

early years are learning years

Tips for easy back-to-school transitions

The summer is just about over. No more going to bed late, sleeping in every morning, or playing outside until dark. Now the routine has to change. Beginning kindergarten, going back to primary school, or to a child care program usually means two things to a young child: 1) a stricter time schedule; and 2) adapting to a different caregiver, classroom, teacher, school, friends, or academic challenges. These new experiences can bring on stress or cause children to resist necessary adjustments. Even as adults, we sometimes feel uncomfortable or anxious when facing a new situation. Think how overwhelming it must be for young children who have far less experience in dealing with the unknown! Smooth transitions can be accomplished if the adults who care for children try to view the situation from the child's perspective. Here are some tips on what you can do to make going back to school a pleasurable experience.

Prepare in advance

Young children always feel more comfortable if they know what to expect. Before the new school year begins, family members can explain to children how their daily routines will change. Precisely describe what the morning routines will be in age-appropriate terms. Some children may enjoy creating a pictorial chart to include each step of the morning schedule.

Try getting up earlier a couple of days before the new school year begins and explain why you're doing it. This may prevent your child from being confused, groggy, cranky, or refusing to get out of bed on the first day of

the new program.

Discuss how the school or child care environment will be different from the previous year. Many schools and child care professionals invite families to visit the classroom and new teacher before the school year begins. If possible, take advantage of these opportunities to allow the child to meet the teacher or caregiver, find his classroom, the bathroom, and the playground. These one-hour visits can be valuable to children because they'll be exposed to their new surroundings and still find comfort in going home with a familiar adult or loved one. Make the visit extra special by going out for ice cream or to the park afterwards.

Reading books with children is a great way to introduce any experience. They can see how other children beginning school or a new program have the same feelings of uncertainty and how they overcome them.

Involve children in preparing for school. For example, they can lay out their clothes, pack a back pack, or select a favorite toy or photo to take with them to the program.

Talk about feelings

Encourage children to describe how they feel about the "new year" and try to ease any fears they may have.

Parents may also feel sad or fearful about their children going off to kindergarten or being transferred to a learning environment for older children. If your emotions are too obvious, you may spoil your child's enthusiasm for the first day. Exude confidence and good feelings when saying good-bye.

Avoid yelling if your child resists getting up from bed, brushing his teeth,

or getting dressed, and expect an occasional meltdown. Beginning something new can be stressful and adjustment takes a lot of concentration and effort. Child care professionals, teachers, and families should expect—and be prepared to handle—a few tears and other emotional displays from young children.

Be there

If possible, arrive at the new school or program early on the first few days to help the child settle in. The teacher or caregiver may also be available to talk one-on-one with your child before the day's learning begins.

It is also important to arrange for predictable pick-up schedules. Children need to feel confident from the beginning that they can count on a loved one to come back and to come when they said they would. Use the commute to ease the transition between school and home.

How adults handle transitional situations can set the stage for how well a child adjusts to other challenges in life. Those who love and care for children can help them adapt by making preparations in advance, clearly explaining the changes about to take place, and listening if doubts or fears develop.

Additional Resources

McCracken, J.B. 1990/1997. *So Many Goodbyes*, NAEYC. #573/Single copies are \$0.50 each; 100 copies are \$10.

Balaban, N. 1985. *Starting school: From separation to independence (A guide for early childhood teachers)*. New York: Teachers College Press.



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