Starting School

Thinking about transition to school

Starting school is an important time for children and families. Children who make a positive start to school are more likely to:

- feel comfortable, relaxed and valued
- feel excited and motivated to learn
- have good relationships with others
- develop a sense of belonging within the school community.

Starting school is not just about the first day. It's a process that begins when children and families start to prepare in the year before, and continues as children experience their first days, weeks and months of school. The process involves a number of changes for children and families, and everyone reacts differently. For some children the change brings excitement about making friends and learning new things, while for others the change can leave them feeling nervous and overwhelmed. You may reflect on your own school experiences and be reminded of the mix of emotions you felt when starting school.

Families play an important role in supporting children to manage the transition to primary school. With the support of your child's early childhood educator and school teacher, you can help them to cope with the new challenges by developing their social, emotional and learning skills. Supporting your child's skills in these areas contributes to their mental health and wellbeing. Children who are mentally healthy are better learners, have stronger relationships and are better able to meet life's challenges.

The main changes for your child

Starting school involves a number of changes for children and families. This includes the differences between your child's current setting (eg home, long day care, preschool) and the primary school they will be attending. When children start school they experience changes in the following areas.

Physical environment: For example, the size of the playground, classroom and school buildings, the location and types of toilets, the number of other children and teachers.

Rules and procedures: For example, more structured times for attending class, eating and going to the toilet, rules for different places such as the classroom and playground, lining up and putting up a hand to speak.

Relationships: For example, meeting new children and adults, responding to children of different ages, leaving an early childhood educator, getting to know a range of teachers for different subjects and from different grades.

Learning: For example, more formal learning experiences, structured times and set tasks, increasing independence.

Managing change during transition

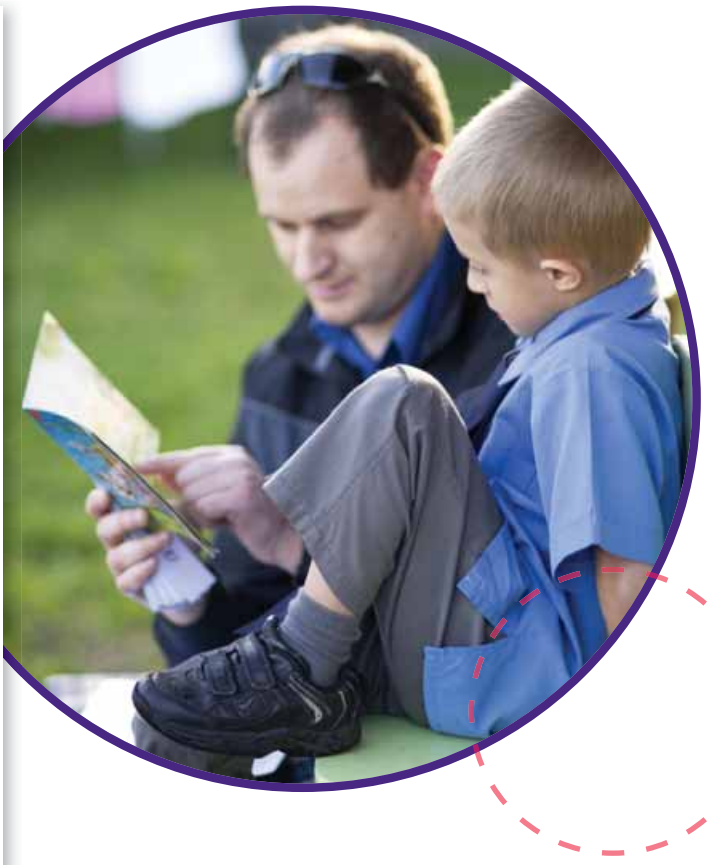
Learning from other transitions

Your child has most likely already experienced several transitions in their life. These may include starting preschool, going on holiday, moving house or welcoming the addition of a new brother or sister. These experiences can help children develop skills for managing new situations such as starting school. They can also help you get to know how your child copes with change. You may like to think about:

- What has helped your child manage other transitions and changes in their life?
- How have you supported them to cope?
- How can you utilise your child's early childhood educator and school teacher to support this process?

Using your child's strengths and skills

Throughout your child's early years they have been learning and developing a range of skills. Every child is different. They each have their own strengths that can help them manage change when starting school.



The following provides you with some ideas for helping your child manage change and build on their social and emotional, independence and learning skills. Many of the suggestions will be things that you are already doing, and your child will keep progressing in these areas when they start school. You may like to choose one or two skills to focus on over the next few months. Choosing a small number of skills is important as you do not want to overwhelm your child in the lead up to starting school.

Social and emotional skills

Teach friendship skills: Teach your child ways to introduce themselves to new children, join in play with others and be friendly and co-operative. Talk to your child about what being a good friend means (eg sharing, taking turns at choosing a play activity, using kind words).

Encourage sharing and taking turns: Playing with your child, following their lead and having fun together will help develop their social skills. Playing simple board games, card games or computer games with children helps them to develop sharing and turn taking skills. It also helps children to cope with disappointment when they do not always win.

Invite children to play together: Arranging for your child to get together with other children helps them to establish friendships and practise their social skills. Providing positive guidance and helping to structure activities (eg using blocks to build a tower together) can be helpful when supporting children to establish new friendships.

Involve your child in conversations: Talking with your child and involving them in conversations can help them to learn the rules of communication such as waiting for a turn, expressing ideas and listening without interrupting.

