

Kindergarten Anxiety

A Parent's Guide To Preparing For The First Day

The first day of kindergarten is a family milestone. It marks not only the beginning of a child's formal education but also the first of many steps toward independence. It's an exciting time, but the transition can be difficult for both parents and children. Luckily, there are ways to ease you through this rite of passage.

Getting Adjusted

In the weeks before school starts, review things such as basic shapes, colors, numbers and letters. Make sure your child can recognize his or her name in print and knows your address and telephone number. Although most schools do not expect children to know all these things, teachers like to get a feel for the overall level of the class.

Begin to let your child assert some independence. This is especially important when shopping for school supplies; having a say in which lunchbox or backpack they use is likely to get children more excited about school.

Kelly Babcock, mother of three boys, narrows down backpack and lunchbox choices and then lets her sons pick. She also likes to take them shopping for school supplies.

"Even if it's just picking up crayons and putting them in the basket, it makes them feel a part of it," Babcock says.

Parents can help prepare by having more conversations with their children about school. Sandi Lillard, a child therapist with Burrell Behavior Health, recommends asking your child questions such as, "What have you heard about kindergarten? What do you think it will be like?"

"A lot of times kids don't know they are fearful, or they don't know how to express it," Lillard says. "When you ask questions like these it helps rule out some irrational fears your child might have."



Adelaide Becking and her mother, Sarah

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Lisa Burke, mother of two girls ages 8 and 4, stresses the importance of reading with her girls and preschool programs that help kids learn the basics as well as practice social interaction.

"When our daughter Carlie started kindergarten, she had already been used to interaction with other kids," Burke says. "I think it might have been a shock otherwise."

Educators also recommend attending open house nights at school. These events allow parents and children to meet teachers and get acquainted with the school and the classroom. If possible, see if you can introduce your child to other classmates and faculty members. The more friendly faces on the first day of school, the easier the transition will be. Make sure the teacher knows what name your child goes by, especially if it's not a first name, to avoid confusion on the first day.

Another way to get your child used to the idea of school is by pointing out the building whenever you pass it or by visiting the school's playground.

Preparing For School

In the week before school starts, set new bedtime and morning routines to acclimate your child to the pace of school. Check to see if your child's kindergarten class has a naptime as many schools now offer only a short rest period.

"We're big nap people," Babcock says. "I've been weaning [my son] off naps all summer so he'll be used to it."

The Burke family had similar problems adjusting a typically late bedtime for Carlie.

"She is our little night owl, so we had to get her used to an earlier bed time," Burke says.

The night before the big day, get as much ready as possible. If the backpack is already packed and the first-day-of-school outfit is picked out, there is less chance something will get misplaced in the rush of the morning. Aim for consistency in the morning routine, which builds a child's trust and confidence. The more things they can count on, the less anxiety they will have.

Many families do something to make the first day special. The Burkes take an annual first-day-of-school photograph

of their girls with their backpacks and lunchboxes. Others make a special first-day breakfast or go out for a celebratory dinner or dessert.

The Big Day

Lillard says there are three mistakes many parents make on the first day. The biggest mistake is the well-intentioned sneak-out. You may think it will be easier if you leave when your child is otherwise occupied, but it really only heightens the child's anxiety.

"It's a trust breaker; if you leave without telling them they will be more anxious when you leave next time," Lillard says.

Parents are also guilty of putting too much pressure on their child to be a "big boy or girl," or on the opposite end of the spectrum projecting their anxiety about the situation onto their children. Lillard says it is important to show you are confident without minimizing your child's fears. If a child becomes scared or upset try reminding them of other times they were brave, such as a doctor's visit.

"I didn't totally bawl, but I was excited and nervous," says Babcock about her son's first day. "I tried to stay upbeat because he kept looking back at me for reassurance."

If you are concerned about your child having serious separation anxiety, talk to your child's teacher about bringing a comfort item. While some teachers prefer that they stay away from things like stuffed animals and blankets, something small such as a family photo hung in a cubby or a lipstick kiss mark on their hand can be enough to soothe an anxious child.

When you pick your child up from school, ask them open-ended questions about their day. Also keep in mind that for the first few weeks your child is still in the midst of a big adjustment. They also may be more tired than usual from being in such a stimulating environment. While every child is different, most adjust to the kindergarten routine in a few weeks.

Although it marks the end of an era in your child's life, most parents agree that kindergarten is the start of something better. Burke encourages parents to embrace the new lifestyle and "enjoy the ride; it's a lot of fun." ■

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