

insights



Helping children make a bright start to school

by Michael Grose

Starting school is a major step in a child's educational journey. It is made easier when children are prepared for the transition.

Children's milestone events such as starting school always bring a mix of emotions for both children and parents, with excitement, anticipation and nervousness being the most common. If either you or your child is feeling anxious about the big event then the following tips will help ease the tension and ensure your child makes the best possible start to their school life:

1. Be positive about the year ahead

School starters generally take their cues from their parents so your attitude to school, your child's teacher and learning can set the scene for a positive year ahead. Be positive and confident that your child will fit in and succeed and you increase the likelihood that they will do so.

2. Tell them what to expect

One of the best ways to ease a child's anxiety is to provide information about what they can expect at school. Over the school holidays, reinforce what they have already learned about lining up, play areas, routines and other aspects of school they may have experienced during the transition program. In this way your child will be better prepared for what happens when real school starts.

3. Develop your child's independence skills

Children with age-appropriate self-sufficiency skills generally find starting school much easier than children who have always had everything done for them. In the months leading up to the start of school make sure your child knows: how to open and close their lunchbox; how to pack their bag or backpack; how to use the toilet independently; and how to pack away their belongings. Practise eating play lunch and school lunch with your child. Also help them develop the habit of packing up their toys, their dinner plates and their clothes. These simple habits soon become ingrained patterns that will help maximise your child's long-term success at school.



4. Explain what school expects from them

Let your child know that being at school requires some behaviours that may be very different from those required at home. For instance, there will most likely be different rules and routines. They will probably have to work with many more children, they may have to put up their hand to get a teacher's attention and they may have to wait

their turn to be heard. Help them understand that in a classroom they may not be able to do things when they want to – which can come as a shock to some children. These lessons about fitting in will help your child adapt quickly to their new surroundings.

5. Teach social etiquette

School requires children to make friends with other children and also to work and play alongside others. Take the time to explain and role-play the social etiquette that will help your child succeed socially. “*Jeremy, when you want to play with others you need to say, ‘Excuse me! Can I join in your game?’*” Another way for children to learn social etiquette is through play dates, family gatherings and family mealtimes. Also insist that your child shows good manners including using ‘please’ and ‘thank you’, which will aid their continued social development.



6. Familiarise them with the school environment

The scale of the physical environment of a school can be daunting for young children so consider spending some time at school during the holidays so they become familiar with the playground and the buildings. Also make the journey to and from school a number of times prior to the start of school so that they are comfortable when they go on the first day.

7. Develop a goodbye routine

Despite the best start to the school year there will always be those days when a child just doesn't want to go to school. Tears and tantrums are common for many school starters. It helps in these less-than-pleasant situations if you have a goodbye routine that includes a smile, a kiss and/or hug and leaving without looking back. If saying goodbye in the morning continues to be a struggle, seek the advice and help of your child's teacher.



8. Don't forget to develop a hello routine too!

Once school has finished some children just want to relax without talking about school, while others may unload about the events of the day. Follow their lead but regardless of whether your child opens up or closes down make sure they have some downtime so they can relax and unwind. If your child always presents a tale of woe about school (“*I hate school. I'm not going back*”), be patient and remember that children can be faulty observers and don't always see things as they really are. Help them look for the positive or good parts of their day by asking questions such as “*What did you enjoy about today?*”

At times of transition it's worth remembering that some children adapt to change far quicker than others. Some children adapt easily to new routines and new surroundings, while others may take many weeks to feel comfortable with going to school. If the latter is the case for your child, then patience, consistency and exposure to affirming parent networks may be the best allies that you and your child can have.



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