

First year at school

Essential tips for parents and carers



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CHAPTER 1

GETTING READY FOR YOUR CHILD TO START SCHOOL

Starting school is a big step for a young child. Children generally feel excited about 'going to big school' and, as a parent, you will be keen to make sure that starting school is a positive, fun experience for them and for you.



Children, parents and teachers focus on slightly different aspects of starting school.

Children wonder whether they will be able to follow the rules and make friends.

Parents hope their child will be able to separate easily from them and behave well with unfamiliar adults. All parents want the teachers to appreciate that their child is precious and wonderful.

Teachers want children to be able to learn and play with others, manage basic tasks independently and follow directions.

By the time they are getting ready to go to school, your child might have already attended a local playgroup, early years setting or preschool. However, school is different and comes with new challenges. A child starting school will be mixing with a much larger group of children and the movement, size and energy of the playground may feel intimidating. There will be set times for meals, play and lessons, and important facilities like toilets will be in unfamiliar places.

This book aims to help families cross the bridge to school feeling informed and relaxed.



Twelve months before school starts

As a parent, you need to prepare for your child's transition almost a year before formal schooling starts. Applications for government schools usually open from the second term of the year before your child will start school. Non-government schools have a longer timeframe, so you will need to apply much earlier.

Choosing a school for your child

In Australia, children attend the first year of full-time school when they are five years old. However, the exact age when children can start varies from state to state. The first year of school might also have a different name depending on your state or territory. It might be called Prep, Reception, Kindergarten or Pre-primary, for example. So, you can check with your local Department of Education, or visit schools in your area to ask about options for five-year-olds.

The education departments expect children to attend a school close to the family home. If you want your child to attend a school that is located outside your local area, start by talking with the principal of your preferred school about whether there is a vacancy and how to apply for your child to go there. The principal will explain how to tell the Department of Education why you want your child to move out of the home area. If you want your child to attend a Catholic or independent school, contact the individual school or the local Catholic Education Office.

Choose the right school for your child by visiting schools and checking each school's website. Read about the school's approach to children, families and teaching. Think about how the school's policies and learning programs relate to your own values and goals for your child.

Consider the following when choosing a school for your child:

If your child can go to a school with other children they already know, they will feel more confident, as friendships can continue.

Parents who already have children at the school you are considering can be a valuable resource. Talk to them about how the school's values, policies and programs operate in everyday practice. If those parents have strong positive or negative feelings about the school, try to find out why, but remember that their beliefs and priorities might be different from yours, so only use their opinions as a guide.

A school close to home will make transport easier and your child will feel safer and less tired.

You might not be able to choose your child's teacher, but you can find out how the school respects children and families and creates a caring community.

Children with a disability or additional needs

If your child has a disability or additional needs, you can ask the district or central office of the Department of Education, the Catholic Education Office or the Independent Schools Association about which school is most suitable for your child.

It is wise to contact the school in the year before the child is due to start. This will give you a chance to discover the level of support the school can offer, and it will help the school develop a plan to include your child as fully as possible.

When a child with a disability or additional needs starts school, it is vital that all the adults involved establish strong, trusting relationships to provide continuity of support from home to school. Don't be embarrassed or worried about discussing any problems your child may have. Open and honest communication is in the best interests of the child.



Case study—Omah

As a young mother, Sharni was anxious about how her only child Omah, who has autism, will be included and supported in the mainstream learning program. Her own experience of school was not good and this added to Sharni's worries. On her first visit to the school, Sharni asked about the daily routines, playground safety and whether Omah would have assistance in the classroom. The teacher assured her that Omah would have support for morning lessons in Term 1 and then the situation would be reviewed. Omah's progress would be recorded and regular meetings arranged with her to discuss his learning, personal comfort and safety. The teacher was happy for Sharni to bring a trusted friend to these meetings. Sharni came away feeling as if her wishes and concerns had been heard.

'When a child with a disability or additional needs starts school, it is vital that all the adults involved establish strong, trusting relationships to provide continuity of support from home to school.'

THINGS YOU CAN DO ...

... to help the school prepare for your child

Arrange a time to meet with the principal, bringing any specialist reports or other information to build a picture of your child.

Take a friend if you feel they can offer support or help you communicate.

At the meeting, ask specific questions in relation to your child's needs. For example, if your child is in a wheelchair, will they have easy access to toilets, classrooms and other facilities? If they have problems with eyesight, will they get a Braille reader? If the child has learning difficulties, will they get assistance? If English is an additional language for the family, will a teacher be provided for English language learning?

Ask about how special support could be funded. Offer to help by providing any evidence required.

Ask to meet and talk with the person responsible for the grade level or for children with additional needs.

If your family has a particular history and culture, ask how these will be respected and reflected in the school program.

If your child is exceptionally capable in some areas, ask if the school offers a range of activities that will extend their skills in the company of similar children.

Once you have decided on the best school for your child, find out about the enrolment procedures and book in as early as possible.



Getting to know the school you have chosen

Parent-information or orientation programs often happen in the year before your child will start full-time school. Both children and parents can attend. At these sessions, children play and get to know their classroom, their teacher(s) and each other. During free play time, teachers answer parents' questions. Attending these sessions will give you and your child a feel for the class. After your school orientation sessions, consider:

- if you felt welcomed
- if you felt comfortable asking questions
- if you felt that the teachers were interested in your child and related to you as a person
- how your child felt about the experience.

You can also make an appointment to meet the principal and the person in charge of the early childhood section. Take a list of questions along so you remember to talk about what is important to you and your family. Share with them what your child enjoys and is good at, and any issues that concern you.

'Attending orientation sessions will give you and your child a feel for the class.'

School fees and charges

Enquire about the school fees as well as the procedure and timeframes for paying these fees. Independent schools charge an annual fee and you can discuss payment terms with the school principal. Government schools ask parents to pay a levy to cover the cost of materials used in the everyday program, excursions and sports activities. Ask the principal or senior staff about the costs and how families can get financial support.

Uniforms

Some schools require children to wear a school uniform. If this is the case with the school you've chosen, enquire about the school's uniform policy. Schools often sell good-quality second-hand uniforms to keep costs lower. Some local chain stores also sell plain 'school clothing' at a cheaper price. Do your research into getting the uniform and make sure your child has suitable items before school starts.

If your school does not require a formal uniform, it is still important to ask about clothing requirements so your child fits in with school expectations. All schools will expect children to bring a sunhat and use SPF 30+ sunscreen when going outdoors. Sunscreen is often provided, but your child will need to bring their own hat.





THINGS YOU CAN DO ...

... to ensure a smooth enrolment and familiarise your child with the new school

Find out what you need to take to the enrolment session. For example, you will have to fill out a form providing your child's name and date of birth, home address, phone number and the names and contact details of parents or guardians. You might also be asked to provide the child's birth certificate, medical immunisation record and any documents showing who the legal guardian of the child is, if family custody is shared.

Get to know the principal and/or senior staff and class teacher at your chosen school. Explain your child's home life, culture and previous learning experiences, including their strengths and needs.

Talk positively about the chosen school with your child, while keeping the child's expectations realistic—some children want to learn to read and do maths on day one!

If you have unhappy memories of school, try to put them behind you so your child can make a positive start.

Listen to any concerns your child may have and answer any questions.

Take the child for a walk around the school, pointing out their classroom and 'mapping' the journey from the room to the toilets, canteen, library and other key facilities.

Try to connect with another family with a child going into the same class so that your child knows someone as they begin.

Find out if the school has a 'buddy system' where an older student can help your child around the school.