

A parent's guide to... getting ready for school

By Penny Tassoni, early years consultant and author

It is just a couple of days before the school year starts. Uniform has been bought, hair cut and shoes polished. But these are just the last-minute preparations. Getting children ready for school needs to begin a few months earlier. So what things can parents do to help their child get off to a flying start?

A good starting point is to consider how confident your child is in a range of situations. First, your child needs to be able to talk to adults that they do not know well. They need to be able to respond not just to their teacher, but also to midday supervisors, teaching assistants and parent helpers.

Being able to feel comfortable approaching an adult for help is important, particularly in the early days of adapting to their surroundings. While some children are naturally outgoing, others, who may be fine with friends and relatives, will need a little practice when it comes to

talking to adults that they do not know well. If you feel this is the case with your child, try giving them opportunities to pay at a shop, order food at a restaurant or take a book out of the library. At first you may need to do a little prompting, but with practice you may find that your child becomes more confident and you can step back a little.

As well as being able to ask for help or respond to questions, children also need to be able to 'stand on their own two feet'! This means looking after themselves and being fairly organised. A classroom is a busy place and there is often a lot going on. Ideally, children need to be able to take

themselves off to the toilet, wash their hands and get their coats on and off. At lunchtime, they need to manage their packed lunch or carry a tray. They also need to be able to blow their noses.

Allow a couple of months to practise these skills and if you have, over the years, become your child's personal dresser and general assistant, expect that there may be a little resistance. Time,



Will your child have the personal and social

patience and a little praise are needed, but it is worth it for your child's sake.

Competent children tend to gain in confidence, and there are other spin-offs too – these self-help skills are great for getting children's hands ready for writing.

Children also need to adapt to having less adult attention than they may have had at nursery or pre-school. While some schools may have exceptionally

good adult-child ratios, in many schools, a child may be one of 30 with just one or two adults.

This, in turn, requires that some 'law and order' has to underpin classroom life. Children need to wait their turn when an adult is talking to another adult or child. They also need to learn that some parts of the classroom routine are non-negotiable. This can be hard for children who are used to immediate adult attention or who are not used to complying with reasonable requests.

While I would not want to turn children into robots, it is worth thinking about whether your child

CASE STUDY

Polly is the youngest of our three children and was very much the baby of the family. From the day she was born, we spoiled her rotten. I just wanted to keep her as my baby, but it meant that when she was four, I was still dressing her and helping her on the toilet. I also let her have her own way most of the time.

When Polly started school, she was excited and bounced happily in. At the end of the first week, she seemed a little subdued. I put it down to tiredness. The following week, she refused to get dressed for school. With coaxing, I got her into school and at the

end of the day had a word with the teacher. It turned out that Polly was not a star pupil. She had been reprimanded several times. The teacher said Polly had also missed out on PE because she had totally refused to get undressed.

My heart sank. Both of the boys had had the same teacher and had loved being in her class.

That evening, a new regime began. We began to treat Polly like a four-year-old, not a toddler. A month later, Polly was no longer the spoiled baby of the family. She was happy at home and happy at school.

can 'toe the line' when needed and whether they understand about waiting for their turn. As with other social skills, a little bit of practice and also mentoring can be useful. It can also be useful to show how you have to wait your turn in places such as shops or before speaking to receptionists. You could also talk with your child about what it would be like if no one waited.

Finally, it is worth looking at your child's sleep patterns – children do find the first weeks very tiring. Children who are not sleeping enough are more likely to pick up a cold or infection. They will also find it harder to concentrate and so learn. Aim in the next couple of months to build up a good bedtime routine and just before term begins, get your child in the habit of being up and dressed early. With a bit of luck, this will help you both to glide through the school gates

on their first day, rather than making a hasty entrance.

READY-FOR-SCHOOL CHECKLIST

Can your child:

- Respond to an adult or ask for help?
- Put their coat on and off, managing the zip/buttons?
- Get changed into shorts and T-shirt for PE quickly?
- Fold their clothes into a neat pile?
- Go to the toilet and wash their hands independently?
- Get a tissue and blow their nose unprompted?
- Carry a tray and eat with a knife and fork?
- Unwrap food packaging including peeling fruit?
- Tidy up toys and put things away unprompted?
- Wait for their turn when an adult is busy with others?
- Comply with reasonable adult requests promptly? ■