

Getting Kids Ready for Kindergarten **Ruth A. Peters, Ph.D.**

School is quickly approaching, and for many five- and six-year-olds it's a whole new world—kindergarten. The big enchilada, real school, homework, larger classes, longer days, and crowded hallways. Many children, especially those with older siblings, have longed for this rite of passage. But, others may be fearful of the change from the often small, loving and comfortable preschool situation. How to make this an easier, more fun transition for your little one? Well, attention to a few issues and some major empathy on your part will do the trick. Usually your child's concerns fall into two categories—getting through the day in one piece (schedules, how the day will proceed) and emotional fears. Let's begin with the basics:

Getting the Lay of the Land:

Where's the bathroom and when can I use it? Good question, one deserving of a very concrete, complete and definite answer! Many kindergarten classrooms are set up with a bathroom or two situated right in the classroom so that the little kids don't mingle with the older students or have to travel outside of the class (and find their way back!) every time Nature calls! Also, hand washing time is much easier if the sink is just a few steps away. Tell your child that the teacher will have a policy about when and how to use the bathroom. Often, it's on an as-needed basis, or the child may have to ask to be excused from the learning environment. But, it's usually a quick and easy process and the other students usually don't notice a frequent potty user, if that's one of your kid's concerns.

What if I don't make it to the bathroom and have an accident? Another good question, and again, easily answered! It's quite common for teachers to request an extra set of underwear and pants, packed in a large zip-locked plastic bag just for this occasion. Tell your child that this is quite commonplace, and to just alert the teacher to their situation and a clean change of clothes will do the trick. No one else has to know about it, and therefore this is nothing to be concerned about.

What if I get hungry? Will they feed me? Yep, and it's fun too. Explain about snack and lunch time, how your youngster will probably have the option of bringing both or buying lunch in the cafeteria. Discuss how snack will occur mid-morning and lunch an hour or so later in the day. Ask your son or daughter what they would like for you to pack, and let them consider making their own snacks and lunches either the night before or early in the morning. Discuss how snack usually occurs in the classroom at their tables (which they will be sharing with another child or two), and that lunch will take place in the larger cafeteria. Most kindergarten students are segregated during lunchtime to their own special tables and areas, so they don't mix with the older kids. Take your child to a buffet or cafeteria style dining establishment and explain that the lunch line at school will be similar. This may also be a good, teachable moment to discuss some nutrition tips about selecting the best foods during lunchtime. Most local newspapers offer the public

school lunch schedules and you and your child can review them before the school week begins.

Do I have to take a nap? Sure, but you don't have to fall asleep! By kindergarten, teachers realize that most kids won't fall asleep (although some are out for the count within a few seconds of their heads hitting the cots!), but benefit from 45 minutes or so of rest and relaxation. Some teachers quietly read a book while others play soothing music. Emphasize that it won't be an incredibly boring two hours of lying quietly on a cold floor! It's often a sought-after respite by pooped-out kids and many enjoy listening to the stories.

Will I have homework like my older brother has? Yes, but it will be fun and interesting is the only sane answer to this question! Many little ones look forward to the idea of homework as it reeks of being a "big kid". Tell your child that there will probably be a few minutes of coloring, cutting or copying to do at the beginning of the year, but that it's all fun, enjoyable stuff and that you, as a parent, can't wait to help and get involved in the process. Make it a positive, exciting idea, not an activity to be dreaded.

What happens first? Then what do we do? It's a good idea to call the school and ask for a daily schedule of activities to review with your child. But, in general you can tell your son that the day begins by putting their book bags in their cubbies and meeting on the circle line for the morning ritual—the Pledge of Allegiance, a short discussion of the day's events, the calendar reviewed and perhaps a story read. Then it's on to some seat work, then center time, snack, recess, more seat work, and then lunch. Usually this is followed by nap or quiet time, and then the "specials" (art, music, and dance). Then it's pack up and get ready for dismissal time.

Emotional Issues:

What if the other kids don't like me? Ugh, the dreaded fear of many children. Empathize with your child, telling her that most kids have a little worry about this, but are pleasantly surprised at how nice and friendly the children are. Remind her that all of her fellow students will be new to the situation and needing to make friends. Explain that she'll be placed, most likely, at a table with a few other kids and that she'll have a chance to quickly get to know them. Recess is also a great place to make friends, as is lunch. You may want to role-play some "small talk" with your child, especially if she is on the shy side. Rehearse with dolls or stuffed animals before the school year begins. Try scripts like, "Hi, my name is Megan, what's yours?" That's sure to get a positive response as well as being a good conversation starter. Discuss how to join into others' games, by saying—"Hey, that looks like fun and I know how to play four-square. Can I have a turn?" Another sure bet is to invite another kid to sit next to your child during snack time or recess. Explain to your child how others are probably feeling just as nervous or uncertain, and will love being invited to sit with, share activities, or play with your child.

