

Helping your Early Primary Child Start or Return to School





It is important that young children feel happy and relaxed about coming to school. The following are a few suggestions to help you and your child manage this exciting time:

Teach practical safety

For example, teach very young children their parents' names, address, phone number, basic traffic rules. Make sure that your child knows that it is important not to leave the school grounds without permission. Check that your child is familiar with the route and method of transport to be used in travelling to and from school. Let your child know where they will be collected after school, and to let their teacher know if they are not sure how they are getting home or where they are being picked up from.

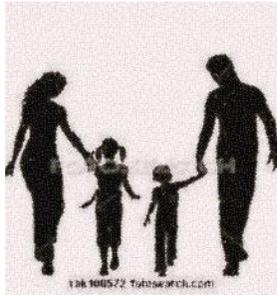
Before school starts

- Talk to your child about what school will be like, how long the school day will be and how school will differ from preschool, day care etc plus what things will be the same.
- If your child is anxious about starting school, explain that he or she will make new friends and have fun learning new and exciting things.
- If you show your child the school before the official first day this can help your child to feel more comfortable.
- Explain the difference between playtime and lunchtime and how you will pack food for both breaks. Make the packaging and size manageable.
- Your child's ability to settle into school life may be made easier if there is a friend starting at the same time. If you are new to the area you may be able to meet other parents who have children starting school.



Preparing for the first day

Show your child that learning is fun; e.g. arranging household items, cooking, growing plants, playing word and number games. Encourage your child to develop helpful habits e.g. putting things away, listen and follow directions, do simple chores, care for their possessions, share appropriately, stick to a schedule, dress themselves, Arrive on time, not too late not too early, leave quickly and cheerfully.



The way parents react makes a big difference

Many parents feel a sense of loss and loneliness when a child starts school, particularly if it is the first or last child. While it is natural for parents to miss their young children it's important not to ask your child things like: 'Will you miss me when you go to school?' Questions like this do not help develop feelings of independence.



Be prepared for initial difficulties

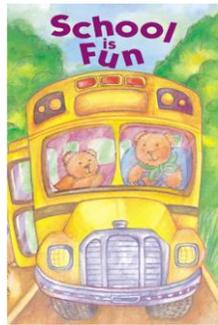
Although most children take going to school in their stride, some have initial problems. Sometimes children are disappointed when they have not learnt to read and write after a couple of days. This usually occurs because they have had too great a build-up before starting school.

A few children find it difficult to accept the fact that they must go to school all day, every day (compared with preschool etc, where they may have attended only one or two days). This is especially so after the initial excitement has worn off.

A small number of children find it difficult to cope with large numbers of other children and the sudden restriction of the classroom. Young children can get very tired and a firm routine at home with regular bedtimes and soothing rituals will help.

Teachers are extremely patient, dedicated and fully understand that not all children cope as well as others and that some will need extra care and attention.

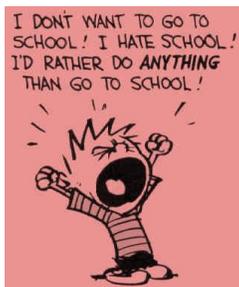
It is important to be on the lookout for signs of stress – tummy aches, headaches, inability to sleep or eat irritability or refusal to go to school. Some of these symptoms may occur in some children when they first start school and this is quite normal. However if the signs persist after a week or two it's a good idea to talk to the teacher so both of you can work together to try to discover any possible causes of the unhappiness.



Dealing with the stress of transition

Adjustment to new situations and changes in routine can be difficult for children and adults alike. Some anxiety and worry is normal and appropriate at this time. With time, and strategies such as those listed below the stress should ease quickly for both children and parents.

- Remember that everyone has to say goodbye sometime in their lives, sometimes the goodbyes are temporary, and sometimes they are permanent. For children it can be very difficult to tell the difference between a temporary and a permanent goodbye. It is often because of this that children suffer from separation anxiety. This is especially true in young children who have not yet learned how to tell the difference. It is also common among young children who have not had much experience with social interactions outside of their own family. Although it is nice to know that your child is attached to you and loves you, the pain that comes with watching your child cry and scream as you leave is very unwelcome. There are ways to help your child learn the difference between the kinds of goodbyes, and to get them to willingly let you leave.
- Children cry when someone leaves because they may not realize that person is actually coming back. Perhaps instead of saying goodbye, you should explain, briefly, what it is you need to do, and say, "I'll be back in a little while," or "see you soon". The more a parent leaves a child, the more the child will realize that mum or dad will be back.
- Give your child notice about the change but don't continue to talk about it. This may only make him or her more nervous, and it may make you appear nervous, too. Children easily pick up on your feelings, and if mum or dad is nervous, your child will pick that up and become even more anxious about your departure.
- Make your goodbye short and not drawn out. It doesn't have to be a distracted, rushed kiss on the forehead and then a mad dash to the car, but don't dawdle around with your son or daughter stalling your leave with extra verbal reassurances. If the parent is unsure about leaving, the child will certainly feel unsure about being left. Give your child a kiss and a hug, wish them a happy day and let them know you/another carer will be back at the end of the school day. Remember that usually minutes after you leave, the tantrums stop. The "show" is for you; once you are gone, the "performance" will end.
- Look at "goodbyes" as opportunities to help children develop the skills of independence, resilience and emotion-management.



