

Getting ready

Parent and carer booklet 2



Acknowledgement

KidsMatter Australian Mental Health Transition to School: Parent Initiative has been developed by the Australian Psychological Society with funding from the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing. It builds on the KidsMatter Australian Primary Schools Mental Health Initiative which has been developed in collaboration with beyondblue: the national depression initiative, the Australian Psychological Society, Principals Australia and, with funding from, the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing and beyondblue: the national depression initiative.

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Understanding your child's feelings and behaviours

Transition and getting ready for school involves changes that can bring a range of feelings and behaviours for children. It is normal for children to experience a number of different emotions and each child will have their own way of coping with these changes.

During this time your child may experience lots of strong emotions, sometimes conflicting ones like excitement and nervousness as they think about leaving their current setting and moving to primary school. Some of the emotions your child may experience include:

- **Sadness/anger** caused by a sense of loss at leaving the safety of their current setting. Letting go of strong relationships and familiar routines.
- **Excitement** about going to 'big school' and learning new things.
- **Anticipation** or wondering what it will be like, if the teacher will "be nice".
- **Nervousness** at wondering who will help if needed, what will the other boys and girls be like?
- **Fear/anxiety** that some things might be "too hard".

Understanding and helping your child to handle the feelings associated with the transition to school will lessen the stress they may experience, and can provide them with positive ways to deal with different transitions and changes throughout their life.

Using language to describe and label emotions will help children to develop self-awareness skills. This takes time and practice.



Let your child know that it is okay to be sad, excited, scared or maybe all of these things at once



What are some behaviours you might see from your child during the transition to primary school?

Children at this age may find it difficult to tell us with words how they feel; instead they may show us through their behaviour. Parents and carers may notice changes in children's usual behaviour during the transition to school.

During this time children may display or display more often the following behaviours:

- **Clinging behaviour** e.g., shyness, not wanting to separate.
- **Restlessness** e.g., difficulty settling at activities, easily distracted, being silly.
- **Withdrawing** e.g., not participating in usual activities.
- **Being anxious** e.g., fidgety, stomach aches, comfort habits (nail biting, hair twirling).
- **Refusing to comply** eg., not wanting to follow rule and routines.
- **Increase in crying and tantrums** eg., more often or in more places.
- **Changes in eating habits** e.g., loss of appetite, becomes fussy with food, overeating.
- **Sleep difficulties** e.g., trouble falling or staying asleep or may begin to have nightmares.
- **Regression to younger behaviours** e.g., bedwetting, thumb sucking.
- **Aggressive behaviours** e.g., hitting, kicking, shouting.

What might your child's behaviours be communicating?

The behaviours described above can be seen as different ways of children trying to cope with challenging situations. They are very typical and common for children within this age group. Most children will display one or more of these during the transition period and beyond.

As it may be difficult for children to put how they are feeling into words, it is often up to parents and carers to try and work out what may be underlying the behaviour. One way to do this is by thinking of the behaviour as the "tip of the iceberg". If we look underneath the surface, the emotions are often a response to something that has happened. These can be harder to identify than behaviours but it can be helpful to think about the emotion in order to understand the child's behaviour and how to best respond.



Suggestions for understanding and responding to the emotions and feelings underlying your child's behaviour

'Being there' emotionally

During the transition period, children usually need extra nurturing, comfort and understanding from their parents and carers to help them feel secure and confident. 'Being there' means being open and receptive to how children are feeling as well as providing comfort and attention when needed. When possible, try to make extra time available when you don't have other things to concentrate on. This way you can spend some special time with your child. It will give them an opportunity to share their feelings and expectations with you.

Helping your child to recognise, label and express their feelings and emotions

As your child gets older, labeling their feelings is one of the first steps in helping them understand and manage them. Children who know and manage their feelings are better able to recognise the feelings of others and to manage relationships.

Some ideas

Name and label your own emotions:

- "I'm so **excited** to go to the park with you."
- "I feel a bit **nervous** when I meet new people".

Using feeling words when you talk with your child about everyday situations will help them to learn the language of emotions. It will become their way of expressing themselves if the language is used consistently.

Invite your child to describe their own feelings:

- "I feel a bit **disappointed** that the trip has been cancelled. How about you?"; "How did you feel when...?"