Help your child to manage their emotions: Emotional skills include being able to recognise, express, understand and manage a wide range of feelings. You can promote your child's emotional development by spending time with them and being warm and responsive to their needs. Talk to your child about what is happening and help them to describe and label the emotions they are feeling.

Get to know other families in the school community: Arranging to meet with other families in the school community prior to starting school will help develop relationships and a sense of connectedness to the school community.

Independence skills

Encourage self-help skills: These skills include your child dressing and undressing themselves, eating from their lunch box, going to the toilet and asking for help. Encouraging your child to develop these skills will give them lots of confidence in being able to do things for themselves.

Promote a sense of responsibility: Encouraging your child to take responsibility for small tasks (eg setting the table for dinner, putting their clothes in the wash basket) will help them feel useful and build their self-confidence.

Teach your child to care for their belongings: Encourage your child to care for and respect their belongings (eg tidying up toys, putting pencils back in their pencil case).

Involve your child in making decisions: Providing your child with simple choices will give them practice for decisions they may need to make at school. Start with giving two choices such as the red or the blue top when getting dressed or an apple or banana for a snack. This will give them the confidence to make bigger decisions.

Develop your child's understanding of social rules: Talk to your child about how different settings have different rules and expectations (eg rules at preschool, rules around a swimming pool to keep everyone safe). This will help them adjust to some new rules they will need to learn to remember and follow at school.

Learning skills

Introduce early literacy and numeracy skills: These include your child recognising numbers and letters, and counting and writing their own name. Introduce the concept of counting and letter recognition through everyday activities. For example, count the number of toys on the floor, point to words when reading aloud to your child, sing songs, say nursery rhymes and foster an enjoyment of listening to stories. Remember, children will get plenty of practice with reading and writing once they start school.

Encourage your child to focus on an activity: Encourage your child to sit and focus on an activity for a period of time (eg making a house from blocks, building a racing track, drawing a picture, doing a puzzle). Your child may benefit from you sitting with them or checking back at regular intervals to provide positive encouragement and feedback as they concentrate and enjoy themselves. For example, you might say, "wow, look at the size of the house you built! Could we add a fence or garden?"

Encourage listening skills: Reading books or listening to CD or DVD recordings of stories is a great way to help develop your child's listening skills. Asking questions about the story can also support your child's understanding and communication skills. For example, ask questions about what has happened, what might happen next or how characters might be feeling. To promote curiosity, you might ask, " I wonder what would happen if...?"

Help your child to follow instructions: Start by giving your child one instruction to follow (eg get your socks) and walk with them to do it if necessary. You can then build up to giving your child two-step instructions (eg put your dish in the sink and get your socks). Children often have difficulty remembering more than two or three instructions at a time.

Promote a hands-on approach to learning: Learning occurs through everyday play and experiences. Providing opportunities to experience new places, such as going to the library to look for books, visiting places in the community and following your child's interests (eg looking for bugs with lots of legs), will show them that learning is fun. 'Make-believe' play, such as when children pretend to be characters, encourages their imagination and creative skills. Materials such as empty boxes, writing materials and dress-up clothes can help to support make-believe play.

Encourage hand-eye coordination: Using scissors and glue, drawing, building with blocks, helping with cooking (stirring and pouring), and throwing and catching balls can help children to learn and practise hand-eye coordination, which is important as they learn to read and write.

For more information

If you would like more information, KidsMatter has produced a range of resources to support your child through early childhood and primary school. The following information sheets related to this topic are available online at **www.kidsmatter.edu.au/families/information-sheets**

KidsMatter Early Childhood information sheets:

- *Feelings matter*
- *Children and play: Resources for families and staff*
- *Learning positive friendship skills*
- *Supporting children to develop friendships and empathy*

KidsMatter Primary information sheets:

- *Social and emotional learning: Suggestions for families*
- *Emotional development: Suggestions for families*
- *Helping children learn positive friendship skills*
- *Friendship skills: Suggestions for families*

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Starting School information sheets for families. View them all online at **www.kidsmatter.edu.au/startingschool**

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Starting School

Getting ready for school

In the lead up to your child starting school, there are many ways you can plan and prepare for the changes ahead. This will help your child and family make a successful start to school. Every family will have different preparation ideas and strategies, so it's best to make a plan that suits your individual family. The following are a range of useful tips and ideas from early childhood educators, teachers and parents.

In the months before school

Get to know your child's school. You could find out:

- if your child's school is holding information nights that your family can attend. When are the transition to school sessions scheduled to start?
- the layout of your child's school and how it differs from their early childhood setting. Where are the classrooms and how are they organised? Where are the toilets, drinking taps, out of school hours care rooms and play equipment?
- how the school day is organised. What time does school start and finish? When and how long are the play times? How does this routine differ to your child's previous routine at home or in their early childhood setting?
- what children are expected to bring to school each day
- how communication between the school and home will happen
- the before and after school care arrangements for working families
- how you can get involved in the school community and meet other families starting at the school.

In the weeks leading up to the first day

Prepare for the new school day routine

There are many things that families can do before school starts to make children's transition easier. Practising changes to your daily routine will help build your child's sense of security and reduce the stress of getting to school. Visits to the school will help familiarise your child with the school and build their confidence.

