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## How to help your child as they start at primary school

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Starting primary school is a momentous and exciting time for children. A positive start to school has been linked to children's social and academic success in their first year at school.

Children generally adjust well to new environments, routines and structure. However, the transition to school can be a nerve-racking time for parents and carers, who are often worried about whether their child will make new friends, understand the rules and make academic progress.

Lots of children look forward to starting school, but many will also feel apprehensive. Their worries may become apparent through behaviour such as becoming clingy and finding it tricky to separate from parents and carers, becoming more emotional and having larger responses than expected.

They may refuse to follow instructions or directions like they usually would. After the first few weeks of term, they may be reluctant to go to school, feel sick or show negative attitudes towards school.

These are all typical ways in which children express their feelings about change and uncertainty. It's likely that they will decrease over time as a child adapts to the new routine of school. But knowing this doesn't necessarily make life any easier for parents.

Here are a few tips to help your child start and settle in to school, drawn from my experience as a child and educational psychologist.

## **Build optimism and joy**

Children want to know about their new school and the new people they will meet. Creating excitement about school is important. In the buildup to the first day, walk past your child's new school with them and help them try on the school uniform, talking positively as you do so.

If your child tells you about any anxieties or worries, don't dismiss them or avoid the subject, but listen and reassure them that you will help them overcome any difficulties.

## **Encourage curiosity**

Encourage your child's curiosity about school by asking them what they enjoyed about nursery or pre-school and talking with them about what they might be looking forward to at school. You could link daily experiences to school – perhaps wondering aloud about what play equipment is on the school playground while at the local park.



Encourage curiosity and excitement about school. JLco Julia Amaral/Shutterstock

You could discuss what your child might learn at school, and explore related activities at home. For example, when reading your child's favourite book, you could talk about whether other children might have read the same one.

## **Focus on relationships**

When your child starts school, focus on making time to connect with them during your morning and bedtime routines. Think about ways to remind your child that you are thinking about them: you could give them something of yours to keep in their bag, or draw a small heart on their hand to remind them of you. Reconnect with your child at the end of the day with a big smile and snacks for the journey home.

A common worry for parents is that their child will not make friends. You can help your child meet the social demands of school by modelling key social skills, such as saying hello to their classmates and other parents at school drop-off and pick-up.

Positive relationships between families and schools are also important. Speak to your child's teacher: they will likely have supported lots of children through this transition and they will be happy to talk to you.

## **Understand the demands of school – and celebrate the wins**

Expect your child to be more tired than usual and their behaviour may also feel more challenging at times as they adjust. Reduce all expectations after school and don't worry if you don't make it to their usual club or swimming lesson in the first few weeks.

Although you will be keen to find out about their day, limit your questions on pick-up and give them the opportunity to offer information in their own time. Also, accept that bedtimes might be tricky as your child processes their new experiences.

Celebrate your child's successes at school by offering praise and positive feedback. Focus on what they have achieved and what they have enjoyed in the first few days of term.

## **Remember your own wellbeing**

Importantly, look after yourself. Children are remarkably resilient to change when they have the support and guidance of trusted adults around them. Schedule time to focus on your own wellbeing in the first few weeks of school.

Connect with friends, speak to other parents and remain hopeful and optimistic about your child's first year at school. Take the time to get to know other new parents in your child's class. The chances are they will be feeling similarly to you.