Starting conversations

During times of change, try to find time and space to allow your child the opportunity to talk about their thoughts and experiences. This can help you to gauge how they are feeling. You might share a story about a time when you felt a similar way about a change and how you handled it. Children need to know that they are not alone and that many people have similar experiences – even adults.

Other suggestions can be found in KidsMatter Transition to School: Parent Initiative 'Booklet 1 Setting the Scene' in the section 'Talking with your child'.

Using pretend play

Children also express their thoughts and emotions through their everyday play. The use of toys, dolls or animal figures can help with imaginative play and allow your child to act out a situation that they may be experiencing. As a parent or carer you can assist them in working through the situation by discussing and developing possible solutions. This can help your child in their everyday life.

See www.kidsmatter.edu.au/transition/forfamilies for the following KidsMatter Primary information sheet:

- Why feelings are important



Active listening

Active listening is a practical way you can help your child express how they are feeling, particularly when you notice changes in their behavior. It involves naming the feeling and the situation or event that led to it. Importantly, it can also allow your child to feel that you understand what they are going through.

Picking the right time is important for active listening. If your child is very distressed or says they don't want to talk, 'being there' (sitting with them, cuddling them or being nearby) until they are less upset, or saying you are ready to talk when they are, is likely to be more helpful.

Sometimes children may not be able to talk about how they are feeling and may need your help to name the emotion. With the use of active listening you can help by suggesting the name of the feeling for them. For example: "It sounds like you felt upset when Dad didn't ask what you wanted for lunch."

Active listening can be useful not only during transition, but in any situation where your child is experiencing strong emotions.



Tips to get you started

Stop and try to give your child your full attention (i.e. stop whatever you are doing) as this can help you to be fully attentive and shows your child that they are important.

Look at your child and, if possible, getting down to their level to show them that you are listening. This may help your child to open up. You might also move somewhere quiet where you can both sit and relax together (e.g., on the couch).

Listen carefully to what is said without interrupting – it is easy for children to lose track of what they want to say if they are interrupted. Show your child you are listening by giving them eye contact and nodding where appropriate.

Reflect the feeling. Use the opportunity to gently describe what you think your child is feeling and why. Be like a mirror – reflect or describe the emotion you think your child is feeling and why. This allows you to check if you have understood how your child is feeling – he or she can usually tell you if you are right or wrong.

An example of active listening

Mum: "It seems like you are feeling sad about something – would you like to tell me about it?"

Salima: "Mrs Kay won't be at school."

Mum: "You are feeling sad because you will miss Mrs Kay when you go to school."

Some examples to start conversations:

You seem to be feeling about

Seems like you feel with

You sound at

You seem by



Problem solving

Developing the ability to make decisions and solve problems can help your child to cope with the challenges that may arise for them at school from time to time. You can help your child to practise these skills by talking through smaller problems that come up (or that might arise) and ideas about what to do, for example, if they cannot find their school bag or find a friend in the playground after returning from the toilets. This will give your child the confidence to deal with these problems if they occur and assist with their transition to school. It is not expected that children at this age can sort out every issue on their own, but encouraging them to take part in problem solving with you will help your child to develop this skill.

One strategy that can be used to help your child develop problem solving skills is the **'Three Finger Strategy'**.

The first step is to help your child to come up with "three things we can do" to solve the problem and to mark these by holding up a finger for each. The final step is to assist your child to pick the solution they think is best.

This strategy can be useful for young children because it works by using lots of ways to remember:

- **Seeing** three fingers being held up to look at;
- **Hearing** and speaking when numbering each solution off on each finger; and
- **Feeling** by touching each finger as they count and say potential solutions.

Using these steps will help your child to remember how to go about using the strategy when they may need it.

