

FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 82

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STARTING SCHOOL

Starting school is a major milestone for children and parents. School is a place away from home where a child will have some of his greatest challenges, successes, failures, and embarrassments. Because school is beyond the control of parents, it can be stressful for both the child and the parents.

At school, a child will learn about how the world works about appropriate social interactions, and about people outside his family. He will learn about himself, his strengths, weaknesses, interests, and who he is socially. He will have to perform in a way that he never has had to at home. He has to separate from parents, meet social and academic challenges, and make friends.

Starting school can be both fun and stressful. Many children show some anxiety about school. That's especially true when a child first attends at the beginning of each new school year or when he's entered a new school. A child who has been in day care may be more comfortable with the daily ritual of separation. These children may be less anxious for the first few days of nursery school, preschool, or kindergarten.

If parents have mixed feelings (e.g. guilt, fear, or anxiety) about sending a child to school, this can add to the child's hesitancy, or reluctance. A child's experience starting school is influenced by his preparation and his parents' feelings and attitude.

What Parents Can Do To Help Their Child:

- Show interest and be supportive and encouraging.
- Talk to your child about what to expect the activities (nap, snacks, and story-time), the schedule, the toys, and the other children.
- Take your child to school to get used to the layout (where his classroom is, where the bathrooms are, which cubbyhole or coat hook is his, etc.) and to introduce him to the teacher.
- Let your child know it's normal to feel nervous or worried about being away from parents and suggest that he take a familiar object or a family picture to school.
- Getting on the bus with a favorite playmate or carpooling with a friend can ease the daily transition from home to school. Identifying a buddy at school can also help decrease apprehension about being alone in the new setting.
- Make the getting-ready-for-school ritual as stress-free as possible. For example, lay out all his notebooks and clothes the night before. Having the child help with school preparations (example, make his lunch) the night before can also reduce stress for everyone.

What To Do If Your Child Has Difficulties:

- If your child has significant difficulty with separation, consider staying for a portion of the first day or two. Discuss this plan with the teacher. As he becomes more comfortable, make your stay shorter, until eventually, you stay only long enough to help him off with his coat, greet the teacher, and say goodbye.

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- Be firm about attendance if your child is reluctant.
- At the end of the school day, make every effort to return when he expects you to; don=t make him wait and worry that you’ve forgotten him.
- If your child has specific worries about school, be reassuring and responsive to his concerns. Ask him specific questions “I know that sometimes kids are afraid of school because they’re not sure where things are, or because they have problems with school work, or a teacher, or a classmate. Is something like that bothering you?” It often helps to admit that you were fearful of something at school as a child and that many children have similar worries.
- Some children may show regression in some behaviors, such as clinginess, sleep difficulties, thumb sucking, bed wetting, and a reluctance to go back to school. These behaviors should be temporary and will be helped by your continuing encouragement and positive expectations.
- For some children the beginning of every school year may be a little bumpy. Change is exciting, but it can be scary, too. With your understanding, patience, and sometimes a needed, but gentle nudge, your child should have an exciting and rewarding school experience.

Examples of children’s books on starting school:

Sometimes it can be helpful for parents to read an age-appropriate book on this subject with the child.

- **Timothy Goes to School:** Rosemary Wells (Dial Books for Young Children)
- **Will I have a Friend?:** Miriam Cohen, illustrated by Lillian Hoban (Macmillan)
- **Today was a Terrible Day:** Patricia Reilly Giff, illustrated by Susanna Natti (Viking)
- **The Kissing Hand:** Audrey Penn (Scholastic Inc.)

Other Resources for parents:

- Your Child (1998): Emotional, Behavioral, and Cognitive Development from Birth through Preadolescence, Harper Collins

See other *Facts for Families*:

07 School Refusal, # 14 Family Moves, # 20 Day Care, and, # 47 The Anxious Child

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