You can practise what going to school will be like for your child using some of the following ideas. Remember that you know your child best – some children feel most confident with a lot of preparation whereas for others too much may be overwhelming. You can tailor the techniques below to suit your child.

- Travel to and from school several times as a practice run. Try going at the usual school drop-off and pick-up times as this will help you and your child get to know what to expect (eg how busy the traffic will be, which route to take).
- Practise the school day routine. This may include the morning routine of getting up early, putting on your child's uniform and packing their school bag. Setting up a regular bedtime routine will allow your child to wake up fresh and ready for the day.
- Practise lunch time routines. For example, you may like to set up a pretend picnic in the backyard or park. Help your child practise getting their lunchbox out of their school bag and guide them to open it by themselves. You may also assist your child with identifying what to eat for playtime and lunchtime. Think of ways you can make it easier for your child to manage their food. This may include ensuring your child can open the packaging.
- Create a visual checklist with your child. This list could include things that need to be done in the evening and morning before they leave for school. Taking photos of your child doing the actions for the checklist can be a fun way to learn.
- Write a story with your child about their new school and what happens during the day. You can draw pictures or include photographs in the story and read it together. This may help to ease their anxiety about what happens during the day. (See the Starting School *A picture book about me* online resource).
- Visit the school on weekends if permitted. Your child can practise using the climbing equipment and playing in the school grounds.
- Arrange opportunities for your child to play with other children who will be starting at the same school. Seeing familiar faces will help your child feel confident and more relaxed on their first day and during the first weeks of school.

Plan ahead for changes

Starting school is a big change for your child that can lead to a range of emotions. You may find your child is excited but they may also be exhausted and tired, even if they are used to long hours at their preschool or early childhood education and care (ECEC) setting. Take the time to notice their mood, and think about how you will support your child to manage these feelings and reduce their stress or anxiety. Every family's strategies are different, so it can be helpful to reflect on what has helped your child manage and adapt to change in the past.

- Consider what sorts of after school activities might be helpful for your child. For some children, minimising after school activities or waiting until your child is settled into school before introducing new activities is helpful. The school day can be quite long for your child and they may not have the energy to engage in other activities. They can begin after school activities once they have adjusted into the new routine.
- Plan some relaxing time after school. Depending on your child's interests, this may consist of quiet play or jumping on the trampoline. Follow your child's lead on what works best for them.
- Help your child to get a good night's sleep. Having a regular routine such as taking a bath before bedtime or reading a book may help your child to relax.

Help manage separation distress

In the lead up to starting school, you may be concerned about how your child will cope with being separated from you. Perhaps they took a long time to adjust to being without you when they started attending preschool or day care. You might feel a bit unsure of how they will cope in their new school environment. In your planning for school, you might like to consider:

- What will help my child separate comfortably from me in the morning?
- What has helped my child in the past?
- Would my child benefit from taking a picture or special object from home?
- What will I do to help myself cope? (eg catch up with a friend, exercise)

It will also help to:

- Talk to your child's early childhood educator and new school teacher – they can help to put some ideas in place to support your child to separate from you.
- Develop a positive goodbye routine together (eg sharing a 'high five', special goodbye hug or a funny or loving gesture like a bear hug).
- Always say goodbye and reassure your child of when you will collect them (eg that you will be back at home time to pick them up, or what the arrangements are for after school care). This helps build their trust and sense of security.
- Avoid lengthy goodbyes as they may increase separation distress.
- Talk positively and enthusiastically about what your child will be doing when they are away from you (eg "you will have a story", "you're going to have fun meeting new children"). Children will pick up on your cues if you are feeling nervous so try to be mindful of what you communicate about your own emotions.
- Take care of your own emotions in managing the separation. (For more information, see Starting School video 6: *A change for the whole family*.)

The night before school starts

It may be helpful to:

- Have your child's uniform laid out so it is ready to be put on in the morning. If there is no uniform, help your child choose which clothes they will wear.
- Assist your child to pack their school bag so it is ready for the big day.
- Stick to familiar routines as much as possible. Try to have a calm evening and allow more time to settle before bedtime if your child is feeling excited or nervous about starting school.

The first day

On the first day, you may like to:

- Allow extra time in the morning. You may want to take photos to capture the moment!
- Talk positively about the day ahead on the way to school and remind your child where you will be at pick-up time.
- Manage your own anxiety. You may like to plan a relaxing activity the night before or arrange to have coffee with another parent after the school drop-off.
- Have a small snack ready at the end of the day to help your child re-energise.
- Remember that your child might be exhausted when they get home. Give them some down time and try not to overwhelm them with too many questions about the day. Grandparents and extended family members might need to be reminded about this too.
- Celebrate the first day of school as it is a huge milestone to achieve. You may like to organise a special activity or dinner together as a family on the weekend to celebrate.

For more information

If you would like more information, KidsMatter has produced a range of resources to support your child through early childhood and primary school. The following information sheets related to this topic are available online at **www.kidsmatter.edu.au/families/information-sheets**

KidsMatter Early Childhood information sheets:

- *Being away from one another*
- *Understanding and managing separation distress*
- *Helping children to cope with separation distress*
- *Developing positive separations: Resources for families and staff*

KidsMatter Primary information sheets:

- *Belonging at school makes a difference*
- *Why connect at school?*

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Starting School

Getting help when starting school

You may have some concerns about how your child will cope when starting school. Perhaps they had a particularly hard time adjusting into their early childhood education and care (ECEC) setting and the educator has raised some concerns with you. Or despite the planning and preparation you have done in helping to get your child ready for school, they may be having difficulties adjusting to their new school setting.

