

Getting Ready for Preschool or Kindergarten

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When children are starting preschool or kindergarten, parents may worry about how their child will adapt. Here are steps you can take to ease the transition.

Prepare Yourself

If you are anxious, your child will pick up on that, and they'll be anxious too. So, before you start talking to them about going to classes, do whatever you need to do to build your own confidence that it will be OK. Get support from others if needed. If your child does notice your anxiety, just calmly say "I'm feeling worried now because this is something new – here's what I'm doing to calm myself."

Planning for Success

Some children are ready for full day classes five days a week, but that could be overwhelming for some children. Some parents choose to start small with a program that meets only a few hours a week, and gradually build up to more. Some choose to start with a cooperative preschool where they can stay with their child in the new setting to help make the transition easier.

It helps to choose a program that has a similar approach to daily schedule / structure and to rules as you do at home, so it's easier for your child to understand and adapt to the expectations of the class.

Teach Skills

- Teach self-help skills. Help your child learn how to put on their coat, take off their coat and hang it up. Help them learn how to open their string cheese or yogurt containers by themselves. Teach toileting, handwashing skills, and also practice how to use hand sanitizer.
- Teach social skills: how to make friends, how to invite someone to play with you, how to ask to play with a toy someone else is using, taking turns, and so on. Set up playdates to practice skills.
- Create routines. What routines can you establish at home to make it easier to get out the door in the morning? If you'll need to be up earlier in the morning than you're used to, do you need to adjust bedtime? Learn about what routines they use at school and try to have similar practices at home. (For example, washing hands before snack time.) If your child will use new tools at school – like a backpack or a lunchbox or water bottle – get them early and practice.

Preparing them for Class

- Explain what happens at classes. There are lots of great books and TV episodes about starting school. Choose ones with a positive approach. (If your child is NOT feeling anxious, don't choose books that talk about how worried a child might be... that can actually introduce anxiety!)
- Talk about what to expect at *their school*. Visit the school, if possible. Or, look at pictures or a video tour, visit the outside of the building and walk around. Show your child pictures of the teacher. Get some materials like they'll have in the classroom and practice using them at home.
- Teach and practice how to interact with a teacher. Explain that the teacher is there to help them and take care of them. Explain that the teacher is in charge. Teach how to get the teacher's

attention and how to ask for help. Teach that sometimes they have to wait for a grown-up to be available to help. Play listening games (Simon Says, Red Light Green Light, or Copy this Rhythm).

- Pretend play. Pretend to be going to school – who will play the parent? The child? The teacher? Play at things like: waiting in line (with stuffed animals), doing circle time, taking turns, asking the teacher for help, saying goodbye at drop-off time.

When Classes Begin

- Don't make too big a deal of the first day. That anticipation and excitement can turn into anxiety.
- Don't introduce all new clothes and shoes and backpack on the first day. Let them wear familiar and comfortable items. Pack their favorite foods, and pack the exact same lunch for the first several days so they know exactly what to expect. Ask your school's policy about "transitional objects" – for some children, having a toy from home can help them adjust to all the new things around them.
- Allow extra time to get there – you want time to relax beforehand and remind your child what to expect. (Note: this is *especially* true if you have a child you think of as shy – I call them "slow to warm up." These children do best when they can arrive a little early, before most of the other children and settle in. They don't do well running in frantic and late to a full and busy classroom.)
- Build a relationship with the teacher(s), other kids, and other parents. When your child sees that you feel comfortable interacting with them all, they will feel comfortable too.
- When it's time to leave, keep your goodbyes brief, radiate confidence that they will be OK. Do say goodbye – don't try to sneak out when they're not looking. Tell them what they will be doing while you're gone, and when you'll return. (Be sure to honor that promise.)
- Make your goodbye ritual simple and sweet. Make sure your child is either settled into an activity or knows that to do next, or hand them off to an adult for care so that when you walk out the door, your child has something else they're focused on other than your absence.
- Lots of children have moments of separation anxiety at first, and may be sad or crying when it's time for you to go. Resist the rescue. Be caring and validate their feelings but stick to the plan and leave. Trust the teachers to be the professionals they are and manage the common challenges of separation anxiety. Typically a child who cries at drop off will cry only briefly and soon calm down.
- After class, give your child a chance to debrief and talk about how the day went.

Handling the Challenges

Even if you "do everything right", your child may have challenging days, with separation anxiety, biting or hitting, not sitting still for story time. That's developmentally normal!

Some things that help: if your child is having big feelings, acknowledge them, don't just try to distract them away. Regression is normal – for example, a child who was potty trained may have accidents – don't punish or shame, just acknowledge the issue and say "let's try to do better tomorrow." If your child is really clingy, maybe they just need more snuggling for a while – soothe and reassure them.

Children who are loved will try hard to be good. If they are misbehaving, ask yourself – is there a skill or support they are lacking? If so, help them build it. Ask yourself – could it be that they have an underlying need that is driving the misbehavior? If so, meeting that need may resolve the issue. Be patient and remember that any challenges are just a phase. Just keep doing your best every day and encourage them to do their best, and you'll make your way through to the other side of this big life step.