

Starting School

What can we do during lockdown?



TEACHING AND LEARNING

In preparing children for the learning experiences they will have at school it is important to be mindful that we do not need to replicate the way we may think teaching happens at school in order to support their learning. Indeed, the Education Review Office has clearly stated that it is inappropriate for overly formal, structured teaching, such as the use of worksheets and flashcards, to be used prior to school entry. Learning should be embedded in play and in experiences that have meaning to children and the suggestions below reflect this. Also be mindful that many schools take a different approach to learning and teaching from what we may have experienced in our schooling. There has been a shift recently and many schools now include play-based learning in their programme.

How you can support your child's learning in preparation for school during lockdown:

Starting school is a significant event for children and for their families and a milestone which many of us celebrate. It is something many children look forward to. Most children settle easily into school, but a few find adjusting to the change takes time.

If your child is close to starting school, you may be concerned that during lockdown they are missing out on learning that will be important when they go to school. However, there are many things you can do at home to support your child in being prepared for the changes involved.

It is important to note that during this time of uncertainty and change to normal routine your child's happiness and sense of security is what is most important. The suggestions have been selected as they will easily fit into family life, however if your child is not interested please be guided by them and their wellbeing.

The suggestions and advice are based on my past experiences as a primary school teacher of five year olds, an early childhood teacher and in transitioning my own three children to school. The advice is also informed by my Masters and PHD research about the transition to school, where children, parents and teachers have talked to me about what they thought was important at this time. It is also based on other research I have read.

I hope the ideas will be useful to you. You may already be doing many of these things and, if that is so, you can be reassured that you are doing lots of things that will support your child to have a smooth start to schooling.



Developing literacy

- The more words a child understands and can speak the easier it is for them to learn to read. So talking with your child will support their later literacy learning. Have lots of conversations, ask them about what they are doing, tell them about what you are doing...
- Tell stories to your child. This helps them learn more language and also helps them understand that stories contain a beginning, middle and end, understandings they will need when they start to write stories at school. Tell them stories about when you were a child, stories from your culture, stories about when they were little, make up stories... and encourage them to tell you stories.
- Write children's names on their art work and where ever you can. When you do only use a capital for the first letter of their name, not capitals for all letters of their name (Joanne not JOANNE). At school they will be expected to write their name in this way, as it would be in a book they were reading. If you write their name in capital letters they will need to unlearn this at school. Talk to children about the letters in their name and the sounds the letters make as you write it.
- Encourage children to write their names. Praise their attempts even if they are not completely correct or unfinished. You don't have to pretend it is completely correct. For example "I can see how hard you tried to write your name". Provide them with a card with their name written on it to copy.



- Read children books that rhyme, sing songs that rhyme, teach children nursery rhymes. Rhymes help children to learn that words are made out of small sounds all joined together. They cannot read or write until they understand this.
- Let children see you reading and writing for a purpose, if you like to read show them you enjoy it.
- Read, read, read to children. Indoors, outdoors, in bed, on the couch.... Talk about the pictures in the book, ask them what they think will happen next, get them to find the first letter of their name in the book. Point to some of the text as you read showing children that words start at the top of the page and go from left to right... Keep some picture books where they can easily access them.

Developing mathematical skill and thinking



- Get your child to help set the table. This develops the understanding of one to one correspondence which they need when counting- one number word for each item, just as we put one plate for each person. You can support counting as well... "How many people in our family?" "How many forks will we need?" "5?, Well can you please get 5 forks?"
- Help your child set up an obstacle course and use positional language such as over, under, below, beside, left, right as they complete the course. Time them as they do the course and compare the length of time. Ask them if they can go faster, slower...
- Play simple board games. If you don't have any you can make these yourself and find an app on your phone to use as a dice. These teach children one to one correspondence as well as enabling them to practice counting
- Puzzles, lego, duplo, building with blocks etc all support spatial awareness and provide opportunities to talk about colour and shape and how things fit together
- Use old boxes for junk construction.
- Take opportunities to count.
- Draw a hopscotch on the concrete and write numbers in the squares
- Measure your child and other members of the family. Talk about how tall each person is. Who is tallest? Who is shortest?
- Count the number of eggs or bears you see in people's windows when going for a walk. Children can take a pen and piece of paper and make a mark on a piece of paper for each one they see and then count when they get home. This teaches them that we can represent numbers with marks. Understanding representation is also an early literacy skill.
- Make a treasure hunt and draw a map children need to follow to find the clues

Developing dispositions that will help with learning



- Encourage your child to persist when things are difficult or when they do not succeed the first time. "Try that again" "Can you think of another way that might work" "Have you thought about trying..."
- Support your child to communicate their wants and needs clearly and appropriately. When they get it wrong prompt them to try again "Try saying that again in a nice voice"
- Encourage curiosity. Help children to find out the answers to their questions and wonderings. If you don't know the answers to their questions, then say so and help them find out.
- Help children learn to take responsibility. Get them to help you with small tasks around the house, give them a job which is theirs (feeding the cat, clearing the table), dressing themselves and helping tidy up after themselves.



CHANGES TO RELATIONSHIPS

One of the things that matters most to children when they start school is the changes that happen to their friendships. Children in my research worried about whether they will have friends and miss their friends from early childhood. They also say that making new friends is the best thing about starting school. Teachers feel it is important for children to build relationships with them and to have met and got to know their teacher before they start school.

What can you do?

- Talk with your child about the people they already know at school
- If you have a way to contact them arrange for your child to communicate on-line with these people
- If your child expresses concern about making friends reassure them that they are good at making friends and remind them about how to greet someone they don't know
- Lockdown is a great chance to engage children in talking with their current friends online, something they could continue to do once they start school if they will not be able to see their friends outside school
- Support your child to learn social skills by playing games which involve turn taking and where they do not always win.
- Talk about your child's teacher, using their name and saying positive things about them
- Make sure your child has met the teacher before they start. If they have not had the chance to do that but are due to start school soon after lockdown you might like to consider changing the date your child starts school to allow time for school visits to occur.
- There will be fewer teachers for the number of children at school so children will have to wait longer for attention. Encourage your child to wait while you complete tasks so they are used to waiting.

A few other ideas...

- Read books about starting school
- Talk about what school is like, remind them of any visits they had, children they met, their teacher
- Get older siblings to talk about school but encourage them to share positive things
- Avoid negative talk about school such as "You will have to pull your socks up at school"
- Take a look at the school website and point out features of the school. My research showed that something children really liked about school was the playground so if there are pictures of the school playground this might be a good talking point



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