Remind them that their teacher can help them and if the school has a buddy system, to ask them for help too.

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- Teach them to bounce back and model positive thinking.
- Celebrate the new things your child learns and does.

### Kids with extra challenges

For a child who has experienced tough times or traumatic events - such as an illness or an accident, losing someone close to them or parents separating - planning for school needs to be carefully prepared for. Teaching and practicing new skills with your child will help to ensure that your child is able to thrive in their new setting.

Children who have traumatic experiences may find that separation makes them feel unsafe and brings back upsetting memories of the traumatic event or loss. These children may benefit from 'safe practice', where they are able to know that they will be somewhere else for a set period of time and that you will return for them. It is important for children with these experiences have predictability and routine. Unexpected delays can be frightening and need to be avoided where possible. If you and your child have had a traumatic experience, it might be difficult for you to let them go and separate comfortably.

It's helpful to have a bit of background to understand how best to help your child with this developmental milestone. In fact, for many parents, this is a milestone in parenting as well, as you adjust to your child becoming more independent.

### What can you ask your child's school to do?

The relationship you develop with your child's school can help your child in their transition, development and learning. There has been a lot of research that has shown a key factor in a child's success at school is having a parent actively interested and involved in their school and education.

A positive and collaborative partnership between you and your child's teacher provides your child with

their own support team. It is important that you share information with your child's teacher that will allow them to understand your child's needs and behaviours.

Some schools will develop a 'transition statement' where parents and children can record details that they think the school needs to know, such as worries the child may have, exposures to challenging life situations, other professionals who work with your child (speech therapists, psychologists etc), assessment and diagnosis reports, health concerns and interventions and what helps your child when they are frightened, sad or unable to settle. You can also communicate this to your child's school by writing the teacher a letter or sending them an email.

### When you may need further help and support

If either you, your child, or their teacher feel that your child needs additional support to settle in to school and learning, it is important to discuss this with the welfare teacher at the school. You can ask to meet with the school counsellor or psychologist and you can speak with your GP about a referral to a specialist that may be able to help.

For more information visit:

**The Trauma & Grief Network**

[www.tgn.anu.edu.au](http://www.tgn.anu.edu.au)

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