

Here We Go To Kindergarten, Kindergarten, Kindergarten

Congratulations!! Having a child start school is so exciting. Did you know that children who start school in 2013 will finish high school in 2026? Sounds far into the future doesn't it? But the support you give your child now will impact the future even farther than that. As a kindergarten teacher, I have been there and done that for the school start of over one thousand kids and their families. As many 'why' questions as kids ask, parents have 'what' questions.

What are some basics to do for the first day? The most important information has nothing to do with your child but believe me, creates panic. Confirm where and when you will pick your child up at the end of the kindergarten day and where you park for drop-off. The first day with all the kids and parents can seem chaotic so check on those details. To help your child prepare, a few days before kindergarten start easing into the routine with wake-up time, typical meal-times and especially, bedtime. This is hard to do coming at the end of summer but there are so many demands on kids as they transition to being at school. They really need their sleep and the security of a routine.

When shopping for school items, a backpack is a big deal. The choices and varieties are staggering as are some prices. Backpacks need to have enough room to hold a craft, food containers, library book, and possibly a sweater, dry shoes and a small lovey or stuffie. All that while being an appropriate size for your child. Beware, too!! There's a monster that lives in the bottom of the backpack that eats paper sent home from school and loosens the lids on liquids. Having an extra set of clothes tightly rolled and tucked in a zip-lock bag for emergencies is a big help as is labeling items, even just initials or a picture clue. For example, a J can be turned into an upside down candy cane or an M makes mountains.

Crayons, paints, markers and glue all say washable, but some colors are more washable than others. School clothes need to be washable and doable. Doable? Yes, so your child can do the buttons, straps, and zippers all by his/her very own self. Without taking too much time, in case playtime was so much fun there wasn't much left for a bathroom interruption.

Speaking of bathrooms, not all schools have separate ones for kindergarten. Can your child read BOYS/Boys and GIRLS/Girls and the symbols? Some boys are used to going into LADIES with their moms so may also need a check-out on urinals. (Confession time: some of these details may be more what teachers wish parents knew.)

Some kids are excited for the first day and some quite reluctant. Reassure your child where necessary and, at the same time, express confidence that your child can cope. "You are going to kindergarten, that is so exciting. Sometimes I feel excited and sometimes I feel sort of sad, but that's okay. I know I can handle that and You Can Too." It's especially hard to leave when your child is crying but sometimes long good-byes can be harder than short ones. It may help to be matter of fact, "I see you are upset. You might feel like crying for a little while so here is a kiss to hold in your hand. It's time for me to go now. I'll see you when I pick you up." This acknowledges your child's feelings and conveys the message that you feel confident your child can handle the situation. Meanwhile, your heart may feel like it's being ripped out. Some schools set up sip-and-sob coffee time for parents on the first day.

For all children, a little practice helps. If possible visit the school beforehand and see the room, the door, the bathrooms, and exactly where parents will drop off and pick up. If crying and anxiety continue, you may need to practice the drop-off. Find a few minutes when there is no one at school just to go over the drill. Switch after a few tries and you be the child and your child is the parent. If needed, wail and howl

so your child reassures you. You can even stage a temper tantrum. Ask your child if that's been enough practice tries. Hopefully, your child will say yes, at which point you can celebrate maybe with ice cream.

Some of the most important readiness skills are not related to academics, instead to social and emotional issues. Is your child able to separate from parents and caregivers for short periods of time? Does your child recognize and express emotions and show some self-control and self-regulation. Separating can be a big deal. Some children are so comfortable it would be nice to hear an "I'll miss you." For others, this can be a major issue. Children who have been going to day-care for years may suddenly dissolve into tears. A day at school can be fine until it comes to naptime. Joining a community program, library story hour, preschool, or play school may give your child the time and opportunity to develop skills to deal with the increased demands of being in a group. These are also skills that you can model for your child. There are 3 ways that children learn from us: by example, by example, by example. Self-control, independence, and self-reliance are like muscles; they develop and strengthen with practice, moderate challenge, and coaching.

From now until kindergarten starts—and afterwards—here's a High Five for developing some basic kindergarten readiness skills.

1. **READ:** Read and share lots and lots and lots of books with your child. A few books a day adds up to over a hundred in a month. Continue that for months and your child has a great foundation for developing later skills for learning to read. Books don't have to be saved for bed-time. How about a breakfast book? Or waiting in line book? Or supper book?
2. **TALK:** Think of each word your child hears as a penny. Pennies go into a piggy-bank and words go into a brain bank. Would you believe children get the brain stimulation of about 3 to 10 million or more words a year? Would you rather your child had an account with 3 million deposits or 10 million? You can enrich your child's brain bank with stories, songs, conversations, talk-time, jokes, riddles, games, and other fun with words.
3. **MOVE:** Besides the 5 senses we know, there are 2 more: the sense of the body's position in space and the sense of movement. Movement activities build brain pathways for all kinds of learning. Move and groove.
4. **CONNECT TO NATURE:** In the words of Richard Louv, our children are in danger of 'nature-deficit disorder.' Even urban areas have pockets of nature. Are there some trees on the way to the bus stop? How do they change with the 4 seasons? Checking the weather, looking at the sky, watching for ants on the sidewalk, collecting rocks and playing in the park are a few ways to connect with nature.
5. **PLAY!** Children need time and opportunity to play. They need to explore, create, figure out, make a mess, build, and pretend. Our days are already crammed full but play doesn't need to be an extra add-on. It can sneak in while sorting the laundry—make mountains of the colors, or setting the table—have the fork and spoon say hello to each other using different voices, and waiting for the bus—sing the people at the stop hop, hop, hop or stand on one foot. Going to the store is like brain candy for colors, sizes, and shapes. Play I-Spy something that is skinny and orange while looking for the carrots.

High five! The kindergarten year is an important transition between home and school and marks a huge expansion in your child's world. Just like you would get ready for other events such as a hike, picnic, or road trip, it helps to get ready for kindergarten. Here we go!

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