



Some Ideas on How to Help Your (Small) Child Prepare for and Settle in School

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- Talk enthusiastically about school in the run-up to starting. This comes naturally to most parents! Lots of positive talk about school, but nothing intense and not repeated ad nauseam so they start to think you are anxious about it yourself. Be ready to answer questions or to just 'wonder' with them how it will go. Don't pre-empt the reality by promising it will be perfect or that they'll make friends immediately, etc. A little bit of initial anxiety on the child's behalf is perfectly normal.
- Visit if possible – to familiarise the child with the environment and to introduce key people – safety comes more from the relationships than from the physical setting. Helpful if they can see their 'peg' before they start, and learn what should go on there. Maybe read books together about starting school.
- Talk about your own (good!) experiences of school if you can, to reassure them that you made friends and got through challenges etc. Maybe show them a picture of you in your uniform if you can, or tell them the name of your first teacher, etc.
- Make sure they know to speak to their teacher if they have any worries at all.
- Send them in with a safe object (eg cuddly toy) at first if you know it will help a sensitive child cope better. Most schools will allow or even ask for this – even if it is kept on a peg or in a cupboard.
- Say goodbye at the classroom door fairly swiftly and confidently, with a smile, and try not to show your own anxiety. Don't hand about for too long where they can see you!
- Get good (ideally calm) routines into place as early as possible so it is predictable and manageable every morning. It can matter a lot to a child, especially one who has a sensitive temperament, to have clarity on who is taking them to school, at what time, etc. It is all part of them feeling safe and like life is under control.
- You could put together a very simple visual 'planner' or mark on your family calendar (if they understand how it works) to show what they are doing on what days. Even some fairly young children feel more in control of their somewhat confusing lives if they can see that for 5 days they go to school, then it's the weekend, and on one day each week they do swimming lessons, another day a breakfast club, etc etc.
- Welcome them home at the end of the day acknowledging they have done really well to get into the new environment, perhaps with a treat. If you are normally hard at work when they get home, give them some one on one time at first if you can, to debrief or just play together – that is the greatest reward for many children. But don't force them to talk about school if they don't want to.
- Build a positive relationship with the teachers, but don't overwhelm them!

- Having new classmates round to play can be very helpful in cementing friendships. However friendships can take time to form for some children and in some contexts, and this commonly raises anxiety in parents who in the long term don't actually need to worry. School will almost always let you know if there is a genuine issue forming relationships, and then you can talk constructively about it and make a plan.
- Additionally, it's worth understanding that there will *inevitably* be some problems in some relationships at some point – it cannot be avoided – so be ready to ride it out, talk to school, help your child grow in their social skills - especially kindness. This is part of education – just as significant a part as what takes place in their academic learning.
- Showing your child that you are 'in a team' with school, working together positively for the their good, is very powerful. They need to know you believe in their school and are behind what is going on (unless of course they are being harmed or treated badly then they need to know you will do something about it). When parents moan or talk 'against' a school or its staff too much, it quickly throws the child's confidence and can make their school experience confusing and even negative. Any issues should be dealt with quickly and clearly on both sides. Get involved supportively with school if there is an opportunity, and help build a positive community.
- A good sleep routine is crucial – that goes without saying – and they are likely to be exhausted in the early days and weeks of starting school. Their behaviour may be more challenging at home too, as they work hard in the day to keep it under control at school.
- Start early in helping them understand it's ok to make mistakes, and seeing them as learning opportunities. Be honest that you make mistakes yourself.
- Don't at any point give the impression your love/approval is dependent on their academic success. Praise effort more than outcome.
- Don't be afraid to ask for support or advice if you feel you are struggling as a parent – it can make all the difference to the child if you do this earlier rather than later.
- Become really good at listening – to your child, the teachers, and everyone else! There's nothing more powerful.
- Don't worry too much about early academic development. Teachers will let you know in good time if there are issues with progress. The key things early on are not necessarily academic – they are more to do with learning to listen and respond, form simple relationships, manage strong feelings, develop some independence, gain more control over their bodies, and play well. Play is still absolutely fundamental at this stage of development. They often begin to pick up academic learning naturally when they are ready (this should happen in a good school). It is certainly not a good idea to force it.