

Starting School: Article for Parents

Getting Ready for Kindergarten

We can let children know that going to school is like discovering a new world, but not a world that's completely unfamiliar. The more we help them recognize how much school is like home, the easier the transition can be. Like home, school has places to sit, places to play, a kitchen, bathrooms, and grownups (teachers) who care about children.

Children's Misconceptions about School

Some children are afraid to go to school because they don't know how to read and work with numbers, and they think they have to know all those things before they even arrive at school. Other children worry that there won't be any time for play once they get to school, or that they won't know when it's time to go home. They may worry about what could happen if they don't listen to the teacher, or what they should do if they have to go to the bathroom. It's helpful to encourage our children to talk about their concerns or fears so we can answer their questions, correct their misconceptions, and give them more realistic expectations.

Asking and Listening

As children deal with the different challenges of school, it can help them to know that we adults will gladly listen to what their day was like. Children need to know that their parents care about what happens at school and that their family is proud of the ways they're learning.

There may be days, of course, when children won't want to talk at all about school, but if you've listened before, your child can trust that you will want to again when he or she is ready.

Share Your Own Experiences

Helping a child get ready for school often brings back feelings we adults had when we began school. No matter what those feelings are, if we can accept them truthfully and share them with our children, we can each have another important opportunity to grow. "I felt that way, too, when I was a child. Tell me more about what your day was like," is a wonderful way to begin to work on any new kind of growing.

Helpful Hints

Before the First Day of School:

- Try to find a balance between acknowledging your child's fears and talking about school and teachers in warm and positive ways. You might ask what your child thinks school will be like so you can try to clear up any misconceptions.
- If you possibly can, call the school and set up a visit so that you and your child can meet the teacher and tour the school building to see the classroom and other places (like the gym, the playground, the kitchen, and the bathroom).
- Help your child get to know other children in the neighborhood who go to the same school. You might try to arrange a "play date" with another child who will be in the same class, so your child will know at least one other classmate that first day.
- Prepare your child for some of the rules at school. Let your child know that teachers often make rules to help children be safe or to make learning orderly. One common rule is that children have to raise their hand and wait to be called on before they speak so that the teacher can be sure that everyone gets a turn.
- Help your child learn your family's address and phone number. Write them on a paper and tape it inside your child's pencil case, backpack or lunchbox. It's reassuring for children to know that they have that information.
- Walk or ride with your child to school and back, so your child can become familiar with the route. You might also want to introduce your child to the crossing guard or school bus driver. Children often find that crossing guards and bus drivers become trusted friends.

Just Before School Begins:

- To help the morning go smoothly, get things ready the night before -- pack lunch, pick out clothes, set the breakfast table.
- Send your child off with encouraging words like, "Have a good day," rather than warnings like, "You better be good."
- If you pack a lunch, you might want to include a kind note or a small toy. Things from home can be a comfort when your child feels homesick. Some parents paste a photograph of the whole family in their child's lunchbox as a reminder that the family will be together again at the end of the day.

After School:

- Encourage your child to talk about the day's activities, and really listen to what he or she says. Ask things like, "What was fun, what was not fun?" or "What was easy, what was hard?" Keep in mind that children often love to exaggerate about how "bad" the other children were or how "mean" the teacher was. Try to remember what it was like for you.
- If you hear that something was difficult at school, let your child know that you understand there are some things at school that are hard to do, that you're proud that he or she has been trying, and that tomorrow will be a new and hopefully better day.