**COPING WITH THE START OF SCHOOL YEAR**

As many children prepare for the start of the school year on Wednesday, there is a special group of children who will be experiencing their first day at big school.

The change from nursery to grade one can be a little scary for kids and parents. The main source of stress is the separation anxiety experienced by children going to school for the first time. While most children are eager to attend school, there are others who find the experience daunting. Children tend to become emotional and cry or cling onto parents. Here are some hints to help:

**Before school starts:**

* Prepare your child for school by explaining to them what to expect e.g. tell your child about what the class will look like. Some classrooms have the desks in rows, while others might have them grouped together.
* Inform your child that they may be seated next to a child they don't know, but it will be okay because it's fun to make new friends.
* Make sure your child knows their address and phone number in case of an emergency. Write this information in their books in case they forget.
* Tell them which parent will come to collect them at the end of the school day, as this gives them a sense of security and decreases separation anxiety.
* Provide words of encouragement and support that learning can be fun and school exciting so that they look forward to big school and the first day.
* Teach your child how to open packaged foods like yoghurt and if it's still too hard and they end up being messy, don't pack it in their lunchboxes until they are more confident.
* Pack lunchboxes taking into account your child’s ability to open the packaging e.g. yoghurt can spill onto your child’s uniform. Pack food that your child enjoys and that's easy to eat in ten minutes.
* Rehearse dressing for school and practise a trial run to school to see how long it takes taking into account traffic congestion. Remember, if you are frustrated, this affects your child as well.

**On the first day:**

* Get up early and do not rush as you will want to experience the joy of your child’s first day at school. Get your child up early as well, giving them adequate time to wash/bath, dress and have breakfast.
* Pack a good lunchbox with nutritious foods that will sustain your child through the day.
* Remember to take pictures as this day is a memorable one.
* Walk your child to the classroom and meet the teacher. Trust the teacher as they have professional training and years of experience to deal with anxious parents and first graders.
* Hug them or wave goodbye and wish them well for the day. Do not stand around as this may make them anxious. Walk away and observe from a distance to see how they are coping before you leave for work. Do not stay and fuss around them as it takes away their independence.
* Make sure your child knows where the bathroom is and the class rules for going to the bathroom. It may not sound like a big deal but first graders often find it intimidating to use the “big bathroom”.
* They will get come home with forms and homework, so make sure you look through the backpack on a daily basis.

**After the first day:**

* Ensure that your child has a bedtime routine and keep to it. Your child will be tired after a long day at school, no morning nap and getting up early. An afternoon nap may be recommended for them to recharge.
* Ensure that your child is getting sufficient sleep (at least 8 hours). You may have to adjust your routine by having an early dinner or cutting back on television during the week.
* Read a bedtime story to your child every evening. This develops a passion and love for reading. Plan a weekly visit to the library and help your child choose appropriate books.
* Attend the orientation program and parent teacher meetings. This is very important because you learn about what your child will be doing during the year and you get to meet all the teachers and administrators that will be with your child during the day. Attend all other meetings as they will focus on how your child is coping.
* If your child refuses to go to school, there is probably something troubling your child. Establish what is making them anxious or scared. It may be bullying, or something small that appears like a huge problem to your child.
* Speak to your child while driving them home from school or when you get back from work. Ask what they did and how their day was. Find out who their friends are and who sits next to them, what homework did they get, etc. In this way you become involved in their school day.
* Show an interest in your child’s life at school, be involved in their activities. Good parenting requires spending time with your child.

Parents will also have to cope with their children only talking about their teachers. Do not feel threatened, it is a just a phase because they spend so many hours with the teacher.

Sometimes the move to the first grade can be harder on parents because it's a sign that our babies are grown up and don’t need you. That is not so as they now need you more than ever.

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