

Getting ready for school

In the lead up to your child starting school, there are many ways you can plan and prepare for the changes ahead. This will help your child and family make a successful start to school. Every family will have different preparation ideas and strategies, so it's best to make a plan that suits your individual family. The following are a range of useful tips and ideas from early childhood educators, teachers and parents.

In the months before school

Get to know your child's school. You could find out:

- if your child's school is holding information nights that your family can attend. When are the transition to school sessions scheduled to start?
- the layout of your child's school and how it differs from their early childhood setting. Where are the classrooms and how are they organised? Where are the toilets, drinking taps, out of school hours care rooms and play equipment?
- how the school day is organised. What time does school start and finish? When and how long are the play times? How does this routine differ to your child's previous routine at home or in their early childhood setting?
- what children are expected to bring to school each day
- how communication between the school and home will happen
- the before and after school care arrangements for working families
- how you can get involved in the school community and meet other families starting at the school.



In the weeks leading up to the first day

Prepare for the new school day routine

There are many things that families can do before school starts to make children's transition easier. Practising changes to your daily routine will help build your child's sense of security and reduce the stress of getting to school. Visits to the school will help familiarise your child with the school and build their confidence.

You can practise what going to school will be like for your child using some of the following ideas. Remember that you know your child best – some children feel most confident with a lot of preparation whereas for others too much may be overwhelming. You can tailor the techniques below to suit your child.

- Travel to and from school several times as a practice run. Try going at the usual school drop-off and pick-up times as this will help you and your child get to know what to expect (eg how busy the traffic will be, which route to take).
- Practise the school day routine. This may include the morning routine of getting up early, putting on your child's uniform and packing their school bag. Setting up a regular bedtime routine will allow your child to wake up fresh and ready for the day.
- Practise lunch time routines. For example, you may like to set up a pretend picnic in the backyard or park. Help your child practise getting their lunchbox out of their school bag and guide them to open it by themselves. You may also assist your child with identifying what to eat for playtime and lunchtime. Think of ways you can make it easier for your child to manage their food. This may include ensuring your child can open the packaging.
- Create a visual checklist with your child. This list could include things that need to be done in the evening and morning before they leave for school. Taking photos of your child doing the actions for the checklist can be a fun way to learn.
- Write a story with your child about their new school and what happens during the day. You can draw pictures or include photographs in the story and read it together. This may help to ease their anxiety about what happens during the day. (See the Starting School *A picture book about me* online resource).
- Visit the school on weekends if permitted. Your child can practise using the climbing equipment and playing in the school grounds.
- Arrange opportunities for your child to play with other children who will be starting at the same school. Seeing familiar faces will help your child feel confident and more relaxed on their first day and during the first weeks of school.

Plan ahead for changes

Starting school is a big change for your child that can lead to a range of emotions. You may find your child is excited but they may also be exhausted and tired, even if they are used to long hours at their preschool or early childhood education and care (ECEC) setting. Take the time to notice their mood, and think about how you will support your child to manage these feelings and reduce their stress or anxiety. Every family's strategies are different, so it can be helpful to reflect on what has helped your child manage and adapt to change in the past.

- Consider what sorts of after school activities might be helpful for your child. For some children, minimising after school activities or waiting until your child is settled into school before introducing new activities is helpful. The school day can be quite long for your child and they may not have the energy to engage in other activities. They can begin after school activities once they have adjusted into the new routine.
- Plan some relaxing time after school. Depending on your child's interests, this may consist of quiet play or jumping on the trampoline. Follow your child's lead on what works best for them.
- Help your child to get a good night's sleep. Having a regular routine such as taking a bath before bedtime or reading a book may help your child to relax.



Help manage separation distress

In the lead up to starting school, you may be concerned about how your child will cope with being separated from you. Perhaps they took a long time to adjust to being without you when they started attending preschool or day care. You might feel a bit unsure of how they will cope in their new school environment. In your planning for school, you might like to consider:

- What will help my child separate comfortably from me in the morning?
- What has helped my child in the past?
- Would my child benefit from taking a picture or special object from home?
- What will I do to help myself cope? (eg catch up with a friend, exercise)

It will also help to:

- Talk to your child's early childhood educator and new school teacher – they can help to put some ideas in place to support your child to separate from you.
- Develop a positive goodbye routine together (eg sharing a 'high five', special goodbye hug or a funny or loving gesture like a bear hug).
- Always say goodbye and reassure your child of when you will collect them (eg that you will be back at home time to pick them up, or what the arrangements are for after school care). This helps build their trust and sense of security.
- Avoid lengthy goodbyes as they may increase separation distress.
- Talk positively and enthusiastically about what your child will be doing when they are away from you (eg "you will have a story", "you're going to have fun meeting new children"). Children will pick up on your cues if you are feeling nervous so try to be mindful of what you communicate about your own emotions.
- Take care of your own emotions in managing the separation. (For more information, see Starting School video 6: *A change for the whole family*.)

The night before school starts

It may be helpful to:

- Have your child's uniform laid out so it is ready to be put on in the morning. If there is no uniform, help your child choose which clothes they will wear.
- Assist your child to pack their school bag so it is ready for the big day.
- Stick to familiar routines as much as possible. Try to have a calm evening and allow more time to settle before bedtime if your child is feeling excited or nervous about starting school.

The first day

On the first day, you may like to:

- Allow extra time in the morning. You may want to take photos to capture the moment!
- Talk positively about the day ahead on the way to school and remind your child where you will be at pick-up time.
- Manage your own anxiety. You may like to plan a relaxing activity the night before or arrange to have coffee with another parent after the school drop-off.
- Have a small snack ready at the end of the day to help your child re-energise.
- Remember that your child might be exhausted when they get home. Give them some down time and try not to overwhelm them with too many questions about the day. Grandparents and extended family members might need to be reminded about this too.
- Celebrate the first day of school as it is a huge milestone to achieve. You may like to organise a special activity or dinner together as a family on the weekend to celebrate.



For more information

If you would like more information, KidsMatter has produced a range of resources to support your child through early childhood and primary school. The following information sheets related to this topic are available online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au/families/information-sheets

KidsMatter Early Childhood information sheets:

- *Being away from one another*
- *Understanding and managing separation distress*
- *Helping children to cope with separation distress*
- *Developing positive separations:
Resources for families and staff*

KidsMatter Primary information sheets:

- *Belonging at school makes a difference*
- *Why connect at school?*

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Starting School information sheets for families. View them all online at www.kidsmatter.edu.au/startingschool



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