

## **HELPING CHILDREN TRANSITION TO A NEW SCHOOL: TIPS FOR PARENTS IN TOUGH ECONOMIC TIMES**



As a result of changes to family economic situations, many students may find themselves starting school someplace new either immediately or in the coming school year. Relocating can result from job changes, moving in with grandparents or other relatives, losing a home, or many other effects that families are facing as a result of the current economic situation. It is likely to be a source of stress and worry for children who are already emotionally vulnerable. There are several steps parents and school staff can take to help ensure that children make this transition as successful as possible.

Getting off to a good start in a new school, either in August or mid-year, can influence children's attitude, confidence, and performance both socially and academically. The degree of adjustment depends on the child, but parents can help their children (and the rest of the family) manage the increased pace of life by planning ahead, being realistic, and maintaining a positive attitude. Here are a few suggestions to help ease the transition and promote a successful school start.

### **Before School Starts**

***Decide what to share.*** Consider how comfortable you are sharing your family's current situation and reason for the relocation with your child's new school. Having honest conversations with new administration and teachers can help them better prepare to meet your child's needs. Know that you are not the only family having this type of conversation with your school staff. They may be able to provide material resources such as clothing, school supplies, or lunch and breakfast, if needed. In particular, you will want them to be on the lookout for any signs of stress in your child. Also, have a conversation with your child about what they will want to share with curious classmates. Work with them on answers to potential questions that may arise. Role play different scenarios with them.

***Good physical and mental health.*** Be sure your child is in good physical and mental health. Find physicians as soon as possible after moving. Schedule doctor and dental checkups as needed. Discuss any concerns you have over your child's emotional or psychological development with your pediatrician. Your doctor can help determine if your concerns are normal, age-appropriate issues or require further assessment. Schools appreciate the efforts of parents to remedy problems as soon as they are recognized. Share any potential concerns with your school administrator or nurse. If you find yourself without medical coverage for your children, consult with your school's student services team or administrators who can point you toward community resources to access free or reduced cost medical services.

***Review all of the information.*** Review the material sent by the school as soon as it arrives. These packets include important information about your child's teacher, room number, school supply requirements, sign ups for after-school sports and activities, school calendar dates, bus transportation, health and emergency forms, and volunteer opportunities.

**Mark your calendar.** Make a note of important dates, especially back-to-school nights. This is especially important if you have children in more than one school and need to juggle obligations. If you are unable to attend events due to job responsibilities, find other ways to gather necessary information.

**Make copies.** Make copies of all your child's health and emergency information for reference. Health forms are typically good for more than a year and can be used again for camps, extracurricular activities, and the following school year. While the new school will request your child's records from the previous one with your permission, it is often helpful to bring copies of previous report cards with you when you register your child to help with appropriate classroom placement.

**Buy school supplies early.** Try to get the supplies as early as possible and fill the backpacks a week or two before school starts. Older children can help do this, but make sure they use a checklist that you can review. Some teachers require specific supplies, so save receipts for items that you may need to return later. If necessary, ask the school for assistance with purchasing required supplies.

**Re-establish the bedtime and mealtime routines.** Plan to re-establish or revise bedtime and mealtime routines (especially breakfast) before starting at the new school. Prepare your child for this change by talking about the benefits of school routines in terms of not becoming over tired or overwhelmed by school work and activities. Include pre-bedtime reading and household chores. To the extent possible, try to stick to a routine similar to that at the previous school. If something will be significantly different from your child's previous school explain this to them (i.e., hours of school day, mode of transportation to and from school).

**Turn off the TV.** Encourage your child to play quiet games, do puzzles, flash cards, color, or read as early morning activities instead of watching television. This will help ease your child into the learning process and school routine. If possible, maintain this practice throughout the school year. Television is distracting for many children and your child will arrive at school better prepared to learn each morning if he or she has engaged in less passive activities. Limit your child's exposure to negative news coverage of the current economy, particularly related to job and home losses. This might increase their stress and worries about your family's current situation.

