

# Getting Your Child Ready For Prep:

## A Guide for Parents of Children with Autism, Anxiety, and other Social-Emotional Difficulties.



### What can you do to help your child get ready for Prep?

#### Attend Orientation / Transition Sessions

- Most schools run a transition program for new preps in Term 3 and/or 4 in the year before they start.
- These may involve coming to school for a story in the library, time in classrooms doing activities, meeting 'buddies' or other structured activities.
- Attending these sessions gives staff the opportunity to start to get to know your child, and also gives your child the opportunity to meet their teacher and other possible classmates, experience the classrooms and become familiar with the school grounds.
- If your child will not attend without you, talk to the school about gradually easing your child into these sessions (e.g. shorter time, gradual decrease in your support, occasionally leaving the room for short periods, etc.)
- If possible, arrange for a specific staff member to be a constant presence in the sessions to give your child some consistency.
- These programs are a good opportunity to take photos of your child completing activities to use in your social story about school. (NB: You will need to get permission from the school first.)

#### Teach Independence Skills

- There are many skills that a child in Prep will be expected to do with some degree of independence including packing and unpack their lunchbox and school bag, putting shoes and socks on/off, using the toilet, recognising their own belongings, and drinking from drinking taps.
- You can help your child develop these skills by practicing them at home:
  - Help them put their kinder snack or lunch in their lunchbox
  - Get them involved with packing their bag (e.g. use visuals to help them check what should be in there.)
  - Encourage independence in toileting (e.g. washing hands, wiping their bottom, etc.)
  - Get your child involved with choosing their lunchbox and bag for school. If they have a 'uniform' school bag, add key-rings or tags so your child can easily identify it as theirs.
    - Encourage your child to fully or partially dress themselves. Start with whatever you child can do now (e.g. put arms in sleeves), and teach them the next step (e.g. putting head through).
    - Ensure your child has shoes that they can easily get on and off. Tying laces can come later - choose something with velcro or use special ties to help your child be more independent.



### Get Familiar with the Setting

- Visit the school grounds after school and on weekends if possible so your child can get used to the buildings and playgrounds.
- Try and time some of your visits to tie in with the bell ringing so your child can experience this and get used to the sound and what it means.
- Practice using the toilets and urinals if appropriate, so your child knows where they are and how to use them.
- Help them recognise common signs around the school (e.g. male and female toilets).

### Make Time for Extra Practice at School

- If your child needs more time at school to get comfortable, talk to the school about how you can achieve this. For example:
  - Coming in to the prep room for the last 30 min of school once or twice a week.
  - Attending assembly each week to get used to the noise and people.
  - Visiting the library during school time to borrow a book.
  - Spending 15 - 30min in the prep classroom after school has finished to get used to the room without other children there.

### Make Connections

- If there are other children from your child's kinder that will be attending the same school, try and arrange play dates, meetings at the park. etc.
- Catch up with other parents from your kinder to share your excitement and concerns.
- If possible, ask for photos of your child's teacher, other important staff members and classmates to take home during the holidays.
- Talk to parents of children with additional needs at the school if possible, they can be a great source of information and support.

### Use Visuals

- Use visuals in the form of a schedule or timetable to help your child grow accustomed to following a visual plan of their daily activities at home or kinder.
- Visuals could be photos, drawings or words.
- Visuals can assist your child's understanding of what is expected at school and what their day will involve, reducing anxiety and confusion.
- You can also use visuals to help your child learn school rules and expected behaviour.  
NB: Visuals are beneficial to all children, even those with good verbal abilities.

### Use Social Stories

- Social stories are useful for introducing new situations/experiences, as well as assisting with teaching appropriate behaviours.
- A social story about your child's new school, including photos of them taking part in school activities, is an effective way of helping your child become more familiar with the idea of school and reduce anxiety.



## What does the school need to know?

### Strengths and Challenges

- It is important for the school to know not just what your child will need help with, but also what they are good at.
- Teachers can use a child's strengths to assist with accommodating their challenges.
- Strengths can also be used to help build up a child's confidence.
- Being aware of challenges is also important in setting goals for your child's development at school.