You know your child best, and if you are at any time concerned about your child, a good place to start is sharing information with your child's educator or teacher. They are there to support families as well as the children in their care. They have a lot of knowledge about child development and learning, and have observed your child during the day with children of the same age. Even if the school has not yet met your child, raising any concerns early can help them get the assistance your child needs before starting school.

As children transition to school, a change in behaviour is quite common. Children are adjusting to a new setting and forming new relationships with staff and other children. They may also be feeling a sense of loss after leaving their previous setting where they may have formed important relationships with peers and early childhood educators. (See the Starting School *Understanding behaviour* information sheet for further information about some of the behaviours that are common during the transition to school.)

What can you do?

You may need to get help at any stage during the transition to school. This includes the year before school begins, during the transition period and in the weeks or months after school has begun.

The following tips may be helpful:

- If you are concerned about your child, take time to observe them in a range of situations or settings (eg when visiting friends, at the shops). Take note of when, where and how often your child is showing the particular behaviour or emotion of concern.
- Talk to your child's early childhood educator, school teacher or others who have regular contact with your child and find out if they have any concerns.
- Discuss any strategies that you have found useful in responding to your child's needs with the early childhood educator or teacher. They may also have suggestions about what strategies they have found helpful to support your child.
- Get to know what types of assistance may be available for children and families in your area.

What types of assistance may be available?

Assistance does not always mean a referral to a professional service. There are many different levels of assistance and support, and it is important to find the right one for you and your child.

These include:

Within the ECEC service or school: This can include educators, support staff, family and peer networks, an early childhood advisor in your ECEC service or wellbeing staff within your child's school. Your child's ECEC service and/or school may also have information, resources and activities available.

Within the wider community: This can include GPs, paediatricians, psychologists, counsellors, family and friends. Members of the wider community may also run information sessions on activities and groups that your child and/or family can attend. Making an appointment with your GP may be a good place to start as they can help you decide if there is a need for specialist support and refer you to an appropriate children's mental health specialist if required.

Why is seeking help important?

Keep in mind there are lots of different ways to access help for your child (eg talking to a friend, talking to an educator or teacher, visiting the doctor) but if you are worried it is important to talk to someone so that you and your child can get the support you need. The earlier you access help, the better, so that your child receives the best support possible.

For more information

If you would like more information, KidsMatter has produced a range of resources to support your child through early childhood and primary school. The following information sheets related to this topic are available online at **www.kidsmatter.edu.au/families/information-sheets**

KidsMatter Early Childhood information sheets:

- *Getting help*
- *Seeking help for children's mental health difficulties*
- *Accessing support: Suggestions for families and staff*
- *Supporting children's mental health: Suggestions for families and staff*

KidsMatter Primary information sheets:

- *Knowing when to get help*
- *How mental health difficulties affect children*
- *Recognising mental health difficulties: Suggestions for families*

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Starting School information sheets for families. View them all online at **www.kidsmatter.edu.au/startingschool**

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Starting School

Understanding behaviour

Starting school involves a big change for your child. It is normal for children to have strong feelings as they start to think about these changes, such as excitement about the prospect of going to school as well as nervousness about what lies ahead. Your child may also be feeling sad or angry about leaving early childhood education and care. This includes letting go of relationships formed with educators and other children, as well as a change to their familiar routines.

Some common feelings children have during transition to school can include:

- excitement
- sadness
- anger
- anticipation
- fear or anxiety.

Understanding and helping your child to handle the feelings associated with starting school will help to reduce their stress and can provide them with positive coping strategies.

Common behaviours

Young children often have difficulty explaining in words how they feel. Instead they may show their feelings through their behaviour. Some behaviours may be easier to spot like tantrums and crying, while others may be more difficult to notice like being quieter than usual. During the transition to school you may notice the following behaviours emerge or increase in frequency:

- clinging behaviour (eg not wanting to separate from you)
- restlessness (eg difficulty settling at activities, easily distracted, fidgeting)
- withdrawing (eg not participating in familiar activities, less engaged, less willing to persist)
- being anxious (eg shyness, fidgeting, stomach aches, needing excessive reassurance around the routines or plans for the day)
- refusing to comply (eg not wanting to follow rules and routines)
- avoidance strategies (eg increased negotiations around participation)
- planning and organisation difficulties (eg trouble getting started, remembering or finishing tasks)
- increase in crying and tantrums (eg more often or in more situations)
- changes in eating habits (eg loss of appetite, becomes fussy with food, overeating)
- sleep difficulties (eg trouble falling or staying asleep, nightmares)
- regression to younger behaviours (eg bedwetting, thumb sucking, baby talk)
- aggressive behaviours (eg hitting, kicking, shouting).

These behaviours are examples of different ways children respond to challenging situations. They are very typical for children within this age group and you have probably already noticed some of these behaviours during other times of change. However, if the behaviours persist or are interfering with your child's daily life it is a good idea to get further help. (For more information, see the Starting School *Getting help when starting school* information sheet.)

