

# early years are learning years

## Ready or not...Preparing young children for the classroom

Just when you've settled into the routine of the school year, it's time to think ahead to next year. With many preschools and kindergartens now taking applications for next fall, parents may find themselves asking: Will my child be ready? Will he measure up?

There is no one quality or skill that children need to do well in school—a combination of factors contribute to school success. These include physical well-being, social and emotional maturity, language skills, an ability to solve problems and think creatively, and general knowledge about the world. School success also depends upon the “match” between children's skills and knowledge and the school's expectations. More children succeed when these expectations reflect knowledge of child development and early learning.

Here are some suggestions of how parents and schools can promote a good match for every child.

### Parents can:

Take advantage of learning opportunities in every day activities. These will make a big difference in preparing young children for the classroom.

**1. Promote good health and physical well-being.** Children obviously need nutritious food, enough sleep, safe places to play, and regular medical care. In addition to medical and dental checkups and immunizations, preschoolers need opportunities to exercise and develop physical coordination. Throwing balls, running, jumping, climbing, dancing to music—all of these activities will enhance coordination and help children learn important concepts such as up, down, inside, outside, over, and under.

**2. Support your child's social and emotional development.** Children who are kind, helpful, patient, and loving generally do better in school, and feeling good about oneself is an

important aspect of developing desirable social skills. Tell your child how glad you are to be his parent. Set a good example for your preschooler by showing what it means to get along with others and to be respectful. Give children chances to learn about sharing and caring, for example letting them feed hungry birds, or helping them make cookies to welcome a new neighbor.

**3. Build your child's language and general knowledge.** There are many things you can do to help your child learn to communicate, and develop an understanding of the world. Don't underestimate the value of play! Play allows children to explore, be creative, and develop social skills. It also paves the way for academic learning. For example, children learn key concepts important in geometry while stacking blocks, and playing with others helps with negotiation skills.

Talk to your children. Everyday activities, such as eating lunch, cleaning up toys, or taking a bath, provide opportunities to talk. Listening and responding to a child is the best way to learn what's on her mind, to discover what she knows and doesn't know, and how she thinks and learns. Listening also shows children that their feelings and ideas are valuable. Finally, read together frequently. Fostering your child's love of books is a gift that will last a lifetime!

**4. Not assume a child with a late birth date should be held out of school.** Research shows that children receive little, if any, advantage when held out of school because of late birth dates. And, the practice may have a negative impact on other children by encouraging school expectations better suited to older children.

**Schools can: 1. Be prepared to respond to a diverse range of abilities within any group of young children.** Small group sizes with enough teachers who are skilled in early childhood education make it easier to pro-

vide the individualized attention every child deserves.

**2. Offer a curriculum and teaching practices that reflect principles of child development and learning** and provide many active, meaningful learning opportunities that build upon children's existing knowledge and abilities.

**3. Make sure expectations of children are reasonable and age-appropriate.** Even children who have received every advantage prior to school struggle when demands are too great, experiencing stress and having their confidence as learners undermined.

**4. Not use tests as the primary measure for entry decisions.** Developmental screening to detect a health problem or developmental disability is important to ensure early diagnosis and treatment, but tests should not be used to determine school entry for at least three reasons: (1) Children are not good test takers, especially with strangers in unfamiliar settings. (2) Young children are growing and learning rapidly; test results may change greatly in six months. (3) Tests too often ignore language and culture variations and may not give a true picture of a child's skills and knowledge.

### Additional Resources

Washington, V., Johnson, V. and McCracken, J.B. 1995. *Grassroots Success! Preparing Schools and Families for Each Other*. Washington, DC: NAEYC. Order #722/\$8

NAEYC. 1995. *Ready or Not: What Parents Should Know about School Readiness*. Washington, DC: NAEYC. #554/50¢ each or 100 for \$10

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## Back to school time—Tips to help children adjust

Back to school time often means changes for children and families: the first day of kindergarten or first grade; new preschools or child care settings; new classrooms and new teachers. Making smooth transitions between home, programs and schools can help children feel good about themselves and teach them to trust other adults and children. Helping children adapt to new situations can ease parents' minds and give them a chance to become involved in their children's education.

Transitions are exciting opportunities for children to learn and grow. Parents and early childhood professionals share a role in making children feel safe and secure as they move to new educational settings. Of course, such milestones in children's lives can cause anxiety, too. Strengthening the ties between programs and families will help create smooth transitions for adults and children both.

