

Dr Goh Chee Leong, Board of Governors, HELP International School

Entering the formal education setting for the first time can be a scary and unnerving experience for a young child, whether it be primary school, or kindergarten or pre-school. For children used to being under the care of their parents and relatives, having to come under the authority of a stranger in a new environment full of other children requires many social and psychological adjustments.

Of course as parents we realize that in the long term most children will adjust to school and once they've gotten used to the do's and don'ts, once they've made friends and once they've figured out how not to get on the "wrong side" of the teachers, life in school becomes "manageable" if not fun.

Parents play a very important role in helping the child make this adjustment and the following are some practical ideas on what we can do to help:

1. Visit the school ahead of time

If possible take the child to visit the school compound and even the actual classroom they will be in. I know not all schools allow this, but if the school does, parents should take full advantage of this opportunity to "orientate the child" to his/her new surroundings.

This visit helps take away some fear and anxiety by "demystifying" the place and making it less unknown and frightening. The tour can include important places the child will have to use, like the toilets, the canteen, the library, the play areas, and the pick-up location. A lot of the anxiety from the child comes from the fact that they don't know how to operate in this new environment, so showing the child where everything is reduces fear.

This trip can also increase the level of excitement of the child. Of course, it is important that parents help create this excitement, which is a good antidote to fear, by talking about all the fun and exciting things they will be able to do in this new exciting place.

2. Get yourself and your child used to school-day routines

School involves a lifestyle change, to both children and parents, for example, getting up early in the morning, which means sleeping earlier the night before. There are certain things that need to be done on a school night, like packing the school bag, preparing the uniform, getting the shoes and socks ready. There are certain things that need to be done on a school morning after you wake up, like having a quick breakfast, learning how to put on the uniform.

I suggest, parents and children have one week of practice runs before the first day of school arrives. You can even have a drive run to the school one time to ensure that the traffic route is worked out. I can tell you that this is as important for the parent as it is for the child. Most parents are stressed out of their minds getting used to the school day routine, and this stress and anxiety is passed on to the child.

Some families I now even start waking their child up early 3-4 weeks before the school term starts, just to get the child used to the sleeping and waking cycle.

3. Dealing with separation anxiety

It is natural and normal for a child to be anxious the first time they are apart from their parents and caregivers for a significant amount of time. Therefore, this is usually a problem more with pre-schoolers who are going to day-care or kindergarten for the first time. More often than not by the time the child attends primary one, this is no longer an issue, but could still be for the minority.

Here are some tips to deal specifically with separation anxiety:

- a. Get the child used to being in the care of others for short periods of time. Having to stay with a total stranger for 3 hours may be a big first step for a child, but staying with relatives for 1 hour, or staying at a friend's family's house for 2 hours may be manageable since they are having fun plus being with someone they know.

So if possible, in the months and weeks leading up to their first day of school, get them gradually used to being apart from you for shorter periods of time. This helps them get used to your absence, as well as reinforces the trust that even though you are not there for awhile, you will always come back and get them.

- b. Mentally prepare them for the separation. It's important that the first day of school doesn't come as a huge big shock and surprise. At least a month before, parents should start talking to their children about the whole process; along the lines of, "we are going to take you to school, we will

walk you to the class, but after that we will need to leave you with the teacher, who will look after you, and then we will come back later and pick you up.”

The child will probably be upset the first time you tell them this, and this is natural, but an important part of teaching them how to emotionally deal with fear and building resilience to potentially frightening experiences.

- c. To stay or to leave? I know this is the big dilemma for most parents on the first week. Some parents believe in a clean, quick “cut”, meaning, they don’t stay on in school after the child has been dropped, so the child has to quickly face the fact that the parent is not around, waiting somewhere in the school compound for them. This probably is the best way to go, it’s like pulling a band-aid (plaster) from a wound; better to do it fast, rather than to draw it out over a long period of time.
4. Involve your child in buying all the new school stuff
It’s important as a general principle to inject enthusiasm and excitement into the whole “new school” experience. One of the ways to do this is to let your child have a direct role in buying all their new school equipment like the bag, lunchbox, pencil box, school shoes, pencils, pens, rubbers, rulers, etc etc. Most children will enjoy this exercise, and it can create a sense of positive anticipation looking ahead to the first day of school when they will get to use these new things for the first time.
5. Allow them to share their fears and anxieties
In spite of all you do, it is still normal for children to feel some anxiety when they first start school. On occasions, your child will share and express their fears and worries with you, both before school starts, and also after school has begun.
It is important not to brush away these feelings. Don’t discount them or belittle them or tell them to just forget about them.
This is an ideal opportunity to help them develop their EQ (emotional intelligence) by acknowledging, accepting and managing their feelings. So, do take time to just listen to them without judgment, just as you would your husband or wife when they share something with you.
If they are very upset and start crying, hold them close and let them cry for awhile. It is a natural human emotion and does not reflect weakness.
After they are done sharing and expressing their fear, take time to address their fears and worries in a practical way. For example, if they talk about how they are afraid of their teachers, you can give them advice on how to avoid being scolded by the teacher, and perhaps share how you yourself were first scared of the teachers in school when you were young but got used to them over time.

In closing, the start of school, like every transition period, will bring some stress to the family as it involves adjustment, but there is a lot we can do as parents to minimize the stress to both the child and to ourselves. In the end, let’s not forget, education is a wonderful thing. There are millions of families in the world who have no access to education and would give anything to be able to send their children to school. So let’s be thankful and do what we can to excite our children about the many learning opportunities school will bring.

This article on education and parenting ideas have been published in the Parenthood magazine between 2008 - 2010