



Ease the stress on that momentous first day of kindergarten and prepare your child for success in the year ahead.

by Patti Ghezzi

The first day of kindergarten is tearful for parents, who can't believe their child is growing up so fast. For the child, however, it doesn't have to be a time for tears. We collected tips from veteran principals on preparing for a smooth transition to kindergarten.

1. Allow your child to become familiar with the school by driving past it as often as you can during the summer, advises Eddie Manuszak, principal of Patterson Elementary in Tecumseh, Mich.
2. Tour the school during the summer, even if your child visited on registration day, just to get her more comfortable in the building. Most schools are staffed during the summer by the principal, assistant principals, and other administrators.
3. Bring up school in conversations at home as much as possible. Talk about the fun things your child will get to do. Don't express regret that he's starting school. Make sure he views it as a positive step.
4. Make shopping for school supplies a fun experience. Get a list from the school of exactly what is allowed and expected. Some schools forbid rolling backpacks, colored markers, or other familiar supplies. Let your child make some choices about the color of her backpack or the type of pencil case.
5. Start the school bedtime routine a month before school starts. Parents can scale back gradually, having the child go to bed just five or 10 minutes earlier each night. "It takes 30 days to establish a routine," Manuszak says. "You don't want your child to be too worn out to make it through the day."
6. Work with your child during the summer on making healthy food choices. Most kindergartners are given some choices if they buy their lunch at school. For example, some schools sell whole, chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, and 2 percent milk. Children used to having Mom make all their decisions may be overwhelmed, and most will be tempted to make the tastiest, and often unhealthiest, choice.
7. Check out books from the library that help ease jitters about starting school. Manuszak recommends *The Night Before Kindergarten*, by Natasha Wing, and *The Kissing Hand*, by Audrey Penn.
8. Attend every open house and meet-the-teacher event offered. Stop by the parent involvement table for information on joining the PTO—it's a great way to meet other parents with children in the same class and to keep up with what's going on at school.
9. Prepare yourself. "You are going to cry," Manuszak says. "Be strong and don't cry in front of your child. Hold the tears until you're in your car."
10. Work with your child throughout the summer on academic skills such as writing her name or reading letters—but only if she's ready. "You know your child best," Manuszak says. "Follow your child's lead. Don't force it. Drilling them before they're ready creates stress."
11. Do arts-and-crafts projects with your child during the summer. He'll get more comfortable using scissors, markers, and other supplies that he'll see plenty of in kindergarten.
12. Ask your school whether they have a kindergarten handbook for parents. Sandra Watson, director of elementary education in Fayette County, Ga., and a former principal, authored a handbook for parents of kindergartners in her district, and parents often refer to it during the summer when questions and fears arise about their child starting school.



13. Find out whether the kindergarten curriculum is available online and familiarize yourself with what today's kindergartners are expected to learn. Kindergarten has changed dramatically in the past 20 years. Many of the skills your child will learn were once taught in 1st grade.
14. Talk to your school's principal about their philosophy of kindergarten. Some educators believe in making kindergarten more play-oriented, like preschool, while others believe it's time for kids to sit at desks like 1st graders. Understanding your school leader's philosophy will help you understand what your child is learning and why.
15. Make sure your child has the necessary immunizations to start school.
16. Be prepared for a wide range of kids in your child's class. "Kids come in A to Z," says Watson. "Some don't know their last name and others are reading at a 1st grade level and higher." Don't make it a competition. Development at this age varies from child to child. By 3rd grade, most kids will be at the same level, but younger kids need to be allowed to grow at their own pace.
17. Over the summer, work with your child on problem-solving. Some kids are whizzes with flash cards but unable to think for themselves when a problem arises. "Give your child a chance to answer who, what, where, and why questions," Watson says. "Going grocery shopping can be a great learning experience in preparation for school."

Getting ready for kindergarten doesn't have to be the main focus of your summer. Your child will be too busy playing to think much about it. But taking time to familiarize your child with school and educate yourself on what modern kindergarten is all about will go a long way toward guaranteeing a smooth transition.