

## Sending Your Child Off to School for the First Time – Helpful Hints

One of the most stressful life events for young children is beginning kindergarten or first grade. Sometimes parents are more keenly affected than children are. Yet, there are many steps parents and families can take to facilitate this important transition so that entering school is a positive experience. From modeling a positive perspective, to sleep schedules, establishing routines, nutrition, stress management, and accessing resources at school, we will talk about some helpful hints for students and families.

### Model a Positive Attitude

One of the reasons entering school for the first time is such a stressful event may possibly be that older friends, siblings, and even some well-meaning parents may talk about school as if it is very difficult and a big step forward for the child. Helping everyone in the family to model a positive attitude about school being about lots of things that the child may already be experienced at plus some new fun and exciting learning experiences can instill a sense of excitement rather than dread.

### Sleep Schedules

Whether your child is starting school for the first time or entering his last year of high school, one thing that many children have to deal with is getting on a good sleep schedule. Not getting enough sleep is an important cause of school performance problems, leading to attentional and behavioral problems, so it is important to encourage good sleep habits for children of all ages.

For younger children who are still taking naps and are starting full day kindergarten, the adjustment in their sleep habits can be almost as big as the whole issue of starting school. If you figure that the average 5 year old needs about 11 hours of sleep in a day, if your child was taking a 1 or 2 hour nap during the day and only sleeping 9 or 10 hours at night, you now have to shift the whole 11 hours to nighttime. Your first step is going to be having him give up his nap. If he is used to sleeping in, you will also have to begin waking him up earlier. Lastly, you will have to get him used to going to bed earlier. A gradual approach of moving his bedtime 10-15 minutes earlier every few days is usually easier than making a big jump of an hour or two. Once kids start giving up naps and/or waking up earlier, many will naturally get tired and want to go to bed at an earlier bedtime.

### Establishing a Regular Routine

Routines are predictable and help lessen the effects of other changes going on in children's lives. Several weeks prior to the beginning of the school year begin to establish simple routines for getting up in the morning, supertime, and bedtime. Even if some days are different due to other family members' schedules, aim for having

some regular rituals at these times. Children can take part in planning routines such as helping with simple dinner tasks, selecting a book to have read at bedtime, and picking out clothes to wear the next day.

### Nutrition

Good nutrition is especially important anytime kids are under stress. A balanced diet with not too much sugar, fat, or caffeine helps kids sustain their present status and form new tissues. Simple, light meals that provide plenty of minerals to build strong bones and teeth and protein for firm muscles, as well as for energy and stamina are the goal. Breakfast is important, so whether you plan for breakfast to be eaten at home or at school, be sure to plan for breakfast.

### Practice Makes Perfect

Practice the route and routine your child will use to go to school each morning. If your child will be riding the bus, don't forget to walk with him to the bus stop and describe the behavior the school expects at the bus stop and on the bus. Walking around the school campus and becoming familiar with which door your child will enter, what the playground looks like, and where the classrooms are located can go a long way toward alleviating worries.

### School Day Reports

Once school begins, asking your child about their day offers another opportunity to model a positive attitude about school. Get into the routine of asking your child to first tell you his or her favorite things or what went well about the school day before telling you what he or she did not like. Having to pause and tell at least one good thing about the day helps keep kids from focusing on just the negative. Some parents use the "thumbs up" rule—tell me a favorite happening before you tell me a "thumbs down" story.

### School Nights

Especially during the beginning of the school year, try to have evenings that are as "unbusy" as you can manage. Even though this isn't always possible, the whole family can benefit from an easy week. A calm supper, little or no TV, a relaxing bath or shower, and a bedtime story help kids drift off to dreamland and get the kind of rest they need.

### When Worries Loom Large

Sometimes concerns about school, changes in routine, and being away from parents or home contribute to anxious feelings for the child. Help kids realize that lots of kids feel a little nervous sometimes and help your child remember some times he or she has already been successful at trying new things, meeting new friends, etc. It helps to call the worries that old "Worry Mosquito" or even the "Worry Monster" who keeps

buzzing around my head trying to make me worry. You can acknowledge the fears your child is talking about and, at the same time, help him plan how he will stop that "Worry Mosquito." Remember that school counselors are very helpful resources and offer individual, group, and classroom programs to help students make the transition to school.

### Remember to Laugh

Heading off to school is an exciting time, full of new learning and great memories. Kindergarten teachers and parents report all sorts of funny things that happen. Remember to relax and laugh along the way. Have a great year!



