

Checklist: Is my child ready for school?

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Starting school is a big step for your toddler. Practical Parenting Magazine explains how to tell when they're ready and smooth the transition



One minute he's learning to walk, the next you're buying him that way-too-big school uniform in the smallest size possible. Then you panic when you realise he can't even write his name, let alone tie his laces. But before you become anxious about your preschooler's ability to read, write or count to 20 by the time he walks into class, try to get things into perspective.

The reality is many normal children will begin school not reading and will proceed quite happily and successfully to do so when ready. Because kids develop at different rates in different areas, they show splintered skills at this age, and one of the most important lessons you need to learn is that kids' development is not a competition. Little Timmy next door might well be reciting Shakespeare, but chances are he's not so proficient at doing up buttons.

School readiness is about being socially and emotionally prepared, as well as having personal care, language and motor skills. So while being able to read and count is a bonus, they're not necessary. Exposure to books through listening to stories and colouring-in is more important than reading, and craft skills such as cutting, pasting and drawing will stand a child in good stead for writing.

Your child's coping mechanisms

You won't see a child being referred to a psychologist because she can't read at the start of school, but we do see lots of kids who can't share, don't cooperate or haven't learnt to adapt to change. If you're not sure your child is up to speed with her social skills, get together with her preschool teacher to work out a simple plan to help her.

You can practise these skills every day in easy ways. He needs to develop emotional independence in social situations, so encourage him to ask for

what he needs on his own when you are with other people, and rather than rescuing him every time anything goes wrong, let him find his own way.

Playing with other kids she doesn't know in the park or at the beach over summer is great preparation. She'll be exposed to new people and the need to take turns and negotiate. If you notice she's not coping, go home and practise the social and emotional skills she needs help with, then return to the park to practise them more in a social setting.

Preparing your child

Make sure your child is also well practised at pulling his pants up and down by himself, wiping his own bottom and washing his hands. I meet the occasional mum who thinks teachers will help with these. They're wonderful, caring souls, but teachers have a lot of other important work!

This is also the time to practise wiping noses, buttoning shirts, doing up shorts and skirts, and getting shoes on. So if you're always picking up after your preschooler because it's easier that way, change your approach – for his sake. Encouraging independence is the name of the game, so have him practise putting things in and out of a backpack, opening and closing lunch boxes and bottles, and tidying away belongings.

What not to do

Resist the temptation to over-hype big school. It's much better to play it down and give your child confidence that she will cope. This is much easier if she has been to some form of childcare or preschool, because you can paint big school as just a small step up.

Neither is it a good idea to warn young kids that they won't cope at school if they don't know how to do a particular task. Keep the mood positive.

The three Ps

Preparation, practice and positives are the three Ps to keep in mind when getting your child ready to start school. Familiarise him with the physical space by visiting while the school is quiet

or watching pupils play at lunchtime. Let him hear the bell and watch the kids go into class. Go to school orientation days. Use his preschool teachers to build confidence and skills. Let your preschooler play with a child who's already at school and loves it.

Be careful not to promise too much, though. I've heard of kids who arrive home distressed after day one because they were promised they'd learn to read at school and it didn't happen!

You may be feeling sad or emotional on the day, but try to hide this. Big smiles and lots of confidence are what's needed. Some kids love it, some are confused, some cry, but all soon get over their fears. Let him know how happy you are he is heading for a fun and interesting time, and the step up to big school won't be so big after all.

School readiness checklist

Can your child...

- * listen to stories, learn rhymes, and recognise and name colours?
- * play, share, take turns and adapt to doing things differently?
- * cope with change and deal with challenges?
- * dress himself, pull down and up his pants, wipe his own bottom and wash his hands?
- * converse socially and express her needs?
- * run, jump, catch, balance and dance?
- * cut, paste and use pencils?
- * hold a pencil correctly?
- * recognise numbers and begin counting?

