

Top Tips for Success in Preschool and Kindergarten
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As a transdisciplinary team for Child Development Consultants, we spend our weeks in nursery schools, kindergartens, childcare centers and on numerous playgrounds. Child Development Consultants is a developmental team consisting of an occupational therapist, speech and language therapist, special educator and behavior specialist. We serve as a community resource to teachers, parents and childcare providers. Our goal is to support children to successfully participate in their preschool classrooms and to help individualize programs for children who need additional support in school.

Our numerous 'on the job' hours have given us the opportunity to see what most often assists children to be successful in their school programs. As preschool and kindergarten consultants we offer the following top tips as a way to start the school year off on the right foot. Since we are also parents, some of these lessons we've learned the hard way.

1. Beat the Clock

Let's face it, mornings with children can be hectic. However, if you would willingly welcome a root canal as a respite from your morning routine...well, it is time to establish another routine!

Allow your child to pick out a choice of two outfits the night before so that your child has fewer decisions to make and dressing can proceed much more smoothly.

Pack your youngster's lunch the night before as well, with input or help from your child.

Make sure that your child's bag or backpack is packed and hanging where you can easily get it on your way out of the house.

Start the day off right! Make the transition from home to school smooth, by allowing adequate time for dressing, breakfast and getting out the door. If your child has difficulty getting up and out, make sure you are already showered, dressed and ready before you wake up your youngster. This allows you to facilitate dressing and encourage self-dressing as your child gets ready for school. If the morning train derails, you can much more easily get your child back on track if you are close by. If your child is rattled or rushed, the transition into the classroom will often be more difficult.

Encourage your child to use the bathroom before leaving home. Some children are picky about using bathrooms outside their own homes. Others become very engrossed in their play at school and resist nature's calling because they don't want to stop playing.

Whatever the reason, it is always a good practice for children to try to use the bathroom before going to school.

1. You Gotta Eat!

A good healthy and nutritious breakfast really does get your child off to a good start. A well-balanced diet is essential for maintaining the good health that allows a child to function optimally. Limit empty calories and provide "kid friendly" balanced meals and healthy snacks such as fruits and whole-wheat crackers. Limit fruit juices and offer water and milk as drink options.

Make sure your child has ample time to eat breakfast so he can summon the energy to participate in numerous school activities. Sometimes adding a 'novel twist' can go a long way to encouraging a reluctant eater. Cutting toast into fun shapes, mixing a couple of healthy cereals together, or eating on a special plate can make all the difference on a difficult morning.

Use this breakfast time to talk about what your child will be doing that day. Make sure your youngster knows who will be picking him up and what time he will be picked up.

This helps a child to feel in control and more able to handle the day.

1. Dress for Success

Make sure your child is dressed to fully participate in his school program. A child should wear clothing that is comfortable and easily washed and be able to manage his own clothing for bathroom times. Sensory play and art often lead to dirty clothes and a child needs to know that it is okay to get dirty and have fun. Always provide a change of clothing for those catastrophic messes or wet clothes.

Ensure that your youngster is wearing shoes, such as sneakers, so they can safely explore playground equipment. Clogs, flip-flops or some sandals pose a safety risk and limit a child's ability to fully participate in active play outdoors and in the classroom. Make sure your child is dressed for the weather, so double check for hats and mittens.

Nothing can snag outdoor play more rapidly than cold, mittenless hands and ten **long** minutes before the class goes inside.

1. Exercise, Exercise

All children need physical exercise and outdoor play time. Some children will benefit from this kind of exercise before going to school. Having a chance for some physical outlet can help some youngsters be ready to play cooperatively and better attend to learning opportunities.

1. Guaranteed On Time Delivery...and Pick Up

Dropping your child off to his program on time allows him to enter group play at a quieter moment. This allows your preschooler to enter play at his own pace. The teacher is available to spend an extra moment with your child if that is needed and that makes the whole day start out easier.

Routines really help many children begin their day. Upon arriving at school, some children are directed by their activities to a designated "first" activity, such as writing their names on a sign-in sheet, before going to play. Other classrooms don't have a transitional activity so it is up to the parent to establish a routine for this transition. This may be coloring a picture together, reading a book, or just helping the child find a playmate and getting "settled" into some type of play. Just like at home, consistent drop off routines add predictability and familiarity to a child's day and contribute to smoother "goodbyes".

