Starting School

Starting school can be an exciting time for children. However it also can be a strange and scary place for beginners.

Young children usually have to cope with bigger buildings, lots more children who are older and bigger, and fewer adults for support. There are different rules to get used to and many new things that they are expected to do. Playtime breaks can be frightening for beginners and school days can feel long and tiring, especially for children who are used to a rest during the day. Children may have been looking forward to school and can feel let down if they don’t enjoy it as much as they hoped. Even for those who do enjoy it, starting school can be stressful. Children need lots of support from you, especially in the first few weeks.

Is your child ready for school?

Not all children are ready to begin school at the age of four-and-a-half years and they do not have to start school in the Northern Territory until they are six. Some children benefit greatly from the extra year of maturity before they start school and it can help them if they start a bit later. Think about this if your child is smaller or younger than the other children or is not yet really comfortable playing with groups of children or confident without adult support. Talk it over with the preschool teacher if he has one.

Preparing for school

It will help if you prepare your child as well as you can, and show that you believe she will manage the new challenges. Some things you can do are:

- Allow your child to take part in any transition to school activities organised by your preschool or child care centre. These may include visits to the school. Preschool and child care centre staff are also a good place to start if you have any questions about your child starting school.
- Show your child where the school is in relation to home. Walk there a few times if possible, even if you intend to drive to school.
- Show your child where you will pick her up at the end of the day.
- If your school is open to the public after hours, take your child for a walk around the school or play on the equipment while there is no one there. Check with the school first.
- Make sure she has clothes she can manage; that she can unwrap her lunch and that she knows how to ask to go to the toilet.
- Help your child understand what the school bell or siren means; how to drink from a water bubbler; and how to put up a hand to ask a question.
- Read a story about a child starting school, or talk about when you started school (as long as it’s a happy story).
Starting School

• Make enquiries with the preschool, child care centre or school and if possible invite another child who will be starting at the same time, and her parent, over before school starts.

• Plan to take your child to school on the first day. If your child is worried about starting school, ask her what would help, e.g. who should take her to school, where she wants to say goodbye, what she wants to do after school. Having some control over what happens can help with fears. You might tell her what you will be doing while she is at school.

Once at school

• Don’t be late picking your child up. A few minutes can seem a long time to a young child, especially if he is not feeling sure of himself.

• School children want to tell you all about their day as soon as you pick them up, so make time for your child after school if he needs it, or as soon as you get home if you work. Some children, however, like time by themselves before they want company.

• Children are often ‘starving’ after school. A healthy snack straight after school will be as important as eating a big dinner. If you are picking your children up in a car after school, take something (a piece of fruit for example) with you ready for them to eat in the car. In the first few weeks they might be too tired to really want to eat at dinnertime.

• Listen, but don’t ask too many questions. Children will talk when they are ready. Bedtime is usually a time to listen. Use prompts to help you understand their day e.g. ‘What did you learn today?’ and ‘Who did you play with?’

• Remember that reading stories to your child is always important. Reading together should be a regular and enjoyable part of your day. Children love being read to long after they have learned to read themselves, and this helps build and maintain your relationship.

• Some children wet their pants in the early months at school. This may be because they are too nervous to ask to go to the toilet; they are too busy to notice the signs; or they are feeling stressed. It can be very embarrassing for them. They need to be reassured that it often happens to children and it is nothing to worry about. Encourage your child to tell the teacher. If you show you are worried, it will make him feel that there really is something to worry about.

• New learning takes a long time and children learn at different rates. Don’t expect too much. You can help best by encouraging them and taking an interest and showing you care.

• Be flexible in the early days of school. Children may be tired and grumpy for a while until they settle in.

• Keep to routines that allow time for rest and free play. Don’t plan too many after school activities or have too many things to do on the way home, e.g. shopping.

• Invite your child’s friends over. One at a time at first.

• Talk to other parents and share your experiences, ideas and feelings.

• If your child is really upset, if you are worried, or there is bullying or teasing going on, talk to the teacher about it.

• Children need lots of support in starting school.

Starting school can be stressful

Some children, when they first start school, find it so stressful that they don’t want to go. They may get tummy aches or be very tearful in the mornings. If this happens to your child, listen to his fears. Try not to let him see that you are worried. Let him know that you believe that he can manage to go to school and you will help him. Ask him what he thinks would help, e.g. sometimes going with another parent instead of you is a help. For another child having something small of yours to mind while he is at school might help. If the worries don’t get better soon, talk to the teacher about the best way to help your child. Forcing children usually does more harm than good.

Reminders

• Starting school is a big step for children and it takes time to get used to.

• Children do best at school when their parents and teachers support each other.

• Let the teacher know if anything is happening in your family that might continue to upset your child at school.

• Tell the teacher when you are pleased with what is happening at school and when you are concerned.
Parentline – support, counselling and parent education from 8am-10pm seven days a week. T: 1300 30 1300

Raising Children Network – information about parenting and growing up children www.raisingchildren.net.au

Child and Youth Health – parenting and child health information www.cyh.com

7 Steps to Safety – a kit to help you give your child the skills and confidence they need to feel and be safe at home. www.families.nt.gov.au | T: 1800 005 485

See other parent tip sheets www.families.nt.gov.au

Starting School

Copyright: The information in this tip sheet was adapted from the Parent Easy Guide Series © Parenting SA, Government of South Australia 2010. Updated by Northern Territory Government 2011.

Disclaimer: This tip sheet aims to promote the wellbeing of children and families. The information it contains is offered as a guide only and should not be treated as a full statement on the subject.