What these behaviours may communicate

As it can be difficult for children to explain how they are feeling, it is often up to the adults around them to help work out what feelings and emotions may be underlying a child's behaviour. As parents and carers, you are in the best position to help work out how your child may be feeling. It can be useful to do this in collaboration with your child's educator and teacher, who will also have a good insight into your child. When you notice these changes in behaviour, you will still need to reinforce or set clear limits for your child while thinking carefully about what it might be telling you. Understanding how your child is feeling and why they are behaving in a particular way can help you work out how to support them, emotionally and practically.

For instance, when you notice a change in behaviour you might ask yourself:

- What is my child feeling?
- Why might they be feeling that way?
- Have they behaved this way before?
- How did I support them previously?

Talking about your child's feelings

Because of the changes associated with starting school, your child may benefit from some extra nurturing and understanding to help them feel secure and confident. Being open and receptive to how your child is feeling as well as providing comfort and attention when needed will help to support them through these changes.

Spend time with your child

Putting aside some special time with your child will give you an opportunity to talk with them and help them express their feelings about starting school. This can be challenging for parents who are busy with other children or have work commitments, but conversations with your child can take place at any time. It may be within your child's everyday routines such as having dinner together or driving in the car. It may also be helpful to find times when your child feels most comfortable, such as when they are playing in the park or engaging in their favourite activity (eg on the swings or kicking a ball). Finding time during a shared activity will help your child to feel relaxed and comfortable to open up during a conversation with you. Some useful ways to prompt these conversations include:

- sharing a story about when you have started something new (eg a job) and some of the feelings you had. This may help your child to feel more comfortable to express how they are feeling
- using open ended questions that elicit more than yes or no answers (eg "What did you like about school during your visit today?")
- using prompts and encouragement or gestures like smiles and nodding to show your child you are interested in what they are saying.

Sometimes children just aren't in the mood for talking and that's okay. Be guided by your child in whether they want to talk, what they want to talk about and for how long. Just being there with your child, sharing an enjoyable activity or having a cuddle can help them feel supported and more at ease at times of change.

Help your child recognise and express their feelings

Labelling feelings is one of the first steps in helping children understand and manage emotions. Once they understand what particular emotions feel like in their body, they can start to use words to describe them and begin to work out how they might manage their feelings. The following tips may be useful:

- Label and name your emotions. This helps children to put a name to the expression you are showing.

  "I'm so excited to go to the park with you."

  "I feel frustrated that I have lost my keys."
- Help label your child's emotions. This will help your child match how they are feeling with the name of the emotion. This can be beneficial when your child is not yet able to describe some of their more complex feelings (eg worry).

  "I can see that you're worried about making new friends."
- Invite your child to describe their feelings.

  "I feel disappointed it's raining and we can't go out to play. How about you?"

  "How do you feel when you go to visit Sara?"
- Talk about feelings in stories you read with your child. Pinpoint some of the characters' feelings and relate them to what is happening in the story.

  "Aisha looks a bit sad about going to school."

  "How do you think Aisha is feeling about starting school?"

  At times, you could extend this to relate it to your child's own experiences (eg "has this happened to you?" or "have you felt that way?") to help your child make links to their own experiences.

Get involved in your child's play

Children often express their thoughts and emotions through everyday play, drawing and painting. The use of toys, dolls, animal figures or dress-ups can help with imaginative play and allow your child to act out a situation that they may be experiencing. Your child may also like to draw or paint a picture (eg their new school and teacher). You can then invite your child to talk about the picture. These types of activities can be a great way for your child to express their feelings as the focus is not directly on them.

Active listening

Active listening is an important part of talking with your child and can encourage them to express how they are feeling. It helps them to feel that you understand what they are going through.

Active listening involves the following steps:

Stop and give your child your full attention. This may involve moving away from a busy place where there are lots of other people. At a time when you cannot give your child your full attention (eg when caring for another child), let your child know that you want to listen and will give them your full attention after you finish. Prioritising time to listen actively to your child will help to show them that their feelings are important.

Look at your child. If possible, get down to their level to show them you are ready to listen.

Listen carefully to what is being said in words and through your child's body language without interrupting. Listening involves eye contact and nodding where appropriate.

Reflect the feeling. Use the opportunity to respond and gently describe what you think your child is feeling and why. This allows you to check if you have understood what your child is feeling.

Example: Sally and her mum

Mum: "You've been sitting very quietly and hugging your teddy bear. It seems like you are feeling sad about something. Would you like to tell me about it?"

Sally: "Ms Kyrra won't be at school."

Mum: "Are you feeling sad because you will miss Ms Kyrra when you go to school."

Sally: "Yes, and I'm a bit worried about what the new teacher will be like."

How to start a conversation

- "You seem to be feeling...about..."
- "It looks like you feel...with..."
- "You sound...at..."
- "You seem...because..."

Active listening can be useful not only when starting school, but in any situation where your child is experiencing strong emotions. (For more information, see the Starting School *Problem solving* and *Coping skills* information sheets for useful strategies for responding to difficulties your child may be experiencing.)

For more information

If you would like more information, KidsMatter has produced a range of resources to support your child through early childhood and primary school. The following information sheets related to this topic are available online at **www.kidsmatter.edu.au/families/information-sheets**

KidsMatter Early Childhood information sheets:

- *Everyone feels overwhelmed at times*
- *Children and emotions: How to help*
- *Understanding and managing separation distress*
- *Feelings matter*
- *Play helps children feel good about themselves*

KidsMatter Primary information sheets:

- *Why feelings are important*
- *Making sense of children's emotions*
- *How temperament affects feelings*
- *Serious behaviour difficulties: Suggestions for families*

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Starting School

Problem solving

Your child will face many challenges as they grow, whether it is starting school, joining a sporting team or going to their first sleepover. The ability to make decisions and solve problems develops as your child learns to cope with daily challenges. Young children are not expected to sort through every issue on their own, and it is likely that they will require lots of guidance from their family. The good news is encouraging your child to take part in problem solving will help them develop this skill over time.

