Top tips for *starting school*

The next few months are the perfect time to focus on helping your child feel happy and confident about starting school. There are lots of easy things you can do now.

To help you get started, here are some top tips from the Parentkind team, our PTA members and Facebook community of mums and dads.



Shop for the essentials

The school will probably give you a list of everything your child needs, but it might not all be essential right from the start, so ask other parents what can wait until later. Children come home covered in everything – mud, lunch, paint, playdough – you name it. So if you don't want to be washing every night, it's a good idea to have plenty of uniform. Ask whether the PTA runs pre-loved uniform sales – particularly for school logo items, they're a great way to support the school and save money. And to help get your child excited about school, let them help choose anything that isn't school specific, like a skirt, shorts, wellies or their PE bag.



Get yourself organised

There's a surprising amount of admin to deal with once your child starts school. Letters and forms come home every week and it's in your child's interests that you are on top of things – you don't want your child to be the only one in uniform on an own clothes day! Read the newsletters, familiarise yourself with the school website and note dates on your calendar. Remember to share information with everyone involved in your child's care.



Develop independence

Though Early Years staff are happy to help with shoes, PE changes, cutlery etc., the effort you put in to preparing your child for school life by encouraging independence won't go unnoticed. Encourage your little one to practise getting dressed and undressed, and make things easier for them – think Velcro shoe straps and elasticated waist bands!

Avoid fear of the unknown

There are lots of ways you can get your child used to the idea of school – start by borrowing a few books about going to school from your local library and read them often. Treat your child to a sticker or activity book about starting school, play 'school' with their teddies, and let them wear their new uniform around the house – if there's anything itchy or annoying you can deal with it before the big day.

Accept that they're going to be tired

Even children who are used to nursery or pre-school will be tired after school, so get into a routine of early bed times and wake ups well in advance and prepare yourself for meltdowns! After a day of listening, playing and learning, there can be an outpouring of emotions once your child's back home. They'll be hungry too, so bring a healthy snack at pick up time for a quick energy boost.





Label it

If it is not permanently attached to your child, put their name on it! Labels help them identify their own clothes, and also help staff deal with piles of identical jumpers and bookbags. If your child isn't reading yet, use labels with little pictures next to their name. There are lots of quick and effective alternatives to sew-in nametapes, including stamps, stick in labels, or the old marker pen on the label trick.

Listen up

"Nothing" and "I can't remember" are standard answers to questions about your child's day. If you're used to detailed nursery handovers, this lack of information can come as a bit of a shock. Don't be discouraged: wait a little and the stories will come out, usually at an odd time – when they're in the bath or on the toilet! Try asking specific questions like "who did you play with at break?" or "what made you laugh today?"



Familiarise & socialise

Familiarise your child with their school before they start. Go along to the summer fair so they start to feel like it's 'their school'. Attend the welcome events, get to know other parents and if possible arrange a few playdates so your child sees a few familiar faces on their first day. Do a dry run of your journey to school, just as if it is the big day itself.



Be positive and calm

Your child may feel anxious if they see that you are worried. Accept that, just like them, you will learn as you go. If you have concerns, talk to their teacher, school office, or head teacher; they are there to help. On the first day don't stay around at drop off; it's generally best to leave them to it and have a box of tissues ready at home – just in case!

Get involved in school life

Volunteering for the PTA, helping in class, or joining a Parent Council are all great ways to be involved with the school and take part in your child's school life. Attend meetings and get-togethers and you will soon get to know other parents who understand the school well.



Lunches

Children don't get a lot of time to eat lunch, and usually they don't want to sit down for too long, so make sure packed lunch quantities are manageable. If your child will be having a hot dinner (all Reception children in England are entitled to a free school lunch), look at the menu together in advance to make choosing less daunting. Try out similar meals at home so they get used to the food on offer, but don't underestimate peer power – children will often give new things a go at school.

It's not a race

Try and dodge playground discussions about whose child can already read or count – your child will develop at their own pace. The qualities that matter most in Reception age children are things like curiosity, independence, imagination, and enjoying playing and sharing with other children.