

A parent's guide to starting school

With summer arriving, the prospect of your child starting school in September edges closer. For most parents, this is a time of both excitement and slight trepidation.

How will my child be helped?

The process of helping children prepare for school normally begins in the summer term. The chances are that your child will be invited into school for a session, either with you or with their nursery. This is an opportunity for your child to look around, meet the teachers and perhaps play. If your child attends a local nursery or pre-school, the reception teacher may also call in for a visit, meet the children and talk to staff about meeting children's needs. In addition, adults caring for your child will also be reading stories and talking about going to school.

How can I help my child at home?

For many children, the key to starting school is confidence. Self-reliant ones tend to fare better. You can do many things at home to make a difference to your child's confidence, such as the following.

Learning practical skills

Make sure that you work on your child's ability to cope with everyday tasks such as dressing, managing lunch and using the toilet. It may seem easier and quicker to help with a coat or undo a bottle, but children need time and practice to perfect their skills. Being able to do things alone is a huge boost to a child's morale.

Asking for help

It is worth building a child's confidence in talking to adults. This skill emerges gradually. Look for opportunities such as encouraging your child to return a library book or to pay in a shop. You may need to be on hand as support, but with practice your child will

gradually get used to asking for help or talking to someone new until you can stand aside.

Taking on responsibility

Being with lots of others means children have to get used to thinking for themselves. You can help by giving some responsibility around the home such as keeping toys tidy, watering plants or sorting laundry. Try also to encourage your child to think through situations by asking what they might do first.

How much should I talk about going to school?

It is important not to saturate your child with information too far ahead.

Some children want to talk about going to school and ask lots of questions or insist that you buy their uniform immediately. Others may not seem interested, and so taking a low-key approach may be best.

Whatever you decide, talk about school positively and do not use school as a threat. The 'you won't be able to do that at school!' type of expression can create fear and anxiety and should be avoided.

What should I do if my child is worried?

Think about your own reaction to your child starting school. If you are feeling nervous, this might reflect back to your child. Try to anticipate what your child might be concerned about, and talk through it with them.

Common fears include not having friends, not finding the toilet or being told off.

Finally, it is worth remembering that children do settle into their reception years very well. Some children take to school like a duck to water, virtually ignoring waving parents from the first minute, while others need a little more time before they plunge in. But by the end of the first term, the vast majority of children are merrily swimming along.