See www.kidsmatter.edu.au/transition/forfamilies for the following KidsMatter Primary information sheet:

- Helping kids to choose wisely

Practising the problem solving strategy with your child

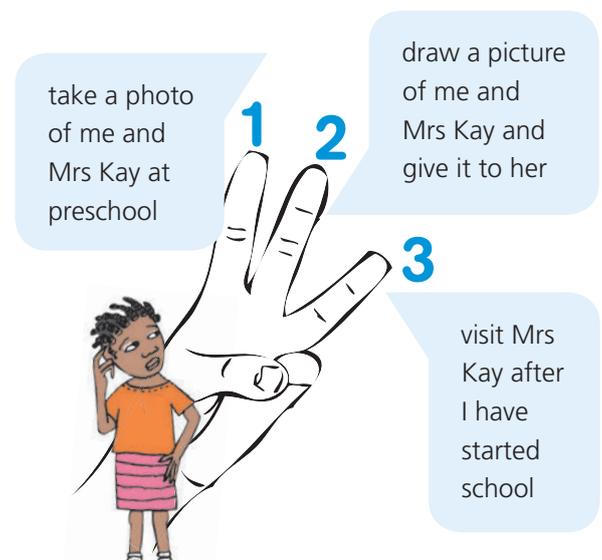
Using this technique allows your child to visualise that there is more than one solution to a problem.

Below is an example of a problem that may arise for your child:

Your child says: "I am sad because I will miss Mrs Kay (preschool teacher)."

You say: "Let's see if we can think of 3 things we could do to help with this."

You hold up three fingers pointing to and touching one at a time as you both come up with each of the following solutions:



Keep in mind

Your child might find this technique difficult at first and will need lots of opportunities to practise it. Begin slowly by suggesting ideas if your child cannot think of any. As they become more practised, you could move from this to prompting them to suggest ideas of their own. It can be helpful to start with simpler problems as this will allow your child to develop a sense of confidence in their ability to think of ideas when they are faced with a challenging situation.



Prepare, Plan, Practise

Preparation, Planning and Practise are important in helping your child and family to make a successful transition to primary school.

Prepare

Thinking about what the move will involve for your child and family.

Plan

Incorporating your thoughts and information into a plan of action that will work for you and your family.

Practise

Using your plan to take your child and family through the various routines that will be involved in going to school.

Prepare

The preparation time in the lead up to starting school can lay the foundations for a positive transition. While it is impossible to think of and plan for everything, trying to anticipate the challenges your child may encounter and using this to plan ahead can help in lessening some of their and your nervousness. It can also create a feeling of security that they can manage the change.

Things to think about and reflect upon could include:

- the changes that will take place as your child moves from their present setting to primary school. Think about what will be different.
- understanding how your child has managed and adapted to change in the past and what this may mean for making the transition from their present setting to school.
- recognising that the change will bring a range of emotions and thinking about how you can support your child.
- the skills your child already has that can help them to manage new situations. Identify what works well for your child and family.

Starting to collect information about the school

To start the preparation phase it is helpful to collect as much information as you can about your child's new school. You will then be able to plan to familiarise them and your family with what to expect.

You could find out:

- what the physical space of the school is like. Where are the classrooms, toilets, drinking taps, office, aftercare area, play equipment?
- what will a school day look like? How is it organised?
- what are children expected to bring to school each day?
- what time school starts and finishes, when the breaks will be and how long will they be for?
- how will communication between the school and home happen?
- what role can you play in your child's schooling?



Plan

Having considered what the transition to school may involve for your child and family you can now develop a plan. Your plan may include:

- ideas about how you will support your child to manage their feelings, practise their skills, and feel confident.
- how you can minimise stress and tiredness for your child.
- how you will respond to your child in times when they may display nervousness or anxious behaviours.

Each family's plan will be different. It is important to ensure that your plan caters for the needs of your child and family and includes the routines and other ideas that you already know work well.

Careful planning will allow you to make the unfamiliar environment of school feel as familiar as possible and the new routines predictable and manageable.

Your plan could include:

Establishing school day routines

Establishing and maintaining routines helps children feel safe in times of change. They provide a sense of predictability and security for your child. You may want your plan to incorporate some new school routines into the routines that are already working well in your family. If you know your child takes a long time to get ready in the morning, rather than having to hurry them along to arrive at school on time, schedule in extra time so everyone will feel more relaxed getting to school.

Creating opportunities for your child to socialise with other children who will be attending the same school

Arranging opportunities for your child to play with other children who will be starting at the same school can help your child to feel positive about coping with their new experiences and surroundings. Seeing familiar faces will help them feel confident and more relaxed on their first day and weeks of school.

