

Getting ready for kindergarten



Tips and strategies for a smoother transition

By JOANNA NESBIT

Soon it will be time for school, and that means changes for your child. Whether you're an old pro at preparing for school or brand-new to the system, it's a big day for your kindergartner, and he'll do best if he's prepared. Here's how you can help the transition go more smoothly.

Re-establish a schedule

As tempting as it is to whoop up the last days of summer, kindergartners will benefit from easing into their school schedule gradually. At least one full week before school starts, re-establish your child's routine by waking late sleepers earlier so they begin to go to bed earlier and have them get dressed in more timely manner than summer demands, recommends Betsy Brown-Braun, child

development specialist and author of *Just Tell Me What to Say: Sensible Tips and Scripts for Perplexed Parents*.

Attend the meet-and-greet

Many schools have meet-and-greet sessions just before school starts so children can visit their classroom, meet their teacher, and tour the school. If your school hosted a kindergarten open house the previous spring instead, re-familiarize your child with her school by walking the grounds and playing on the playground. Consider contacting the principal for a personalized indoor tour, especially if your child has a tough time with transitions. Clock your walk to school, or prepare your child for bus readiness by checking with your district on its school bus

policies and go over bus protocols with your child.

Plan playdates

If you know some of your child's classmates, plan a playdate or two so the kids get to know each other better before school starts. Some schools don't release class lists until the day before school begins, so it may not be possible to plan a playdate. If that's the case, make a point of introducing yourself to families at the meet-and-greet so your child will recognize a familiar face in class on the first day of school.

Watch for anxiety

Many children are excited about starting school, but many feel anxious. As school draws closer, "look for signs of nervousness that

may include night wakings, loss of appetite, picking sibling fights, more back talk than usual, regressions, or reluctance to separate," says Brown-Braun. "Encourage your child to list all the things she feels anxious about and put the list on the refrigerator. At the end of the first week of school, take a look at the list to show her how she is no longer worried."

Don't minimize fears

If a child is anxious or scared, avoid minimizing her fears, suggests Brown-Braun. "Don't say 'Oh, it'll just be fine' or 'There's nothing to be nervous about,' as these things teach a child not to trust her own feelings." Acknowledge and validate her feelings, she recommends, and then remind your child that the butterflies will go away as she learns the school routine and makes friends.

Keep the morning calm and organized

"Getting ready for the first day of school should be as calm as possible," says Dr. Deb Moberly former associate professor and founder of an early-childhood development consulting service. Ensure your child has the necessary school supplies and wake your child early enough on the first morning to have a leisurely breakfast. Make it a healthy one that includes protein to sustain him, such as eggs and toast or yogurt and granola. The night before, help him lay out clothes and create a space where he can store his backpack every day. If you're packing him a lunch, ensure he can open containers or food packets by himself (practice the week before). Many kinders have trouble with commercial packaging and lids.

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Keep your toddler happy while big brother is at school

- 1. Keep a routine.** Your toddler's world has already been turned upside down by the sibling's absence, so it will be a comfort if they have a routine.
- 2. Balance the attention.** Don't get wrapped up in other priorities when it's supposed to be play time with you and your toddler.
- 3. Take care of you.** With two, or more, children going through a major transition, the road can be rough for while. So make sure you schedule some time for yourself.
- 4. Be patient.** Remind yourself to be patient with testy, cranky, confused and overtired kids.

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KINDERGARTEN

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Expect separation anxiety

"Whenever there is a transition or a change in a young child's life, it is natural for her to experience

separation anxiety," says Dr. Fran Walfish, psychotherapist and author of *The Self-Aware Parent*. "Be supportive and talk things through and role play how the child can ask for help from the teacher." Keeping your own anxiety in check will help. If you're emotional about milestones, try to keep those tears at bay until after you've said good-

bye on the first morning of school.

Create a first-day plan

"If your child is one who is challenged by separation, make sure she knows the plan for the first day," says Brown Braun. "Tell her 'I am going to walk you into school and together we will find your cubby. We'll both say hi to your teacher, and then all the moms and dads will leave the classroom.'" Remind her that you'll meet her right at the door at the end of the class session.

Practice self-help skills

Prior to school starting, help your child be more independent with his coat zipper, shoes, and buttons. Teachers won't have time to help each child. Also, talk to him about asking the teacher for permission to use the bathroom, especially if he's timid or forgetful. If he's extra timid, consider alerting the teacher so she can play closer attention and remind him to use the bathroom.

Simplify your schedule

School takes a lot of energy, so in the beginning, keep your afternoons open. "Plan to not schedule anything after school for the first few weeks while they adjust because they will be tired!" says first-grade parent, Stephanie Dethlefs. Don't be surprised if your child is extra grumpy and takes it out on her siblings.

Meltdowns after school hours are not unusual, especially if your child functions well in a social setting. Being good all day long is exhausting and home is a safe place to fall apart.

Helping your child prepare for school can go a long way to making the beginning of school a new and positive adventure. Your child will be sailing in no time.

Joanna Nesbit was a timid kindergartner who didn't like to ask to use the bathroom. Learn more about her at joannanesbit.com.

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