

Off to school...

The move to 'big' school is an exciting event for both parents and child. Pheobe Doyle examines how parents can approach this transition and what practical and emotional support will be useful to them.

By Pheobe Doyle, education writer, Nottingham

To many parents it may seem like a minute ago they were fastening their children into their car seat and tentatively bringing them home from hospital. Now here they are, standing in front of them, with a slightly-too-big uniform, wearing a look that sits somewhere on a spectrum between 'rabbits in headlights' and joyous excitement. Understandably, many parents have an emotional response to their child starting school.

Whatever the individual circumstances, there are ways in which parents can be supported, with this important transition. Staff who have looked after the child's care and education in their nursery or pre-school, should have a clear picture of the child's disposition when it comes to being ready for school, and will be happy to share information, on a friendly but professional basis.

Parents certainly have much to gain from acquiring all the information they can, particularly in terms of their child's development outcomes, social skills and level of independence. If the practitioner or key person has been successful in establishing a trusting relationship with the parent, there will have been an ongoing dialogue about transition to school, a long time before it actually happens.

Practical advice

It is a good idea for parents to visit several schools prior to making their decision about where to send their child. Of course they should read the Ofsted reports, and certainly ask the advice of friends in the same area – but nothing is the same as visiting the setting for themselves, meeting the staff in person and asking any questions they may have, that may be quite specific to your child or circumstance.

While there, parents are likely to get 'a feeling' about the environment. Is it warm and friendly, or is it more formal than some others? What are the teachers like? Do they seem bonded with the children? Are there lots of interesting and varied play activities? And so on... Looking at how engaged both staff and children are in what they are doing is a really good, fast indicator of a school's ethos and success. Parents will often ask the early years staff they know for their opinion on a particular school.

Once a decision has been made about which school to opt for, and the family is confident they have got a place, then it's time for them to make a second visit, and this time with the child. At this point they might want to hold back a little with the questions and to make it all about fun and play. The child's visit can be supported positively at home and in the nursery, with questions and activities.

What to expect

When a child enters school, they will gradually be introduced to focused sessions where they are expected to sit, often on the carpet, listen and learn for a short periods. This will be a natural development of what they have experienced at pre-school. Children develop in different ways, at different times, so the more information parents have about their learning journeys and activities in pre-school, the better.

Nursery staff can suggest some fun activities that parents can introduce at home to help children gear up for reception. Parents might want suggestions on how they can extend some of the activities in pre-school to help them develop in key learning areas. The emphasis should always be on fun.

Positive talking

Parents may have all sorts of concerns about their child starting school. It is important they share these concerns with nursery staff or family members, but never with their child. There needs to be a consistent message, with the child's family and pre-school carers being upbeat about the transition. This will help the child to start its school journey with the confidence it needs to succeed.

Further reading

■ *Smooth Transitions* by Ros Bayley and Sally Featherstone (Featherstone)