What if you don't pick me up on time? That's a common fear of little ones, and something that is usually under your control. Tell her that you'll be in the car line on time (but don't promise to be first—that's definitely not always an option and really scares the kids when they don't see your car heading up the line!). Let her know that she may have to wait a few minutes for you, but that's normal and nothing is wrong. If your child rides a bus home or a van to day care, explain the process and how the adults will make sure that she'll be safe.

What if the teacher doesn't like me? Explain to your child that kindergarten teachers are perhaps the nicest folks on Earth! They've chosen to work with little ones because they love children and are usually warm, funny and understanding people. Emphasize how your child can trust the teacher and go to him or her with any concerns.

What if I'm the dumbest kid in the class? This is a good entrée to getting out the crayons, pencils and scissors and reviewing with your little one some of the skills that will be needed in class. Review the colors, shapes, and the alphabet letters that she knows. Practice cutting, coloring and copying—but don't overdo it. Praise her effort (regardless of the final product) and let her know that she's right on target for the beginning of the school year. Emphasize that raising her hand to answer questions (and not calling out the answers), sitting quietly on the circle line, and staying in her seat are responsibilities and skills that will need to be finely honed. It's a good time to begin working on some of these at home, in the weeks before school begins.

And, don't forget the excitement of shopping for the lunchbox, book bag, and school clothes. Many kids love to wear a new outfit the first day, but don't be surprised if your child decides on something that he wore at preschool. It may be comforting to take a bit of the old with him as he enters into the new!

Finally, if possible, visit the school beforehand. Try playing on the playground and looking into the classroom windows if a tour is available. Review the floor plan of the building, at least the part between arrival at school and finding her classroom. Discuss how you'll handle that the first few days of school. If you can, arrange for a short meeting with the teacher and a quick look at the classroom. Be prepared for a bit of clinginess the first week or so. Then, on the first day of school, hand the child over to the teacher (she's the expert on this) and try to have a good day!

Kindergarten Readiness:

If you are concerned about your child's readiness and want to do a quick brush-up on some of the skills, consider the following list that I've developed:

What are the signs of kindergarten readiness?

Emotional/Behavioral Issues:

- Knows how to communicate his needs—can assert himself about his own materials and work, need to go to the bathroom, or feeling ill
- Can choose a preferred activity and complete it satisfactorily
- Can separate from parents without excessive anxiety or fussiness
- Can get along with peers in terms of sharing, taking turns, and appropriately entering into games on the playground
- Displays emerging independence in terms of making choices, asking for help from an adult other than a parent, and working alone on tasks
- Can sit still long enough to listen to a story or a lesson
- Is able to keep hands and feet to self and to not be disruptive in the classroom (excessive chatter, touching others' possessions, not using an "inside voice")
- Is cooperative and mature enough to complete tasks, especially those she's not particularly interested in

Pre-Academic Readiness:

- Has shown an interest in listening to stories and having books read to him
- Recognizes some uppercase alphabet letters, especially those in her name
- Recognizes and knows the names of the primary colors as well as the basic shapes (circle, square, triangle, rectangle, diamond)
- Can count to 10 and understands the number/symbol relationship from 1 to 5 (child is able to count out 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5 pencils when placed in front of her)
- Can *copy* some letters and numbers. Don't expect the child to have memorized the letters and numbers at this stage of development, just the ability to copy some in rough format. Also, expect lots of reversals—"p" looks a lot like "q" and a "2" is often mistaken for a "5"!
- Fine motor skills are developed enough so that the child can color a large picture and keep the crayon on the page, although the crayon may not stay between the lines.

Social Skills:

- Can interact during play with another child—does not engage exclusively in either solo play or parallel play
- Can take turns, does not cut in line, understands and accepts the concept of "not always being first"
- Shows some empathy for others beside self—shows some concern if another child is crying or hurt
- Is not excessively grabby—allows others to use playground equipment or enter into the various classroom "centers"
- Can use words to express negative emotions, not aggressive actions
- When upset with a classmate, will seek out the teacher to help solve the problem
- Is not excessively shy, to the point of not being able to participate in classroom activities or to let needs be known

