

Five steps to prepare your child for kindergarten

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It's the first day of kindergarten for your child, and you're not sure who's more anxious. Excitement, trepidation, anticipation. Starting school can be a stressful time.

Use the summer weeks to prepare and this significant step in life can go smoothly. You can focus on more important matters like making sure you get a great photo of your child in front of the school on Day One! If you plan in advance and follow a few simple steps, the day can be memorable in all the right ways.

Helpful steps include helping your child practise new routines, introducing your child to the school staff and space and choosing a familiar object that will remind them of home when the time comes. These things can all help to ensure that everything goes smoothly on their first day of kindergarten.

I have a PhD in psychology and am a professor in the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary, but my first degree was in elementary education. As a former kindergarten teacher, I took my responsibilities seriously when it came to ensuring a smooth transition to school for young children. After all, the success or failure of the first days and weeks could set the tone for their entire school career.

The good news is that there are five easy steps you can take to exert your own leadership this summer, as a parent — to ensure that everything goes smoothly on day one. From practising new routines to finding a familiar “transition object,” these are all manageable steps that take only a few minutes and can be easily incorporated into the weeks ahead.

Why is kindergarten such a big deal?

First, it's important to understand why the transition to kindergarten can provoke anxiety, and how normal this is. Young children are used to relying on their parents and primary caregivers as their source of security. This has long been established by early developmental researchers such as John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth.

Ainsworth discovered the attachment system, which we understand now is linked in part to the hormone oxytocin that is naturally released during parent-child interactions to increase bonding and reduce anxiety. Bowlby referred to parents as the child's “secure base”. When we send children off to school, we are asking them to leave their secure base and head off into the great unknown, which can create anxiety.

Even if your child has been in full-day daycare, kindergarten offers a range of new challenges. These include the social demands of larger class sizes with fewer adults and more peer social interactions to navigate, as well as having to deal with older students in the hallways, bathrooms and on the playground. There is also a larger physical space and a bell system that divides the day into segments. There's an increase in organized

learning activities that require focus and attention. Taken together, the adjustment can be immense.

If possible visit your child's kindergarten classroom, and find the washroom, before school begins.

In the days of the one-room schoolhouse, the transition to school would likely have been easier, as older siblings, cousins and close neighbours would have been sitting together with the novice student. However, in larger cities we segregate children by age, and fewer students attend local schools because specialized magnet schools draw children from all corners of the city. The outcome is that everyone has to make new friends, which can make the adjustment more challenging.

Not to worry though. As a child's secure base, a parent has great power to create a smooth transition for everyone.

Five steps to a smooth transition

1. Talk about the new routines

In the weeks before the start of school, you can begin to change routines like bedtime and breakfast. Predictable routines are important in early childhood and changes in routines have been linked to difficulties adjusting to kindergarten. It is wise to begin early and make changes gradually. Ask your child what they're looking forward to at school and about any concerns they may have. Have them draw and talk about both positive and anxiety-provoking activities. Then ease their worries by acknowledging feelings and coming up with solutions.

For many children, leaving the secure attachment base of the family and heading off to kindergarten is a natural source of anxiety. (Shutterstock)

Revisit these things frequently: "When you start school, you are going to make some great new friends!" or "Are you still worried about the washrooms at school?" Introduce your child to any new school clothes, their schoolbag and school supplies, and talk with them to decide what their snacks and lunch will consist of. The night before the big day, work with them to get everything ready for the next morning.

2. Prepare a cheat-sheet for the teacher

Prepare a one-page note with key information about your child. It should include your child's picture, name and nickname, date of birth, medical conditions, allergies, family members, pets, interests, food likes and dislikes, favourite games and play activities, talents and interests. It might also include any worries they have about starting school.

3. Visit the classroom and locate the washroom

Go to the school the week before the start of classes so your child can meet the secretary and classroom teacher, tour their classroom, and locate the washroom. If possible, give them a chance to flush the toilet as some loud flushes can be frightening. Do not forget to tour the playground!

Some schools do offer an orientation in the spring but most young children will need to visit closer to the first day. Although some schools ban parents and children prior to the start of school, I always encourage parents to connect with their parent-school association and request this vital access. Research shows that active parental involvement in a child's education offers many benefits.

With a little planning and careful reassurance, parents can support their children to have a positive school experience. (Shutterstock)

When I was a teacher, I had an active parent council just for my kindergarten classroom. If your school doesn't have one, you can ask your child's teacher if they'd be open to having a parent council help them to plan events, organize field trips, fundraise or offer support in the classroom or library.

4. Choose a transitional object

Finally, you can provide your child with a "transitional object". We are all familiar with the proverbial security blanket that some young children latch onto. It is an inborn mechanism wired into young children that allows them to attach to others and attach to soothing objects when significant adults are not available. It might be a stuffed animal, a favourite shirt or even a photograph. It could also be a small card with your photo and phone number stuck inside the outside pocket of their backpack. In the event that they need to call you for a check-in, you can be assured that your child has your contact information right at hand. Sometimes just looking at the picture will be enough.

5. Figure out the logistics ahead of time

Before school starts, make sure to find out about things like bell times, drop-off and parking procedures and unique code words if your child is being picked up by someone else. That information will make it less stressful for you as a parent.

When you do drop off your child, be sure to tell them that you'll be there to pick them up as soon as school is finished, and remind them to have a great day.

If all goes well, you will both have memories that you can cherish for years to come.



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