**Visit school with your child.** If your child is young or nervous about a new school, visit the school with your child. Meeting the teacher, locating their classroom, locker, lunchroom, etc., will help ease pre-school anxieties and also allow your child to ask questions about the new environment. Call ahead to make sure the teachers will be available to introduce themselves to your child. If necessary, request a meeting with your administrator and your child's teacher to share any concerns about the transition or relevant information about your child and family.

**Minimize clothes shopping woes.** Buy only the essentials. Check with your school to confirm dress code guidelines. Common concerns include extremely short skirts and shorts, low rise pants, bare midriffs, spaghetti strap or halter tops, exposed undergarments, and clothing that have antisocial messages. Again, schools are an excellent resource for assistance with these types of purchases.

***Designate and clear a place to do homework.***

Older children should have the option of studying in their room or a quiet area of the house. Younger children usually need an area set aside in the family room or kitchen to facilitate adult monitoring, supervision, and encouragement. This may be difficult if your move has resulted in a significant loss of family living space. Help children creatively divide up shared rooms if necessary to provide quiet and privacy.

***Select a spot to keep backpacks and lunch boxes.***

Designate a spot for your children to place their school belongings as well as a place to put important notices and information sent home for you to see. Explain that emptying their backpack each evening is part of their responsibility, even for young children.

## **The First Week**

***Clear your own schedule.*** To the extent possible, postpone business trips, volunteer meetings, and extra projects. You want to be as free as possible to help your child acclimate to the school routine and overcome the confusion or anxiety that many children experience at the start of a new school.

***Make lunches the night before school.*** Older children should help or make their own. Give them the option to buy lunch in school if they prefer and finances permit.

***Set alarm clocks.*** Have school-age children set their own alarm clocks to get up in the morning. Praise them for prompt response to morning schedules and bus pickups.

***Leave plenty of extra time.*** Make sure your child has plenty of time to get up, eat breakfast, and get to school. For very young children taking the bus, pin to their shirt or backpack an index card with pertinent information, including their teacher's name and bus number, as well as your daytime contact information.

***After school.*** Review the new after-school routine with your child. Ensure they know what to do if he or she gets home after school and you are not there. Be very specific, particularly with young children. Put a note card in their backpack with the name(s) and number(s) of a neighbor who is home during the day as well as a number where you can be reached. If you have not already done so, have your child meet neighbor contacts to reaffirm the backup support personally.

***Review your child's schoolbooks.*** Talk about what your child will be learning during the year. Share your enthusiasm for the subjects and your confidence in your child's ability to master the content. Reinforce the natural progression of the learning process that occurs over the school year. Learning skills take time and repetition. Encourage your child to be patient, attentive, and positive.

***Reinforce your child's responsibility.*** Many children will be as worried about their parents' jobs and finances as they are about their own place in a new school. Remind them that their job at this time is to focus on being a successful student and caring friend. Answer questions as they arise openly and honestly, but refocus your child on their academic, social, and emotional experiences.

***Send a brief note to your child's teacher.*** Let the teachers know that you are interested in getting regular feedback on how and what your child is doing in school. Be sure to attend back-to-school night and introduce yourself to the teachers. Find out how they like to communicate with parents

(e.g., through notes, e-mail, or phone calls). Convey a sincere desire to be a partner with your children's teachers to enhance their learning experience.

***Familiarize yourself with the other school professionals.*** Make an effort to find out who it is in the school or district who can be a resource for you and your child. Learn their roles and how best to access their help if you need them. This can include the principal and front office personnel; school psychologist, counselor, and social worker; the reading specialist, speech therapist, and school nurse; and the after-school activities coordinator. Share information about your family that may be relevant to your child's success at that school.

## **Overcoming Anxiety**

***Let you children know you care.*** If your child is anxious about school, send personal notes in the lunch box or book bag. Reinforce the ability to cope. Children absorb their parent's anxiety, so model optimism and confidence for your child. Let your child know that it is natural to be a nervous anytime you start something new but that your child will be just fine once he or she becomes familiar with classmates, the teacher, and school routine. Share any anxieties that you might have about starting a new job so that they can see how you cope with similar stress.

***Do not over react.*** If the first few days are a little rough, try not to over react. Young children in particular may experience separation anxiety or shyness initially but teachers are trained to help them adjust. If you drop them off, try not to linger. Reassure them that you love them, will think of them during the day, and will be back. Remain calm and positive.

