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Helping your child cope with the transition to big school

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Parenting expert Elaine Halligan shares tips on how to help prepare your child (and you!) for the transition to school life.



Children often have difficulty dealing with change. These could be everyday minor transitions like moving from one task to another (e.g. packing up toys and coming to have a meal), or from one environment to another (e.g. home to school) or even from one person to another, (e.g. parent goes out leaving a babysitter in charge). Moving from holiday mode to term-time routines involves change and additionally, change

comes at the beginning of the school year as children move up a year, move schools or even start school for the first time.

Whatever the change, children often need help dealing with a multitude of feelings which they frequently don't understand. Their discomfort may be reflected in withdrawn, sulky, regressive behaviour or 'testing' behaviours. Or they may get physical symptoms of stress such as headaches, eczema, stomach cramps.

For example starting 'big school' is a real landmark in your child's life as well as yours and it is normal to be feeling slightly anxious. As much as possible, try to keep your anxiety from your kids, as 80% of parenting is modelling. So if we show worry, concern and doubt, this will become a burden for your child and they may also start to self doubt.

However you are NOT alone – according to a survey a few years ago by Fairy Bio, more than half of all parents feel “overwhelmingly emotional” when they drop their child off for their first day at school. In fact, mums are 5 times more likely to cry than their children! Half of parents then say they pined for their child's company and 44% consider having another baby!!

Recognising that anxiety is closely linked to uncertainty and a feeling of being out of control is useful for parents to acknowledge. This forms part of the solution that will help children feel more in control and set them up for success. The worst thing we can do is ambush them and throw them in at the deep end expecting them to cope, as this undermines trust us their parent.

So what can we as parents do to ensure our children are well prepared for the transition to big school.

The solutions are plentiful:

1 . Build up their confidence by setting them up for success and help familiarise them with the new school.

- Visit or look at pictures of the new school often.
- Reading books about starting school is a good way to teach your child about the reality of school life.
- Make sure to get the uniform well in advance and try it on.
- Practice getting in and out of it and go through the morning routines e.g. would you prefer that uniform goes on after breakfast to minimise the chance of spills? Should your child get dressed in the kitchen to avoid the distractions of a bedroom? Should hair brushes and toothbrushes be downstairs to make for a quicker getaway?
- Practice with them going to the toilet and wiping their bottom, flushing and hand washing and give them lots of descriptive praise.

2. Help children cope with feelings- don't deny or dismiss.

But don't pump them for information – kids are often tired at the end of the day and they live in the moment so often don't share much about what happened earlier. When you ask "How was your day?" it can feel like too broad a question and the answer can feel too big. The result usually is a generic one of "fine".

Some children don't speak about their feelings but parents can guess something is amiss and need to address the underlying feelings. Don't try to make it better. Children don't need protection from their feelings– they need to be able to deal with them. Once children's feelings have been expressed they may be ready to focus on solutions.

So for example if your child gets upset when you have to leave them:

-Practice over and over what will happen when you/or someone else leaves them at school "*What is mummy/daddy /carer going to say when they drop you off? And then what are you going to say?*"

-They may have feelings of anxiety about being left. Acknowledge the sadness, *“You might feel sad when I leave you and that makes you want to cry. You might be worried about what’s going to happen at school or you might be thinking you’ll be missing something at home”*.

-Involve them in solutions. *“What could we do to help you feel less sad? Shall we have a special kind of good-bye kiss? Or a goodbye song? Would you like to take something of mine to keep with you? ...What do you think?”*

3. Maybe talk about your experiences of being a child at school (positive ones).

Mention friends, the activities you liked best, the games you played, the teachers you remember fondly. Maybe find a photo of you when you were at school.

4. Making opportunities to talk to ensure good communication. Sometimes these come up when you least expect it and they may not be at very convenient moments.

Your child may open up at bedtime or something may come up as you’re trying to get them to school or the childminder. You can invite opportunities for conversation through reading books, playing fantasy games or doing an activity and wherever possible try and have chatty time before bath time so any worries and anxieties are not discussed just as the lights are going out!

6. Prepare yourself for transition! In the medley of thinking how to prepare your children, we often forget about what we need to do. It can be very helpful getting to bed 30 minutes earlier, put your mobile in the drop zone outside the bedroom and whoever picks up from school remembers that after school snack. Get the blood sugars back on track, if you don’t want your child to turn into a hysterical mess! So don’t delay, start preparing for success and ensure both you and your child start this new milestone happy, confident and cooperative.

Elaine Halligan is London Director of The Parent Practice, an organisation that enables parents to bring out the best in their children, and is the author of a best selling book called ‘My Child’s Different’.

www.theparentpractice.com