The following steps are a useful guide to teaching your child about problem solving. Encourage your child to take part so that they can slowly learn to do it for themselves.

Remember, it is best to begin when your child is feeling calm and relaxed. Start with an issue where you know they are likely to experience some success. If your child is very anxious or angry, help them to calm down first (eg having some quiet time, taking some deep breaths) or leave problem solving for another day or another issue when you know your child is ready to participate.

1 Identify the problem

This step can be difficult as children do not always have the words to tell you how they feel or know exactly what the problem is. Finding a quiet space where your child feels comfortable and relaxed may help them to start talking about it. Using your active listening skills will also help your child to feel understood and supported in talking to you. (For more information, see the Starting School *Understanding behaviour* information sheet.) Your child will benefit from your help in trying to understand what might be happening, particularly when they are having difficulty identifying the problem. Remember to step back and not jump in to solving the problems for your child at this stage.

2 Find solutions and try them out

Once you have a better sense of what the problem is, you may like to generate some solutions with your child. Brainstorming two or three solutions is a good place to start as any more may seem overwhelming for a young child. They may not yet be able to generate their own solutions, but you can encourage their thinking with questions such as “what do you think you/we could do?” With practice and support from others, your child will gradually be able to come up with more of their own solutions. However, you may need to make some suggestions in the beginning.

Once you and your child have identified some options, you can decide together which one to try first. Work out a plan for how they will try out their solution. Do they need support from you, another child or a teacher? When will they get a chance to try it out? (eg at home or in the school playground.)

3 Check in: how did it go?

Once your child has tried the solution, check in with your child as soon as possible. Did it work? If not, why not? What could your child try next? Remember to give your child lots of support and encouragement if the solution didn’t work out. Sometimes we have the right solution, but need to practise it many times. Other times, we may need to return to step one to see if the issue was correctly identified.

You can help to support your child's problem solving skills

- Model your own problem solving. Next time a daily problem arises (eg losing your car keys) talk through the problem and solution out loud. This will help to show your child that everyone has problems and that we can work through them by coming up with different solutions.
- Encourage your child to utilise support people to assist them with problem solving. These could be family members, friends, educators and teachers. This will promote help-seeking behaviours in your child and enable them to feel supported when they have a problem.

Learning to negotiate solutions to everyday problems and make decisions for themselves will help your child to gradually become more independent and responsible. It also helps them feel confident and good about themselves, which is an important part of mental health and wellbeing. When their mental health is supported, children are better learners, have stronger relationships and are better able to meet life's challenges.

For more information

If you would like more information, KidsMatter has produced a range of resources to support your child through early childhood and primary school. The following information sheets related to this topic are available online at **www.kidsmatter.edu.au/families/information-sheets**

KidsMatter Early Childhood information sheets:

- *Helping young kids to choose wisely*
- *Learning to make good decisions and solve problems*
- *Decision-making skills: Suggestions for families and staff*

KidsMatter Primary information sheets:

- *Helping kids to choose wisely*
- *Decision-making skills: Suggestions for families*

This resource is part of a range of KidsMatter Starting School information sheets for families. View them all online at **www.kidsmatter.edu.au/startingschool**

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Starting School

Coping skills

As they grow and develop, all children encounter situations where they feel worried, nervous and sometimes even scared. Starting school involves a big change for your child as they settle into a new environment and begin forming relationships with peers and school staff. Even if your child's transition to school goes smoothly, it is likely that they will encounter some ups and downs throughout their primary school years. Helping your child to learn coping skills as they start school will allow them to develop and practise skills that will enable them to cope with future changes and challenges. This will help to strengthen your child's mental health and wellbeing now and into the future.

What are coping skills?

Coping skills are what we think and what we do to help us get through difficult situations. Your child will begin to learn and use different coping skills from the time they are born. You can build on the skills they are already using, as well as assist them to learn new ones. This may include asking for help, talking with friends, problem solving and taking time out when they need a break. You may also explore how you can help your child manage strong emotions, promote helpful thinking and assist them to break down tasks into smaller, manageable chunks. Following your child's lead will help you work out what approach will be best for them. For some children, talking about a problem too much may lead to an increase in anxiety.

Helping children cope

There are lots of ways you can help your child to cope during challenging or worrying situations. You might like to:

Listen and talk to your child. Help them to identify their concerns or worries and acknowledge how they are feeling. For example, you could say, "it sounds like you are worried about who you will play with at school tomorrow." (For more information on active listening, see the Starting School *Understanding behaviour* information sheet.)

Comfort your child. There may be times when your child does not want to talk and just having a parent nearby engaging in a shared activity or giving them a cuddle is helpful.

Reassure your child when they are feeling worried or unsure. For example, you could say, "it is a big playground but there is an area for just the little kids to play."

Demonstrate and model ways that you cope with situations. For example, you could say, "I am going to take five deep breaths to help myself relax."

Prepare your child for changes. Talk positively with your child about school, show them their new surroundings and do activities together that relate to starting school, such as reading stories about change.