When children are dropped off late, it can get the whole day off to a difficult start. Some miss their free time altogether and must begin the day in a more structured school time.

Others miss the opportunity to complete an early morning project, or spend time with a special friend.

Occasionally all parents have experienced delays due to unexpected traffic or construction. However, aim to pick up your child at the designated time. Nothing is more disheartening than that woebegone face waiting and worrying about when parents are coming to pick up.

1. Dealing with Separation, Anxiety or Both!

Let the teachers do their job. If a child becomes upset upon the departure of a parent, don't return to the classroom or hover where he might see you. Don't be "wishy-washy" about leaving. Let the teacher 'work her magic' by comforting your child. Give her the opportunity to help your child feel better. Their bond will strengthen and the child will learn that there are other adults in the world who he can trust and be comforted by, in addition to Mom and Dad.

Watch your words. Avoid telling a child how much you'll miss her while she is at school because she might decide it makes more sense to stay home with you so you won't be sad! Express confidence in your child and her ability to make friends, try new activities, learn new concepts, etc. At the same time though acknowledge any concerns or fears she may have about preschool without patronizing or minimizing her issues. This is a tricky balancing act for sure!

1. Communication is Key

Form a partnership with the staff at your child's school or center. Share information about your child and listen to feedback from school. Find out what your child is learning at school and reinforce those concepts at home.

Many children enter school are receiving some therapeutic intervention. Make sure all your child's teachers know if your child is receiving therapy such as physical, occupational, speech, special education, or psychological therapy. When parents do not share with a center that their child is receiving therapy a lot of valuable time is wasted. A teacher who does not know a child is receiving therapy can spend the first few months with a child documenting delays and waiting for the optimal moment to share concerns with the parent. Time in which the teacher could be helping the child by using specific strategies is lost.

When a teacher knows what challenges a child faces she can implement the therapist's strategies in the classroom and help the child be more successful.

Give teachers and childcare providers copies of your child's therapeutic goals and make sure you give the therapists and teachers permission to communicate so they can work as a team.

1. May I Bring a Friend--Playdates

Children spend a great deal of time in classrooms and centers with other children.

Sometimes parents think that their children do not need to have playdates with classmates since they spend so much time together in class. However, for many children learning to socialize in a big, noisy classroom can be a daunting task. For these children having playdates with classmates is the key to developing friendships and making a connection with a peer.

Keep initial playdates short so they can end on a good note. Initial playdates or playdates with three year olds may require a parent to accompany them. Supervise these interactions closely so these are positive interactions for both children.

1. Reunited and It Feels so Good!

Don't linger too long with other parents or teachers when you pick up your child. Make arrangements to have lengthy talks with other parents or with your child's teacher at another time. Children really need the attention of their parents and caregivers during pick up time.

Turn off the cell phone in the car so your child gets your undivided attention for the ride home. Play games, sing songs and enjoy the together time.

1. Sometimes You Have to Bend a Little--Flexibility

Certainly some children are inherently more flexible than others. However being flexible makes life easier, particularly in a group learning environment such as a classroom.

This is especially true in preschool, where a child needs to accommodate to school structure and occasional changes in daily routine. Whenever possible teach your child patience and flexibility. If you have some strategies that you have found helpful with your child, share the information with your child's teachers.

1. Keep Em' Healthy

A healthy child is at his best for social interactions, learning and simply enjoying the school experience. Monitor your child's health carefully and make other arrangements if your youngster is sick. Going to school when a child isn't well can be miserable and can also quickly spread communicable diseases.

1. Sleeping the Night Away

Very simply put, preschool or kindergarten is the young child's work. Your child will have more fun, learn more and interact better with friends if well rested. Some children need

more sleep than others; however a good guideline for preschool children is 10-12 hours of sleep.

Before you know it your child's preschool and kindergarten years will be a memory and it will be time for reading, writing and arithmetic. Enjoy those first back to school days with your young child by putting some of our **'top tips'** in place. We wish you and your child an enjoyable and successful school year.

Amy Freedman is a speech-language therapist. Sharon Anderson and Judi Greenberg are occupational therapists and Amy Egan is a special educator and behavioral consultant. These authors have written a book for teachers and parents entitled: Is It a Big Problem or Little Problem? (St. Martins Press, 2007)