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Helping Kids Learn

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Information Sheet 15

Starting School

Is your pre-schooler ready to make the transition to big school?
How can parents make the transition easier?

By Danielle Tracey, Psychologist

The transition to 'big' school is one of the major challenges children have to face in the early childhood years.

It is a time of stress and anxiety as well as excitement and enjoyment. For parents it may also cause some anxious moments as another adult becomes a primary carer of their child and their child takes an important step toward independence.

When faced with this transition each child and parent may react differently.

Some children are horrified at leaving mum and cling to her desperately, while others are thrilled to be going to big school and can't wait to learn to read and meet new friends without giving their mum a second thought. Some mums are quite eager for their child to commence school so they can return to the workforce, while others cry, overwhelmed by a sense of emptiness and loss.

Why is the move to 'big' school such a transition for children, even when they have attended pre-school?

Young children feel safe and secure when they are in a familiar environment, when they understand the routine, and know what is expected of them. When there is a change they can feel threatened and insecure.

Preschool and school are very different.

Preschool has a higher staff-child ratio and emphasises a cosy and caring atmosphere. School has larger buildings, a more regimented routine, a cohort of larger and older children, and more noise and congestion. These may seem trivial differences to an adult, but to a child they are important and can question their sense of security.

For parents, a large part of the stress associated with their child commencing school is agonising over the right time to send their child to school.

When should a child commence school?

In NSW, children are eligible to start 'big' school at four and a half years, provided they turn five before 1 August in the year they commence school. By law they are required to start school by their sixth birthday.

Child development experts continue to disagree about the 'right' age for a child to start school, but there is an emerging belief that numerous other factors – not just chronological age – should be used as criteria for school entry.

As children grow, they develop at different rates and age may not be the best indicator of school readiness.

It is vital to consider all aspects of a child's development because if a child enters school before they are developmentally ready to cope, their chances of failure and low self-esteem increase dramatically. They can lose confidence and feel they can't cope with schoolwork and making friends.

Deciding when to send your child to school is a big decision, but being bright and being ready to start school are not necessarily the same thing.

There is no one quality or skill that children need to do well in school, but rather a combination of skills contributes to school success.

You need to consider your child's ability to communicate with both children and adults, how well they follow instructions, how well they sit and listen, how they handle a large group situation and how well they co-operate.

It is also important to be able to dress themselves, go to the toilet, handle their lunch and look after their own belongings.

On an emotional level, are they eager to participate, wanting to learn, are they interested, motivated and confident, and can they negotiate with friends?

Can they hold a pencil, hop and catch a ball?

Learning Links is a non-profit charity assisting children who have difficulty learning and their families.

We raise funds to help children from birth to 18 years by offering a range of services including the following.

Early Childhood Services for children from birth to six years.

- Early childhood intervention and support for very young children.
- An inclusive preschool for children with and without special needs.
- An assessment and consultancy service for families who are concerned about their young child's development.
- Specialist early childhood teaching and therapy.

School Age Services for children from Kindergarten to Year 12 who have low support needs.

- Comprehensive assessments.
- Small group tuition and therapy.
- Occupational and speech therapy programs combining specialist education services and therapy.
- Outreach programs.
- The Ronald McDonald Learning Program for seriously ill children and the Reading for Life Program for children falling behind in their reading.

Family Services helping and supporting families and health professionals.

- Centre and home-based family counselling.
- Parenting Programs and groups for families.
- Case Management Services.

Professional Development for teachers and health professionals.

Presentations, workshops and advice on identifying and helping children with learning difficulties, learning disabilities and developmental delays.

Learning Links has branches in six Sydney locations at Peakhurst, Penshurst, Fairfield, Miller, Dee Why and Randwick. We also offer some services to children in country NSW, the ACT, Victoria and New Zealand. A complete list of branch locations and contact numbers is on the back cover.

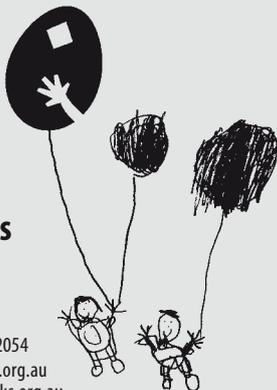
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This sounds like a lot of things to consider, and it's difficult to know what skills are most important. What if your child can do some but not all of these things?

Parents often judge their child's readiness for school by whether or not they can perform academic skills such as counting, saying the alphabet or writing their name.

Research tells us there is a strong link between social ability and school readiness. The ability to interact and get on with other children is a strong predictor of success at school.

Young children need to learn social skills that will enable them to function as well adjusted members of a group. They also need to develop positive attitudes that predispose them to learning.

What can parents do to prepare their child for school?

As a parent you want to do all that you can to provide your child with the best possible chance of school success.