Some information about children's fears

To many parents, children's fears seem to make no sense at all. Nevertheless, to young children, monsters lurking in the dark or scary noises coming from the roof are quite real. Around your child's second birthday, he or she may become frightened by things that did not cause fear before e.g. - the neighbor's dog, the dark, the bathtub drain, and loud noises.

Several factors contribute to a child developing fears. Children between the ages of 2 and 6 may have experienced real fear or pain from being lost, injured, or bitten. They also have vivid imaginations and struggle with the idea of cause and effect.

A toddler knows something about size and shape, but not enough to be sure that he or she won't be sucked down into the bathtub drain or into a flushing toilet. Older children are aware of dangers that they hear about or see on TV but find it hard to know what is real and what is not.

All children have fears at some point in their life and it is usually considered to be a normal part of development. These fears are only abnormal if they are persistent or keep the child overly preoccupied with the subject that is feared, so that it interferes with normal activities, if the child cannot be reassured or distracted away from the fear, or if it is an irrational fear. Whether or not a fear is irrational depends on a child's age and developmental level. For example, it is normal for a 2 year old to be afraid of sitting on the potty, but it would be irrational for an 8 year old to have the same fear.

Toddlers normally have fears of separation, noises, falling, animals and insects, using the potty, bathing and bed time.

Fears among preschool age children also include separation, plus fears of animals and insects, monsters and ghosts, getting lost, loss of a parent and bed time.

Younger school age children normally have fears of separation, noises, falling, new situations (especially starting school), parents divorce and bedtime. Older school age children worry about bullying, social rejection, war, new situations, and burglars.

Adolescents normally have fears of burglars, new situations (going to college, etc), war, divorce, and sexual relations.

Fear of the dark is usually one of the last childhood fears to be conquered.

In children of all ages, fears may also increase during times of stress (new baby, moving house, divorce, etc). They may also develop a fear after a triggering event, such as falling in the water, touching something hot, or being chased by a dog.

Some children are more fearful of things, even common things, than others and this is usually a function of his/her type of temperament. Also, children who have parents that are very anxious or fearful, or who tend to overreact to things, may have children who have the same reactions in similar situations.

A note about separation

Children's anxiety about separation is an indication of growth. Before your toddler turned two, he or she forgot you after you left, and settled down quickly. Now your child worries about and puzzles over your departure. Always tell your child that you are leaving. Sneaking out decreases trust. It may help to get your child absorbed in an activity before you leave. A simple ritual of waving bye-bye and blowing good-bye kisses also may help.

Preschoolers are more self-assured than toddlers, but occasionally experience fears about being separated from a parent when starting a new school or child care arrangement, staying overnight with a relative, or moving to a new home. Ease into new situations gradually, with the parent using a matter of fact attitude and a few reassuring words. Visiting the new school /new environment several times before the first day, or staying with your child for the first day or two can make a big difference.



Some tips on dealing with your child's fears:

- Respect your child's feelings and fears. It is not helpful to coerce or use logic or use put downs, such as 'you're being a baby for being afraid of that,' or to tell them to ignore the things that he is afraid of.
- Ask him why he is afraid and then talk about it. This can be especially helpful if there was a triggering event. . Reading children's books about scary or new situations such as starting school, going to bed in the dark or having an operation in the hospital also can be helpful.
- Don't let him/her avoid all of the things that s/he is afraid of, but you also don't want to try and force your child into doing something s/he is afraid to do. It is best not to force a child into fearful situations all at once. Often the "shock" method will backfire and intensify the fear. A small dose at a time is the best way to help a child over-come fear.
- Don't overreact; your extra attention on their fear reinforces your child's reactions.
- Remember that some fear is good. Children should have a healthy sense of caution. Strange dogs, unknown people and unfamiliar situations may not be safe. As children grow older, they begin to have a better understanding of cause and effect, and reality versus fantasy. Help them with protective behaviors support or first-hand experience with the object of their fear and discover ways to control potentially dangerous situations. Eventually, most fears will be overcome or at least brought under control.

- Show your child how to cope. Young children can learn some coping skills that will help them feel like they have more control of their fear. Learning how to take deep breaths, using their imagination to turn a scary monster into a funny monster, or keeping a flashlight by the bed after lights are turned off are all good examples of coping skills.
- Give your child support as they learn to master their fears by helping them name and describe the feeling. For example, if your child is afraid of starting a new school, you should be empathetic by saying things like "I know you are scared of starting a new school and you are probably worried about making new friends, but I think you will

- feel much better once you get started” and talk to them about the things that they are afraid of. Remind them that they have always made friends before and provide encouragement once they start school. It may also be helpful to model or role play how to go up to and introduce ourselves to new people.
- Remind them of other things or times in the past that they were afraid of, and for which s/he no longer has fears.
 - Again, reassure and comfort your child as you help them to face their fears. In the long run, it is not helpful to teach your child that it is alright to avoid everything that we are afraid of. A calm, problem-solving approach works best.

The home school connection



- Visit the school, be involved, check the newsletter and other school correspondence, encourage play-overs, make contact with other parents.
- Inform the teacher, privately of any family or personal matters that may be impacting on your child’s attendance, attention or general well being.
- Visits to your child’s classroom are welcome. The teacher will guide you as to the best times. If longer visits or a meeting is required, make a separate appointment with the teacher; bell times at the start and end of day are particularly busy.
- Remember that your child’s teacher, the school’s management and admin teams and the school social worker are always available to help you settle your child into school, at every year level.



Sources:

“Every Kid: parenting your 5-12 year old child” by B Waters and L Kennedy

“Fear Free Children” by Janet Hall

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