### Special Interests

- Most children have at least one interest that is the focus of their conversation and play.
- Special interests can be used to:
  - motivate students to complete non-preferred tasks.
  - reward students for appropriate behaviour.
  - assist with making connections with peers and teachers

### Triggers of Anxiety and Distress

- For children with ASD and other social-emotional difficulties, there are many aspects of the school environment that may be sources of stress or anxiety.
- You will not be able to predict everything that may be anxiety producing for your child.
- Advising staff of situations, sensory inputs, and activities that regularly cause your child stress will assist them to keep your child as calm and comfortable as possible while settling into school.
- Examples of triggers may include: being surrounded by students on the mat; loud noises; certain smells (e.g. banana); making a mistake; being touched; lining up; transition times.

### Signs of Stress

- As parents, we are often aware of subtle changes in our child's behaviour that indicate they are stressed.
- Sharing these signs can aid teachers to intervene before your child becomes extremely distressed.
- Signs might include: twirling hair around a finger; fidgeting; gradually increasing voice volume; rocking on chair.

### Behaviour Management Strategies

- Let the school know about any effective strategies you have for managing your child's behaviour.
- Keep in mind that strategies may need to be adapted to be used in the school environment.
- It is important that you and the school come to an agreement regarding how behaviours will be dealt with.



## Sensory Sensitivities

- Sensory processing can have a huge impact on a child's ability to learn and cope with being in the classroom.
- It is important to inform the school about sensitivities to sensory input and any sensory strategies that have been found to be effective with your child.
- Your child's Occupational Therapist, if applicable, will be able to advise staff further on individual strategies for your child.
- Sensory strategies which can help your child may include: 'move and sit' cushion; weighted lap blanket or vest; fiddle toys; regular movement breaks; tent.

## How can you help the school help your child?

### Good Communication

- It is important to have a reliable and strong pathway for communication between yourself and your child's teachers.
- Setting up a communication book or regular email contact can be useful.
- Keep in mind that it will not usually be possible for teachers to spend extended time with you at the beginning or end of each day to discuss your child.
- If you have concerns that need to be addressed, arrange a meeting to discuss any issues at an appropriate time.

### Share Responsibility

- A successful experience for your child at school depends on both the school and your family.
- Work with the school to solve problems that occur, don't expect the school to solve everything on their own.
- Conversely, let the school know if there are things happening at home that could be impacting on your child's behaviour at school.

### Supply Comfort Objects and Sensory Tools

- Provide the school with comfort objects (e.g. a special toy, game or object) to assist with helping your child through difficult times.
- A bag or box containing any special items could be kept with the teacher and brought out when needed.

### Expect a Few 'Teething Problems'

- Even when it seems you have all bases covered, there are likely to be some unexpected difficulties.
  - Misunderstandings may occur; your child's reporting of an event may cause you concern; something you were told would be in place may not have been implemented.
  - It is important to approach the school in an open, non-accusatory way, and ask to have a discussion around your concerns.



## Have Confidence in the Teaching Staff

- It can be difficult to hand over the care of your child to someone else, especially when it's for a large part of every day.
- Trust that the staff have your child's best interests at heart and will do their best to make sure their school experience is a positive one.
- Teachers may not feel it is necessary to inform you of every small issue that occurs at school. If there are specific kinds of incidents you need to know about, make it clear to staff that they are important and that you would like to be informed.

## What should you expect the first few weeks?

- The first few weeks will be busy, tiring and confusing for everyone.
- Expect your child to be tired and a little emotional. They may also have an increased appetite.
- Try to keep things relaxed at home with few demands.
- Don't push your child to talk about their day. Some will tell you straight away, others may not want to talk until bedtime. Give your child the time they need before they share their experiences with you.
- Keep your routine as consistent as possible. While they are getting used to so many changes at school, they need home to be predictable and calm.
- Keep extra curricular activities to a minimum for the first few weeks. Doing too much too soon can be really stressful and overwhelming.
- Make sure your child has a change of clothes in their bag in case of accidents - this is really common when children start school.

## How do you (the parent) get through the first few weeks?

- Make plans during the day – especially in the first week. Have coffee with friends, go to the gym, take a long walk. Don't just go home and worry!
- Establish your new daily/weekly routine as soon as possible. You will soon settle into your daily program, just as your child will settle into school.
- Get involved with the school. Find out what ways parents can support the school and get on board. But remember to pace yourself - don't sign up for too much early on.
- Enjoy the possibilities that having a child at school brings - more "me" time or a chance to spend time with your other children, the chance to meet new people and make new friends.



## References

- **Transition: A positive start to school.** Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Melbourne, June 2009.
- **Transition Booklet: My journey to Prep.** Department of Education, Training and Employment, Queensland. <http://education.qld.gov.au/asd-online-resource-kit/transition/index.html>