***Acknowledge anxiety over a bad experience the previous year.*** Children who had a difficult time academically or socially or were teased or bullied may be more fearful or reluctant to return to school. If you have not yet done so, share your child's concern with the school and determine how they would handle it should similar problems arise. Reassure your child that the problem will not occur again in the new school, and that you and the school are working together to prevent issues. Reinforce your child's ability to cope. Give your child a few strategies to manage a difficult situation on his or her own. But encourage your child to tell you or the teacher if the problem persists. Maintain open lines of communication with the school.

***Arrange play dates.*** Try to get involved in your new community to arrange get-togethers with some of your child's potential classmates before school starts and during the first weeks of schools to help your child establish positive social relationships with peers.

***Plan to volunteer in the classroom.*** If possible, plan to volunteer in the classroom at least periodically throughout the year. Doing so helps your child understand that school and family life are linked and that you care about the learning experience. Being in the classroom is also a good way to develop a relationship with your child's teachers and classmates, and to get firsthand exposure to the classroom environment and routine. Most teachers welcome occasional parent help, even if you cannot volunteer regularly.

## **Extracurricular Activities**

Go for quality, not quantity. Your child will benefit most from one or two activities that are fun, reinforce social development, and teach new skills. Too much scheduled time can be stressful, especially for young children, and may make it harder to concentrate on schoolwork. When evaluating extracurricular activities, consider your family schedule, finances, and personal energy level. Multiple activities per child may be too much to manage, particularly if the activities have

overlapping times, different locations, require your attendance or assistance with transportation, or disrupt the dinner hour. Select activities where you have someone with whom you can carpool. Even if you are available to drive most days, you will need backup sometimes. Choosing activities that occur on-site after school will also minimize driving and potential cost. Find out from the school or teacher which days will be heavy homework or test study days and schedule extracurricular activities accordingly. If your child does not want to participate in regular, organized extracurricular activities, you may want to consider other options to help build interests and social skills. For example, check out the local library for monthly reading programs, find out if your local recreation or community center offers drop-in activities, or talk to other parents and schedule regular play dates with their children.

### **When Problems Arise**

These recommendations can contribute to a positive and productive school experience for most children. Some children may exhibit more extreme opposition to or fear of school or may be coping with more specific learning or psychological difficulties. Some children might have a more significant reaction to leaving a previous school, particularly if they were happy and had to leave close friends. If your child demonstrates problems that seem extreme in nature or go on for an extended period, you may want to contact the school to set up an appointment to meet with your child's teachers and school psychologist. They may be able to offer direct or indirect support that will help identify and reduce the presenting problem. They may also suggest other resources within the school and the community to help you address the situation. While children can display a variety of behaviors, it is generally wise not to over-interpret those behaviors. More often than not, time and a few intervention strategies will remedy the problem. Most children are wonderfully resilient and, with your support and encouragement, will thrive throughout their school experience.

### **Resources**

Clark, L. (1996). *SOS: Help for parents* (2nd ed.). Berkley, CA: Parents' Press. ISBN: 0935111204.

Dawson, M. P. (2004). Homework: A guide for parents. In A. Canter, L. Paige, M. Roth, I. Romero, & S. Carroll (Eds.), *Helping children at home and school II: Handouts for families and educators*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Desrochers, J. E., Cowan, K. C., & Christner, R. W. (2009). Supporting Students and Successful Learning in Tough Economic Times. *Principal Leadership*. Reston, VA: National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Rimm, S. (1996). *Dr. Sylvia Rimm's smart parenting: How to raise a happy, achieving child*. New York: Crown. ASIN: 0517700638.

### **Websites**

National Association of School Psychologists—[www.nasponline.org](http://www.nasponline.org)

Parent Information Center—[www.parentinformationcenter.org](http://www.parentinformationcenter.org)

*This handout was revised by Andrea Cohn, PhD, NCSP of the National Association of School Psychologists. A version of this handout was first written in 2005 by Ted Feinberg, EdD, NCSP, & Katherine C. Cowan, National Association of School Psychologists. © 2009, National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Hwy #402, Bethesda, MD 20814*

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