

Preparing Your Child for Kindergarten

By David Lowenstein, Ph.D

There's no denying it - Kindergarten is a big deal. To your child, this means a new "big kid school," a new teacher, new kids, new routine, and a completely unknown adventure that is probably the biggest event to date in her young life. It's no wonder that the first day of Kindergarten creates a host of anxieties for most kids. Fortunately, there are ways to make starting Kindergarten an exciting event for kids and a smooth transition for the entire family.

Although your child may seem excited for Kindergarten, any big change like this can provoke anxiety and stress. The vast majority of kids are more worried about this big event than they let on. Anxiety shows itself in many forms including: not sleeping, fighting with siblings, forgetfulness, hyperactivity, and regression to earlier behaviors like bedwetting. These behaviors may emerge as early as two weeks before the big day. Be aware that starting Kindergarten may well be the cause. Address your child's concerns and let her know that having these feelings is perfectly normal. Then take steps in advance to lessen her anxieties.

Many of your child's - and your own - anxieties before and during the first weeks of Kindergarten may stem from the fear that she doesn't know things the teacher is discussing or that other kids know. You can reduce her worries by reminding her that the point of Kindergarten is to learn new things. However, there are some activities that you can do with your child to make her more comfortable with the types of lessons she may be learning in the classroom:

- Read to your child each day for 20 minutes. While you are reading, she is learning how to hold a book, that pictures match the text and that print goes left to right.
- Fill your house with several types of reading material like books, magazines and newspapers. Put this reading material at your child's eye level to inspire curiosity.
- Purchase magnetic letters for your refrigerator door so your child can explore learning letters, spelling words and making her own name.
- Write your child's name on special paper so it can be used as a reference when writing her own name. Hang this special piece of paper in a place she can always see.

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- When walking down the street or driving in the car, talk about the things that all of you can see like colors, shapes, or street signs. Talk about what the street signs say and what that means.
- Make up stories together and draw or talk about the sequence of her day in reference to what happened, who she met, what she did. This helps your child in putting words, ideas and pictures together to further explain what is going on in her world.
- Play games that have your child finding numbers or letters in old magazines or newspapers. A yellow marker can be used to highlight or circle the letter or word. For example, "Find all of the 'R's' and circle them. Then count how many you found."
- Count Cheerios, crackers or anything similar as you place them in a bowl or plate.
- Sort M&M's or Skittles by colors, which will help your child with organizing and determining differences and similarities of shapes and colors.
- Find a useful way for your child to learn other children's names. For example, "Mary's name starts with the same letter as Aunt Margaret's name. Can you tell me what letter Mary starts with?"

While helping your child prepare academically for Kindergarten is extremely important, there are still quite a few other types of anxieties - from separation anxiety to worries about the unknown - that should be addressed.

Here are a few ideas that will make this stressful time easier for everyone:

- Most important, calm down! As a parent, your own anxieties about the "Big K" may be showing through. Your child can sense if you are overly nervous. Keep a positive, upbeat, and confident attitude and your child will take cues from you.
- Create a countdown calendar and display it in an area of your home where your child can see it and reach it (like the refrigerator door) and then mark down the days until the first day of school.
- Help your child pick out a special lunch box and/or book bag and include her in placing her name on personal items. This will help your child feel empowered and part of the planning process.

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- Tell your child a story about **your** first day of Kindergarten. If you have other children who have already been to Kindergarten, enlist them to tell their own first day story (as long as it was a good experience!)
- To lessen your child's fears about unknown situations, like getting hurt or needing help in the bathroom, ask her to play a game with you in which she shares the situations she may be worried about. Together, review what she would do in those scenarios.
- At least a few days before school starts, pick out a new outfit that your child can wear to school and tell her how great and grown up she looks.
- Place a photo of your family in your child's school bag and tell her you are always there with her if she gets scared or lonely. Make sure to tell the teacher you've done this so if your child needs to take a peek for reassurance, she can.
- During the summer months leading up to the first day, take your child to the school so that she can see her classroom and become familiar with the bathrooms, lunchroom and playground.
- If possible, make an appointment for your child to meet the teacher before school begins. And if you can, introduce her to the school nurse and the principal so she knows who is also available for help and comfort.
- Take your child out for donuts or something special the morning of the first day of school. It is very important to make this experience a great one.
- Create a routine similar to the school routine several weeks in advance. If necessary, change your child's bedtime to reflect this, lay out clothes the night before, and find a special place to keep her school bag.
- If possible, take time and stay in the classroom for the first half-hour of the class. Help your child get adjusted to the other kids, new surroundings and the teacher. But then leave! Don't prolong your good-byes.
- Before class begins, introduce your child to some of the other classmates to help break the ice.
- After the first day of school, make some special time to discuss your child's day. Take her out to dinner to celebrate a great first day at school. Remind her that there are many more terrific days to come in Kindergarten!

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Like any type of transition, the start of Kindergarten can create a variety of anxieties for kids, whether it's apparent or not. Don't make the mistake of assuming your child is taking it in stride. By planning ahead and implementing some of these ideas and activities, you'll lessen your child's stress and make this big step as smooth as possible.

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