Encourage help-seeking by teaching your child when to ask for help. For example, your child could ask a teacher for help to open their lunch box.

Problem-solve the situation with your child through a step-by-step process. (For more information, see the Starting School *Problem solving* information sheet.)

Encourage your child by talking positively about their attempts to cope.

Managing strong emotions

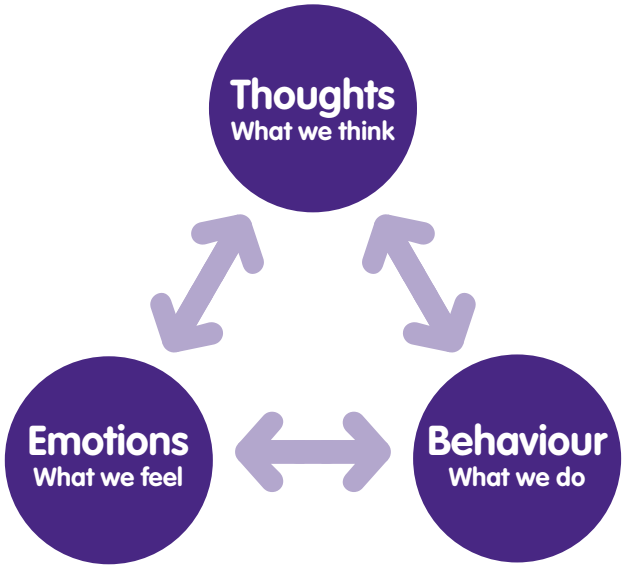
When faced with a difficult or challenging situation your child may feel angry, worried or perhaps distressed. It can be hard for them to think clearly at these times, and it makes communication and cooperation difficult. If your child is experiencing a strong emotion, it's important to acknowledge it and be nearby to support your child. You may also consider teaching your child strategies to calm themselves. There will be different strategies that help each child to feel calmer, and some children need more time and structure than others. Follow your child's lead to find out what helps them to feel relaxed.

Some suggestions include:

- counting to ten
- taking five deep breaths
- jumping on the trampoline
- going to a quiet place
- playing with toys.

Promote helpful ways of thinking

Another way you can help your child to cope is by helping them to begin to understand that how we think affects the way we feel and how we behave.



This means that how we think also affects how we cope with a challenging situation. You can begin to teach your child that sometimes we have 'helpful' thoughts that make us feel and act in positive ways. Some examples of helpful thoughts include:

- "I drew a really good picture at school today."
- "This is hard to do, but it will get easier the more times I try it."
- "I can try my best."
- "I can always ask my teacher if I need help."

You can also begin to teach your child that at other times we have 'unhelpful' thoughts that can lead us to feeling negative or bad about ourselves or a situation and can stop us from doing what we want to do. Some examples of unhelpful thoughts include:

- "I can't do this."
- "No one will like me."
- "I won't be able to do it without Mum."
- "I'm stupid."
- "It's too hard, I will never be able to do it."

Example: Cassandra and Soo-Meng

When arriving at school, Cassandra waved to her friend Soo-Meng across the playground. Soo-Meng did not wave back to Cassandra.

- An unhelpful thought Cassandra might have had in this situation is: "Soo-Meng doesn't like me anymore." (Thought)
- Having this thought is likely to make Cassandra feel sad and unhappy. (Emotion)
- Cassandra may then avoid Soo-Meng if she thinks she doesn't like her anymore. (Behaviour)

Examples of more helpful thoughts for Cassandra might be "Soo-Meng didn't see me wave" or "Soo-Meng is just busy playing". This will help her to feel okay about herself and her friendships. Cassandra may then approach Soo-Meng to play with her later.

Children need to understand that it's not wrong to have unhelpful thoughts as everybody has them, but that learning to recognise unhelpful thoughts and finding more helpful ways of thinking is a way to better manage their feelings. Young children need adult support to find more helpful ways to think, but as they get older they can slowly start to learn to do more for themselves.

You might have already found some ways to help your child to see things from a different or more helpful perspective. You might say things like:

- "It doesn't mean she doesn't like you anymore. Do you think there are other ways we could think about that?"
- "Yes, it does look a bit tricky but how about just giving it a try?"
- "You were brave when you had your last injection; let's be brave like a lion again and it will be over in no time."
- "It doesn't have to be perfect. Just have a go."

How to support your child's helpful thinking

- Acknowledge and validate how they are feeling (eg "it sounds like you're feeling worried because you won't know anyone at school"). Dismissing what children are feeling (eg "don't think like that") can lead them to believe they are wrong to think or feel that way and stop them from expressing their feelings with you the next time a problem arises.
- Help your child to look at the situation from a more helpful perspective. Thoughts such as "I can be brave" or "I can only try my best" can help to replace negative thoughts.
- Remind your child of a time they coped with something similar in the past (eg "Remember when you started preschool you felt worried, but then you got to know everyone and you felt okay").
- Model helpful thinking. Children learn a lot from watching family members use helpful thinking to cope with challenging situations. Thinking out loud can help to teach your child how to come up with helpful thoughts (eg "I'm feeling nervous about meeting the other parents too but I can just be friendly and say hello").

Helpful thinking is about promoting positive coping skills and encouraging children to feel good about themselves. This will help your child to feel more confident in new situations.