Adapting expectations and limiting after school activity

Going to school will be a busy, stimulating and tiring time for your child. Understanding that this can be an emotional time and adjusting your expectations can help you support your child. By limiting after school activities until they have adjusted to the changes, you will give your child the time they may need to revive and relax.

Creating a sense of security for your child

Many children separate comfortably from their parents and carers. For some however, this separation can be associated with feelings of nervousness and fear. Even for children who separate confidently in many situations, the initial days and weeks of school can present challenges. One suggestion is to plan to arrive a little bit earlier in the morning so that your child is not rushed and has enough time to play with friends and feel comfortable before class starts. If you have concerns about your child separating from you, you could also talk to your child's teacher to agree on a plan for helping them feel more secure and settled.

See www.kidsmatter.edu.au/transition/forfamilies for the following KidsMatter Transition to School: Parent Initiative information sheet for further ideas.



Practise

Opportunities to visit the school, become familiar with the physical environment and practise some of the new routines will give your child some sense of what going to school will be like. When the time comes they will be able to approach the first day and the weeks and months that follow with confidence. Some things that can be helpful to practise are:

- **travelling to and from school:**
Having a few practice trips to the school.
- **being familiar with the school environment:**
Visit the school at weekends and practise using the climbing equipment, using the drinking taps and playing in the school grounds.
- **school day routines:**
Practising some of your school day routines, such as getting up earlier in the morning or putting on the school uniform, will help your child adjust more easily to the changes that going to school will bring.



The first day

To help ensure that the first day of school goes smoothly, make sure your child's school uniform and school bag are ready the day before, and that you and your child have a relaxing and happy day. Make sure you get up early enough to pack your child's school bag, eat breakfast, get dressed and arrive at school on time. If you want to take photos, have your camera ready with batteries that work!

What you might expect after the first week of commencing school

After the excitement of starting school, you may find your child is quite tired and may also get grumpy. Many parents and carers are surprised at how tired their child is after starting school, even if they are used to long hours at their previous setting.

- Children are often hungry at the end of a school day and need to be re-energised. Having a small snack ready for them enables them to relax and refuel.
- As they will be using all their energy to concentrate at school, they may arrive home exhausted. Give them some down time and try not to overwhelm them with too many questions about their school day.
- Take the time to notice their mood. Are they over-reacting to small incidents and does it take a long time to get them to sleep? These could be signs of over-tiredness or stress. Taking a bath before bedtime may assist with relaxation.
- Making sure your child gets enough quality sleep can help their transition.



Looking after yourself

Transition to school can also be a stressful time for parents and carers. Monitoring how you feel and maybe your own sense of loss as your child starts school and enters another phase of independence is important, as your reactions may impact on your child's sense of security. Think about what things work for you when you are feeling this way and what supports are available. Engaging in activities you enjoy can help you to manage your own and your child's emotions around starting school.

Plan how you will use your time after dropping your child at school for the first day or week so that you feel supported. Other parents and carers whose children are starting at your school can often be a good source of support. Organising to meet for a chat or a relaxing walk is a good way to continue to build connections with the other parents and carers in your school.

Remember

As this can be seen as one of your child's major milestones, don't forget to celebrate the event.

You can do something special as a family, like having a special meal the weekend before or after they start school. Plan something nice after the first day, like going for an ice-cream or cake, or present them with a small memento.





TRANSITION TO SCHOOL: PARENT INITIATIVE

KidsMatter Primary information resources

The KidsMatter Primary information resources, designed for parents, carers and teachers, contain information on specific topics that you may also find useful for supporting your child during the transition to primary school. These can be found at: www.kidsmatter.edu.au/resources/information-resources/

The KidsMatter Primary information sheets that relate to this Booklet, and provide further useful information, include:

- Making sense of children's emotions
- Why feelings are important
- How come they're so different
- Helping kids to choose wisely

Further information about other resources for supporting children during the transition to school can be found in the KidsMatter Transition to School: Parent Initiative information sheet: 'Other resources on transition to school for families'.

This resource is part of the KidsMatter Transition to School: Parent Initiative.

The team at KidsMatter welcomes your feedback at: www.kidsmatter.edu.au/transition



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