There are many things you can do to assist your child's transition to school. When they are well prepared they gain self-confidence and are more likely to succeed. Here are a few strategies that you can do at home with your child.

Firstly, prepare them for the school environment.

Visit the school before their 'first day'. Children feel more comfortable if they know where to find the classrooms, toilets, bubblers, school office, the bus stop and any other important part of their new environment.

Talk about school routines with them. Discuss school bells, lining up for class, assembly, morning tea (recess), lunch and playtime. Mention things like what to eat from their lunch box at morning tea and what to save for lunch. Talk about what to do if their lunch falls in the dirt or their drink tips over.

Don't save their lunch box, drink bottle and even school uniforms for their first day, however tempting it might be to make these special. Let your child get used to opening the lunch box and the drink bottle, so they feel confident with using these.

Let your child try on their school clothes, making sure they feel comfortable and can take their jumper or jacket off or put it on easily.

Talk to them about looking after their own belongings and try to help them recognise their own name on their clothes, lunch box, drink bottle and anything else they take to school.

Ask your school about their orientation program. Many schools have some wonderfully comprehensive orientation programs for their new starters.

Think about what you and your other children say about school. A child's expectations of school are based on information they receive from others (including parents, siblings, peers and other family members).

Be excited about school

Have an excited tone in your voice and talk about the fun things they will learn and do. If you are fearful about your child commencing school, they may also be fearful of this new experience.

Provide your child with opportunities to play with other children their own age in an unstructured way. If possible let them get to know some other children starting at the same time as your child. It's nice if they can recognise a face, even if they are not good friends when they do start school.

Let them do things for themselves, teach them responsibility and give them confidence in their abilities.

Then there are the physical things such as eating sufficient nutritious food and getting enough sleep. Both of these are important to a child's ability to cope with such a big change in their life.

The first few years of a child's school life will determine their attitude to learning and will affect a child's self-esteem and success.

The development of cognitive skills such as learning the alphabet is an important goal of early childhood. However, instilling within a child a love of learning is even more important.

You can do this by incorporating learning into your life as fun. Children are quick to work out what is a chore and what is fun. If you make learning a chore by forcing your child to sit and recite words when it is clear that they do not want to, you are jeopardising their future motivation, interest and effort.

Encourage conversations with your child as they build a child's vocabulary and help listening and concentration. The more you talk the better they will be able to communicate.

Talking also lays the foundation for pre-reading skills.

Children are curious about the world and will ask lots of 'why' questions. Try to engage in rich conversations about a range of topics of interest to the child. If you visit lots of different places, you can talk about the visits.

Read for pleasure in front of your child. Buy your child books as presents and go to the local library, making sure you read to your child and talk about the story.

Finally, let your child play. Playing is the way young children learn best.

Playing actually enhances a wide range of skills that are essential for school success. Not only does it provide an opportunity to interact with other children and practice social skills and effective communication, but it also allows them to practice gross and fine motor skills through games and movement.

Children develop a greater understanding of their world as they explore and question their surroundings. Play enhances a child's emotional skills as they build confidence through activity.

Commencing school is an important life transition that every individual and family will experience.

It is an event that can be fraught with both negative and positive emotions. Take your time with this major change, giving your child opportunities to practice their different skills and expose them to a range of experiences. Above all, encourage your child with praise and love and you will help give your child the best start to a very important part of their life.

Is your child ready for school?

Skills to consider

The following skills should be taken into account when deciding whether your child is ready (or not) to commence school.

Social skills:

Skills that facilitate friendships and participation in a large group.

Does your child:

- take turns in a group;
- mix happily with friends and can leave Mum and Dad without tears;
- share, comfort and help other children;
- play co-operatively;
- initiate play with other children;
- participate and attend in a large group;
- sit without disrupting others;
- follow rules and expectations; and
- comply with an adult's request?

Motor skills:

Motor skills include both large muscle co-ordination and fine motor muscles such as those found in the hand.

Does your child know how to:

- jump;
- run;
- catch a ball;
- hold a pencil;
- hold small objects such as lego; and
- use scissors?

Self-help skills:

Skills that allow the child to care for their primary needs independently.

Does your child:

- look after their own belongings;
- go to the toilet independently;
- dress themselves with zips and buttons; and
- unpack lunch and eat independently?

Cognitive skills:

Skills that form the foundations of academic learning.

Can your child:

- label the colours green, red, yellow, blue, orange, brown, black, white;
- recall elements of short story told 5 minutes ago;
- recognise or write own name; and
- say or sing a nursery rhyme?

Emotional skills:

A positive attitude towards themselves and learning.

Is your child:

- willing to attempt new experiences;
- eager to participate in activities;
- motivated and confident; and
- wanting to learn and interested in new things?

Physical well being:

A child's primary physical needs must be satisfied before they can focus on learning.

Does your child:

- eat sufficient nutritious food;
- have enough stamina to complete a full day at school;
- get enough sleep; and
- have all the necessary immunisations?