### How parents can help:

- 1** Be enthusiastic about the upcoming change. If you are excited and confident, your child will be, too.
- 2** Prepare yourself. Take note of how your child reacts to separation. If possible, visit the new setting with your child. Introduce your child to the new teacher or early childhood professional in advance.
- 3** Arrange a play-date with another child from the program, preferably one-on-one, so that your child will see a familiar face when she walks in.

**4** Start daily routines that will add to continuity. Let your child become involved with packing lunch or laying out clothes. Also, begin an earlier bedtime several weeks before.

**5** Put aside extra time, particularly on the first day, for chatting and commuting together. But remember not to prolong the good-bye. If the child whines or clings, staying will only make it harder.

**6** Always say good-bye to your child. Be firm, but friendly about separating. Never ridicule a child for crying. Instead, make supportive statements like, "it's hard to say good-bye."

**7** At the end of the work day, put aside your concerns and focus on being a parent.

### How teachers or early childhood professionals can help:

**1** Make sure activities are developmentally appropriate for children. Interesting and challenging, but doable, activities will help children feel comfortable in their new setting.

**2** Make an effort to get to know each individual child as quickly as possible. Parents can provide information about children's likes, dislikes, and special interests.

**3** Welcome suggestions from families, particularly those of children with special needs. Parents can offer specific suggestions they have found useful for their own child, and advise on classroom set-up and modifications.

**4** Hold an orientation for children and parents. Small groups will make it easier for children to get to know each other.

**5** Show children around the new school or program, introducing them to other adults who are there to help them become acclimated.

**6** Create partnerships between preschools and elementary schools in the community. Meetings may focus on the sharing of ideas and concerns.

**7** Set up an area for photos of parents and family members that children may "visit" throughout the day. Also include items that reflect the cultural experience of all children to help promote a sense of mutual respect and understanding.

Children, just like adults, need time to adjust to new people and situations. Experience can make transition a bit easier, but even with experience, change can still be stressful. Patience and understanding on the part of parents and teachers or caregivers will help children learn how to approach new situations with confidence—a skill that will help them make successful transitions all through life.

For a free copy of NAEYC's brochure, So many good-byes, send a SASE to NAEYC, 1509 16th St., NW, Washington, DC, 20036-1426. Specify box #573.



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## Tips for easy back-to-school transitions

**T**he 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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### **Early Years Are Learning Years** **Helping young children start school**

A new school year can make young children nervous, especially if they are entering a new environment. Whether they are starting preschool, kindergarten or first grade, some children may be worried about the new setting and the new experience, and there are things that parents and families can do to help their children make a successful transition.

- First, discuss the changes that will be taking place. Before the new school year begins, talk with your child about the changes in his daily routine. Together, you could make a chart illustrated with photographs or pictures of the new morning schedule. Encourage him to describe how he feels about starting a new program or school and try to ease his fears. He may be nervous about new challenges and social interactions at school. Reading and discussing books is a great way to make him comfortable with a new experience. It helps him see how other children beginning school have similar feelings of uncertainty and how they overcome them.
- In the days and weeks before school starts, help your child ease into the new environment and adjust to the new routine. Arrange to visit the school and classroom with your child, and, if possible, meet her teacher. This will help her become comfortable in her new environment while you are with her. Have her start her school-year bed time and morning routine a few days early. This may prevent her from being confused, groggy, or cranky on the first day of school. Arrange a playdate with another child from her class, preferably one-on-one, so that she knows someone in her class and will be more comfortable.
- As school gets closer, your child can help get ready for the first day. Let him lay out his clothes or pack a back pack for the first day. If possible, arrive at the new school early on the first few days to give him time to settle in. Use this time walking or riding to school together, or waiting at the bus stop, to talk about what he can expect that day. Always say good-bye, and let him know you will see him at the end of the day. Your child will have an easier time with separation if he's confident you will return to pick him up.

Problems may arise during the first few days of school, even with appropriate preparation, so be ready to handle them in a matter-of-fact way. Approach the new year with confidence, and your child will, too. Take time to make sure your child adapts to his new environment, clearly explain the changes around him, and listen if he has doubts or fears.

*Early Years Are Learning Years* is a regular series from NAEYC ([www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org)) providing families with tips for giving their young children a great start on learning. Parts of this information excerpted from *So Many Goodbyes*, by J. B. McCracken.

### **Additional Resources**

1990/1997, NAEYC. *So Many Goodbyes*, by J. B. McCracken. #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.

### **Books to read with your child**

*Timothy Goes to School*: Rosemary Wells (Dial Books for Young Children)

*Will I have a Friend?*: Miriam Cohen, illustrated by Lillian Hoban (Macmillan)