

Getting Off to a Good Start

Australia a couple of years ago that children are at greatest risk at times of greatest change. That could mean the change from home to preschool, preschool to school, or primary to high school. At these times their security is shaken and they are at their most nervous. If things go wrong from the start then expect their normal fussing to turn into fears or even phobias as minor problems become catastrophes, and molehills turn into mountains overnight.

So, first impressions are very important, particularly for sensitive children. But for any child a new start can be helped or hindered by what we do or don't do.

DON'T

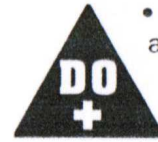
- Don't sabotage their success by threatening that they'll get the cane if they are naughty or that other kids will knock them into shape.
- Don't condemn their first days to failure by sending them off with promises of learning to read and tell the time. Kids who have no idea of time and can't read yet, expect to pick it all up on the first day and become very disappointed if they can't read to Mum when they get home.
- Don't forget to let them practise the things they'll need to know to survive socially. If they haven't had practice at preschool in how to cope with toilet 'voyeurs', how to unwrap their lunches, how to ask for help, how to get their shoes and socks off and on, then we can expect the dreaded 'T-thing' problems (tears, tummy aches, tiredness and testiness).
- Don't add to their anxieties with a mind-boggling list of things to remember. Think of all the 'don't for-

One of the world's leading experts in child development, Urie Bronfenbrenner, said at a seminar in

gets' we pepper them with: to eat their lunch, to remember their bag, to play in their own area, to put their hat on in the playground, to sit in the shade, to make sure their laces are done up, and, most importantly, to go to the toilet as soon as the bell goes! The teachers won't forget so we really don't need to worry.

• Don't rush out and stock up on all the school gear in case you 'miss out'. Wait at least until you've seen other children who go to the school or have talked to a few seasoned parents. (Remember, though, no high-top shoes as they are too hard to put on in a hurry.)

• Don't ask questions when they come home such as, 'How did school go?' That's like asking you 'How did work go?' If we want specifics then we must ask specifics: who they sat next to, whose lunch they ate, what story they had ... If they say they just played then remember that play is a child's best way of learning about life.



• Do get involved from the start as a reading parent, canteen helper, homework helper, 'working bee-er', transport helper, excursion chaperone, or in any way that your time and patience allows. Research clearly shows that kids do better at school if their parents are involved in some way.

• Do make sure they have the same pencils, clothes, and such equipment as the others—and make sure they are ALL NAMED.

• Do try to meet the teacher even briefly in the first few weeks so that your child is not just a homeless face in that squirming, sniffing mass of uncivilised humanity.

• Do expect the kids to be tired and irritable after school for a week or two, or even a term or two. Give them a bit of unwinding time after school, together with time to tell you their worries or fears after you've turned their lights out at night.

• Do help make their day more interesting with a bit of lunch food flair by including the odd cutlet,

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homemade goodies, a club sandwich roll-ups or any other healthy but non-melting favourite. If mornings are chaotic then prepare, wrap and freeze their lunches the night before. That way the goodies are still fresh at lunchtime but too frozen to eat at playtime.

• Do be on the look out for signs of stress:

- headaches
- tears
- tummy aches
- tiredness
- school refusal
- baby talk
- crankiness
- clinginess
- poor sleeping
- poor eating

Most kids will show some of these they try to cope with a brand-new world but if the symptoms continue increase after a week or two then nip it cool, keep them going to school, and arrange to meet the teacher to compare notes and ideas to make things happier.

By far the best advice, however, is that it really doesn't matter what you do or how you do it. If you are enthusiastic about your child and the school then there's every chance that home and school will make a happy and productive partnership. And whatever you do, please take as many photos of your brand-spanking-new kids as they head off on their first day—they will never look the same again!