Communication skills:

Skills that allow children to become effective communicators, including speaking and listening.

Does your child:

- speak fluently and clearly;
- express their needs;
- contribute to discussions;
- ask and answer questions;
- respond to directions, follow instructions, and
- listen to an adult or peer who is talking?



Tips for New School Starters

Tips for Making Friends

- Talk to your child about the meaning of friendship.
- Teach your child to laugh off teasing moments.
- Explain to your child that they are one of many children in a class.
- Make your home a place where your child feels valued and loved.
- Open your doors to your child's new friends.
- Explain that sometimes during playtime you may lose sight of your new friends. Tell them that it's O.K. if this happens and they can't find them quickly, suggest they go to the library if it's open, see the teacher on playground duty if they feel upset, or just sit down and watch the other kids until they see someone you know.
- Encourage your child to take 2 or 3 inexpensive pocket size toys to school to play with them. These small toys are sure to attract other children. The toys can then be shared and friendships formed. This also helps stop a child feeling alone in the playground.
- If your child has a birthday in first term, organise a birthday party and invite classmates. That way your child will be easily recognised by the other children and find it easier to make friends.

Tips for Lunches

- Use sandwich wrap or sandwich bags rather than cling wrap, as they are easier to open for little hands.
- Pack small pieces of fruit.
- Peel oranges.
- Re-use new pop-tops and fill with your own juice to avoid lost lids and expensive drink bottles.
- Make sure the lunchbox is one with the lid attached to avoid lost lids.
- Don't pack dairy snacks or meat fillings in sandwiches on hot days.
- Pack 'little lunch' or 'morning tea' separate from 'big lunch'.
- Label lunch boxes and drink bottles and check occasionally if the labels have worn off.
- Remember that children need healthy food for school-time staying power.
- And, for Mum, clean out food scraps from bags as often as possible (before the smell overwhelms you).

Tips for Reading Success

- Regularly read to your child.
- Make reading time a special time... sit closely, cuddle, and give lots of smiles.
- Let your child see you reading for pleasure and information.
- Take your child to the library.
- Don't pressure your child to read books independently.

Tips for travelling to and from School

- Drop off and pick-up your child from the same point each day – some Kindergartens require you to come to the room to collect your child.
- If your child must cross a road independently – practice, practice and practice again.
- Attach bus passes firmly to school bags.
- Teach your child their address and phone number to a familiar nursery rhyme melody.

Tips for Hot Days

- Don't overdress your child in summer.
- Ask teachers to enforce the rule 'No Hat, No Play', although a lot of schools already do this.
- Apply sunscreen before your child leaves home.
- Keep a stick-style sunscreen applicator in your child's bag.
- Freeze drinks and wrap in plastic.

Tips for Homework

- Set aside a regular time for homework.
- Keep a handy supply of sharpened pencils, glue, scissors, a rubber, coloured pencils, ruler, plastic letters, bread counters, times table chart, alphabet or sound chart, and number chart in one place such as a tray or basket.
- Divide homework into achievable sections each day.
- Encourage your child to complete a small section of homework each day rather than completing the entire week's homework in one setting.
- Let your child's teacher know if homework is taking too long or distressing your child.

- Collect different coloured plastic bread discs that are useful for counting and assisting with maths homework. One colour can be used for single numbers and the other for lots of ten.
- Buy or make a times table chart or placemat and place beside child when completing maths homework.
- Buy plastic letters and use to assist spelling. When using a sound eg. 'at', you can set up the 'at' and get the child to add other letters to see which ones make a word and which ones don't.

Tips for School Uniform and School Bag

- Buy velcro, buckles or slip-on boots if possible rather than shoes with laces.
- If possible, choose t-shirts and skivvies rather than shirts that button.
- Choose pants, t-shirts, shorts and socks that are loose fitting and easy to put on.
- Choose pants with elastic waistbands rather than zips and buttons.
- When buying a school bag, make sure your child can open and close the bag by him/herself before you buy it.
- If the bag is a back pack, carefully fit the straps so that the back is not placing undue strain on your child's back – make sure it does not hang down too far from their shoulders.
- Have all clothes and belongings clearly marked with your child's name and teach your child how to recognise their name.
- Show your child where their name is on their belongings.
- If you buy iron-on labels for clothing, you may also like to use a felt pen as well to put your child's name on the tags – to avoid problems if a label falls off or is ripped off.
- Attach a distinctive keyring or other object to their school bag to make identification easy.
- Make sure extra underpants and perhaps shorts are in their school bag in case of accidents.
- Library Bags can be easily made out of a cot size pillowcase. Just thread some cord through the hemmed edge.



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Early Childhood Services
– all enquiries to Head Office

School Age Services
– contact your local branch

Family Services
– contact your local branch

All other enquiries
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