

Tips for a Less Stressful Start to Preschool

Making the transition to school easier for first-time learners starts with a few strategies that account for their emotions and uncertainty.

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Every new school year, children, teachers, and parents struggle through a swirl of emotions that can undermine a joyful beginning. As teachers, we need to successfully handle those feelings, which may include expectations, anxiety, and even some fear about the demands of the new school year.

In my experience as an early-years and preschool teacher, I've found some strategies that may help these first days and weeks to flow more serenely.

SEPARATION ANXIETY

There are many approaches to handling the parent-child separation process during the first days of school. It's a good idea to meet with parents and guardians individually and as a group, if possible, before school starts to explain and agree on how to help the children adapt to school.

One way to help with the transition is to allow parents to stay with their children for a period of time during the first few days or so (but not for more than two weeks, unless there's a specific need), if the parents or caregivers want to and are able to, and if the child wants them to stay. Seeing their parents or caregivers relaxed, confident, and happy to be at school may help reduce the child's anxiety; they're more likely to feel that this new context isn't threatening and the teacher is someone they can trust and rely on.

As with every aspect regarding children's development, allowing parents to stay should be based on the individual child and, of course, the parents and their work and personal demands. The teacher should be sure to establish the boundaries of parents' involvement with their children when they meet with parents before school begins, such as who will lead the activities in the class and who will comfort the child if there's a situation with a peer.

For example, a parent might want to interfere if they see that their child isn't participating and suggest a different task, or the parent may intervene with interactions between their child and another student. Being clear beforehand that the teacher is in charge is essential.

TIME MANAGEMENT AND ROUTINES

Time shouldn't fly in preschool. The little ones have to understand what's going on and how they're expected to interact in the new context with their peers. They also need to understand the routines in the classroom and how to use the materials. Time wisely used, avoiding haste, is a great ally. It's important to allow learners to move around freely, discover the new context, and exchange with their peers at regular intervals set aside in the schedule.

Plan activities that promote interaction with other members of the school staff, and enable the children to get to know the other rooms and the playground. Designing routines can help learners understand and adapt to the day-to-day at school. Routines are big anxiety neutralizers. For example, the teacher can explain where the restrooms are and walk with the children from the classroom to the restrooms, and then they can ask the children to count their steps there and back, walking in pairs while the others wait for their turn.

Another helpful routine for the children is setting the table for snacks. While the children are having snacks, the teacher can share about the different cultural backgrounds behind the variety of snacks the children have brought to school and also discuss table manners and how to use the tableware and napkins.

When children know what to expect during their school day, they feel more relaxed, and as a result, they're in a better mood to enjoy the learning process and interact with their peers. Establishing a regular daily structure is key. Here are some examples:

- A gathering and free play period at the beginning of the school day, which may include cleaning up and putting back toys and materials in the proper place afterward;
- Circle time, to share news from different learners or comments about something that took place at home, or to review songs and stories shared earlier in the week;
- Recess (more free play), possibly with a snack, which may include setting the table and cleaning up afterward;
- Active learning time, which may include content areas such as music, PE, motor skills development, dance, arts, math, or writing; and

- Gathering to share feelings, impressions, discoveries after the active learning process.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FREE PLAY

As [Sir Ken Robinson](#) said, “Play has deeply important roles in the development of intellectual skills, in social skills, in developing empathy, in stretching our imaginations and exploring our creativity.” Allowing learners to play freely as much as possible will help strengthen the cohesion of the group and each learner’s sense of belonging faster and in a sustainable manner. In addition, children process the complexity of the world by themselves through play, and they do this with enormous pleasure and strong motivation.

When possible, allowing children to play and even develop their active learning activities in the open air, in contact with nature, will help lower anxiety and facilitate social interaction.

SHARING

This might be a bit of a challenge for some children. When it comes to sharing materials, toys, a book, even friends, and the attention of the teacher, some children may be very reluctant. It’s a good idea to devote time to working with the children on taking turns listening and speaking. Playing a game in the playground that requires that they take turns is one way to do this; waiting is quite difficult for some children.

At the same time, teachers may discover leaders among the children, who organize what to play and decide who participates and how. In this case, it’s important to ensure that all children have the chance to participate in different play situations and eventually lead their peers too. Sharing roles in play deserves the teacher’s attention.

FLEXIBLE LESSONS

Planning thoroughly for the first days of school, as well as the following days, is crucial. More than ever, however, the teacher needs to have a flexible attitude about the delivery of the lessons. In these first days, teachers get to know the children and may find that there are some learners who will make different contributions—they might bring toys from home to show and share with their peers or share stories about their family and family members.

Children love sharing facts and emotions from experiences they had outside of school, so quite often they’ll talk about how, for example, they made muffins with their

grandmother the previous afternoon. The teacher might want to develop a discussion about baking and the roles of different ingredients and utensils. Or maybe the children will comment on a story they read at home or a visit they had to a special place—a farm, a museum, a park, the beach, etc. Any of these topics can turn into a lesson or at least a nice interactive moment if given the necessary time and interest.

Teachers need to be open to changing or adapting their plan to what the learners have brought to the class, welcoming the unexpected and enjoying the learners' contributions. Sometimes it might be possible to include what a child has brought to the classroom in the lesson plan, but other times it might be necessary to leave the plan aside and work on the content or topic that the children have brought. When teachers make these decisions, they're showing respect for the learners and their contributions, and they're showing a real commitment to teaching using a learner-centered approach.

It's in the best interest of teachers, families, and children to have a successful school year. I hope these tips will ensure that the first school days create the framework for inspiring teaching and learning.