

Transitioning to Kindergarten

By Janis Strasser

Starting school can be scary and exciting for both you and your child. Effective kindergarten teachers know that children are individuals who each start kindergarten with a wide range of skills. You do not need to drill your child with letters, numbers, and facts, before school starts. But there are some things you can do to prepare both you and your child for kindergarten. Here are some ideas.

Before school starts

- **Send a note to the nurse and to the teacher if your child has allergies or special needs.** Do this even if you have indicated this on other forms already. It may be critical for teachers to know that your child reacts to bee stings, has food allergies, or has hearing or vision modifications. As a parent, you have the responsibility to advocate for your child's health and safety.
- **Visit the school and meet the teacher.** If there is a visiting day to meet your child's teacher and visit her classroom before school starts, make sure to participate. If you missed visiting day or the school does not offer one, call to see if you can arrange a quick visit to see the school and to meet the teacher with your child
- **Start your school routine early.** To reduce stress and get used to new routines adjust new bedtimes or wake up times a few weeks before school begins. Routines are comforting for us and for children. Read a soothing bedtime story every night to help your child fall asleep with comforting thoughts. Do not watch the news or violent programs in the evening.
- **Label everything.** Make sure to label backpacks, lunch boxes - everything your child brings to school. This includes her! If your child's school has not supplied a nametag, make one. It should have your child's name, address, and a phone number where a parent/guardian can be reached, the name of the teacher, and how your child gets home from school.
- **Read books together about starting school.** You can ask your local librarian for suggestions or try some of these:
 - *Miss Bindergarten Gets Ready for Kindergarten*, Joseph Slate (Illustrated by Ashley Wolff)
 - *Seven Little Mice Go to School*, Kazuo Iwamura
 - *Pete the Cat: Rocking in My School Shoes*, Eric Litwin (Illustrated by James Dean)
 - *Mom, It's My First Day of Kindergarten*, Hyewon Yum
 - *Yoko Learns to Read*, Rosemary Wells

On the first day of school

- **Be positive.** Give your child a smile and a hug, tell her you love her, and wave goodbye.
- **Help your child say goodbye.** Saying goodbye in a new setting can be frightening for some children. When you say goodbye (either at the bus or at school), reassure your child that

you will see her later. Mention a specific time and a concrete activity, for example “I will pick you up before lunchtime and we will have lunch together.”

- **Avoid behaviors that might upset your child.** For example, try not to:
 - Cry as you wave to your child through the bus window.
 - Argue with the bus driver who may be late the first few days. (The drivers need time to learn the route and talk to anxious parents.)
 - Battle with your child about an outfit you want her to wear. (She doesn’t have to be the school fashion queen.)
 - Force your child to eat a big breakfast. (She may be nervous and it might be better to eat lightly than to have a stomachache, for the first couple of days).
- **Wait to ask the teacher your specific questions.** The first day of school is not the time to bombard the teacher with personal requests and information. Remember, your child is one of 20 or 25 children. Trust that the teacher is a professional who will make your child feel welcome and help her feel like a member of the classroom community.

During the first week of school

- **Be supportive.** Adjusting to school may take time. Ask, “What was the most fun thing you did in school today?” Then ask, “What was the hardest thing for you?” (Only ask this after you have discussed what was fun.) Don’t expect your child to tell you every detail.
- **Instill a sense of confidence in your child.** Celebrate your child’s successes. Tell her that you are proud of the way she got on the bus and sat down all by herself, or the way she tried to print her name. Don’t dwell on how many friends she has made during the first few days. This is too abstract for most 5-year-olds and their friends change by the minute. Instead, ask, “Tell me about some of the children in your class.” It takes time to adjust to new people, new activities, and a new environment. Don’t expect perfection. If your child was perfect, she wouldn’t have to go to school!
- **Set aside a time, each evening, to share your child’s day.** See if your child has brought home any drawings, paintings, or scribbling. These papers may be very important to your young student. If there are no papers, don’t assume that your child didn’t do anything worthwhile. After a few weeks have passed and your child has gotten used to school, ask her about what she played with in the classroom, what stories the teacher read, if she went outside, etc. Listen for clues about your child’s strengths and challenges. If you have concerns, contact the teacher and set up a time to talk.
- **Read everything the school sends home.** During the first weeks of school children bring home a wealth of information about school routines, important dates, and meetings that you will need to know about. Make sure to check your child’s backpack every day. Also, you may want to go over with your child, in a positive, calm way, the information you have supplied to the school on the emergency card (who may pick your child up other than you, where she can go if you’re ever not home, etc.).
- **Enjoy being the parent of a kindergartner!** This is your child’s first step into primary school and a unique time in childhood. Enjoy!