

Your child's first year at school: A book for parents

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Introduction

If you are an adult caring for a child who is starting full-time school, this book is for you. It is to help you support your child to have a happy, positive and satisfying beginning to the great adventure of the school years.

It focuses on questions, issues and topics that commonly arise as a child takes this first big step into 'the world of school'. There is information about practical matters such as clothing, excursions and homework; as well as deeper issues such as development, emotions and behaviour, and young children's learning.

You will notice that some information is repeated in different sections. This is because aspects of your young child's life interact and affect one another. If you find things repeated it is probably because they are important.

The term 'parent' is intended to include all caring adults who have primary responsibility for young children in the great diversity of family structures in our society.

As school policies vary across Australia, you will need to check with your child's school about the detail of the particular rules, routines and procedures.



Your child: Starting school

When children begin school they are, in some ways, moving away from the world of parent and family and into the world of children. It is a big step on the pathway towards growing up, and most children look forward to it.

They are keen to make new friends, learn new things and feel like 'a grown-up school person'. In the process, there will be many wonderful experiences for children to enjoy and share with their parents. At the same time, all of this can be stressful for both children and parents if they are not sufficiently prepared for the changes, or if the real experience is 'a bit of a let down'.

Some children, for example, expect to be able to read and write and 'do sums' by the end of the first day. Some expect all the other children to like them and to make lots of new friends straightaway. Parents may need to focus on the positive things and to explain to children that important things like learning and making friends take time.

Before going to school children may have been at preschool, in child care or at home, but primary school is a very different place. There are more children and, in the first year, your child will be among the youngest and smallest in the school. Other children may seem like confident, knowing strangers. Even children who have been at school a year or two look like 'big kids' to a five-year-old. The newcomers need help from parents and teachers to ensure that their first year is an enjoyable and rewarding experience that sets the scene for future successful schooling.

The first year at school is often a new step for you as a parent, especially if this is your first or last child starting school. You might not have been into a school for quite a while. Education may have changed a lot since your own school experience, so it's wise to get to know the teacher and some other parents and to find out what they do in schools nowadays. Try to put any unhappy memories you have of school behind you because parents and school have to work well together to give your child the best start.

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Children with special needs

Schools across Australia operate under different policies about educational provision for children with special needs, so you may need to check with the district or central office of the Department of Education before selecting a school for your child.

Children who have special and/or additional needs will require particular support to enable them to fully participate in the school experience. Parents of a child who has a disability, impairment or learning delay should contact the school they have chosen well before the start of the school year. This will enable everyone concerned to prepare appropriate materials and to plan, as necessary, for the child's smooth inclusion in the learning program. For example, you may need to ensure that there is wheelchair access to toilets, classrooms and other facilities; your child may require a Braille reader if they have a vision impairment; if their first language isn't English, they might be entitled to language teaching and interpreter services; or your child might be gifted and benefit from extension and enrichment activities. Some children who have different needs find transitions such as those from home to school difficult and they require sensitive support from all of the adults involved, in order to thrive in the new environment.

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Some parents have found it helpful to explain to the class about a child's disability or difference. This helps the other children to understand and act sensitively. Talk with the school and the child's teacher about whether they think it's a good idea and whether you or they will meet the class and answer questions. Some parents have also prepared a little 'biography' of the child who is different, to give to other parents who ask questions.



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Parents provide a safe base

Your child's relationship with you will be more important than ever as they begin this big, new 'adventure'. Parents are the safe base from which children can move out to explore the world, to learn and grow and become socially confident, responsible young people.

Your child will want to share with you their new friendships and things they have learnt. At times, they will also need your understanding and comfort—it's like that for all of us throughout life. We want to tell the people we are close to about the exciting and good things that happen, and we depend on them to listen and reassure us when something goes wrong. Children are the same as adults in this. Having a safe place to come back to, where people understand and support them, gives children the confidence to try new things and the courage to have another go if they don't at first succeed.

Supporting independence

We want our children to grow into confident people who can do things for themselves. It's going to be essential for a happy and fulfilling life. At school, often for the first time, children are expected to be independent in new ways; to look after their clothes and belongings, to follow instructions and to make decisions:

- *'How much of my lunch will I eat at little lunch and how much should I keep for later?'*
- *'Which of these books, games, puzzles or activities will I choose?'*
- *'What do I do if my best friend is away?'*



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However, we can't expect children to have the skills and confidence to be independent straightaway. As with other changes, we need to prepare children for what will happen. We can talk to them about what to expect at school and draw parallels with going to preschool, child care or grandma's; we can give them practice at making choices and decisions at home. Packing and unpacking their school bag (usually a backpack), for example, lets children practise some of the skills they'll need at school.

Parents also support children in feeling happy and confident at school by taking steps such as:

- Make sure the clothes that are worn to school are easy to put on and take off and that lunches and snacks are easy to unwrap.
- Use shoes with Velcro fasteners until your child can manage more complicated fastenings—learning to tie shoelaces is, in fact, a high-level cognitive skill!
- Label *everything*—including shoes and socks—for the first weeks. It's amazing how everyone's clothes look the same when children have changed for games, or taken socks off when it became hot.
- Put an extra pair of undies and socks in the bottom of the bag; accidents do happen and it reassures children to know they have 'back-up supplies' of *their own* things.
- Expect that children may be tired in the first weeks at school, even if they have been used to care situations. Provide a cuddle, a drink and some quiet time when they first arrive home.
- Make sure they have sufficient sleep—add an afternoon nap at weekends if your child seems overtired.
- Ask about their school day, but expect that you might get a shrug, or an off-hand reply; learn to ask questions that require some elaboration, such as: *'What was your favourite thing about school today?'*, *'Tell me about your drawing?'*
- If your child has special needs, keep in touch with the teacher and the networks of advisory services to access resources to help the child operate as independently as possible.

Teachers in the early years are very sensitive to young children and their needs and will offer help and guidance. However, the more everyday, safe tasks children can manage for themselves, the more they'll feel in control.

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