A plan for coping

Your child might be facing a challenge or worry that seems too overwhelming for them to tackle all at once. Breaking down the worry or challenge into small steps will help your child to slowly face their fear. You can devise a plan with your child where you work out small steps to help them reach their goal.

Take the following example of Jalak who has trouble speaking in front of his preschool group during show and tell. His mother, father and Jalak sat down together to work out the following plan:

Jalak's goal	**To speak in front of the class at preschool**
Step 1	Practise in front of his favourite teddy with no one watching
Step 2	Practise in front of Mum and Dad
Step 3	Practise in front of the whole family (parents, siblings and cousins)
Step 4	Practise with a small group at preschool
Step 5	Participate in show and tell in front of the preschool class

Jalak was slowly able to face his fear of speaking in front of the class with lots of practice in small steps and the help of his early childhood educator. Jalak felt very proud that he was able to achieve success.

The following tips will help you develop a plan for coping:

- Ensure that the first step is achievable for your child. This will build their confidence and help them to feel good about themselves.
- When your child feels comfortable with the first step, encourage them to start the next step. If your child is resisting, you may need to return to your plan and break it down into smaller steps.
- It is not uncommon for children to need to return to an earlier step or need extra time and practice at one of the steps before feeling ready to move forward. Remember to proceed at a pace that is comfortable for your child.
- Think of ways you can encourage and recognise your child's effort and hard work in facing their fears.

For more information

If you would like more information, KidsMatter has produced a range of resources to support your child through early childhood and primary school. The following information sheets related to this topic are available online at **www.kidsmatter.edu.au/families/information-sheets**

KidsMatter Early Childhood information sheets:

- *Keeping a balance: Managing feelings and behaviours*
- *Coping skills for managing emotions*
- *Supporting children to cope with stress*

KidsMatter Primary information sheets:

- *How thinking affects feelings*
- *Helping children cool down and stay calm*
- *Coping with fears and worries*
- *Fears and helpful self-talk*

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Kids Matter

Starting School

A change for the whole family

Starting school is not only a change for your child. Amid the excitement and preparation it can be important to take a moment to think about how this change affects you and your family. As you help your child to prepare for the changes ahead, it is important to monitor your own feelings. Having your child start school may lead to a new routine for you and your family. There may also be a period of adjustment as you begin to connect with the new school community and feel the loss of strong relationships formed at your child's early childhood education and care (ECEC) service. Thinking a little about how things are going to change for everyone can help you to make sure the whole family is ready for starting school.

Mixed emotions

Starting school may bring about a range of emotions for you and your family. Think back to your own experiences of starting school and some of the emotions you felt. As your child reaches this milestone, you may be feeling a sense of loss as they are spending more time out of the family home and in somebody else's care. Or perhaps you are worried about how your child will settle into their new setting, cope with new learning tasks and make friends. You may also be feeling excited and proud as your child is growing up and starting a new phase in their life. If you have other children in the family, they too may be experiencing a mix of emotions about their brother or sister starting school.

It is important to monitor your own reactions and consider what you may need during this time. Try to recognise when you are feeling stressed and the potential causes. This will help you to respond appropriately and think about what else you might need to do to prepare for starting school. Planning some enjoyable or relaxing activities to help you manage your own emotions can be really helpful. Your child is also likely to be aware of how you are feeling and this can influence their reaction to school. If you appear confident about the challenges ahead and express a positive outlook, this will help your child to feel confident about starting school.

A new family routine

As your child prepares to start school, take some time to think about how your family will adjust to the new routine. If you are a working parent, you may need to consider arrangements for before and after school care, or how you will organise school pick-up with your partner or other family members. You may need to allow more time in the mornings as you drop off one child at an ECEC service and the other at school. If your primary role has been mainly at home looking after your child, there might be a period of adjustment as your child is away from you for longer hours. Your child may also feel exhausted with all the changes they are experiencing, and you may consider adjusting or holding back on after school activities.

Supportive relationships

Supportive relationships can help everyone cope with challenging or difficult times. Talking through your concerns with your partner, friends and family, or your child's early childhood educator, can help to support you during your child's transition to school.

It can be really helpful at this time to connect with other families at your child's school. It's likely that they too are experiencing similar emotions. Sharing your concerns, hopes and experiences can be comforting and you may learn some useful tips or ideas. On your child's first day of school, it can be helpful to join in any social activities your school has on offer or arrange to meet up with some of the other parents.

Connecting with your child's school

As well as experiencing a mix of emotions about your child starting school, you may also experience a change in the strong relationships formed within your child's ECEC community. This is a good time to start linking in with your child's school community, which will help your family to feel supported and allow you to develop new relationships. Building connections between your family and the school will also help your child adjust to their new setting as you are able to provide and share valuable knowledge about your child. There may be opportunities where your child's school will seek information about your child. At other times you might find opportunities to communicate with them and take steps to become a part of the school community.

In preparing for starting school, it will be helpful to:

- Attend information nights and transition sessions held by your school.
- Share information about your child and their previous environment. One way to do this is to provide the school with a picture book about your child in their ECEC service (see the Starting School *A picture book about me* online resource). It's also a good idea to find out what information your ECEC service has passed onto the school.
- Speak with school staff if you are concerned about a particular issue (eg your child's fear of using school toilets, separation anxiety) and plan how you will address it before your child starts school.

Once your child has started school, there are many different ways you can continue to build connections. It is important to be involved in a way that suits you and your family. It can be helpful to:

- Maintain regular communication with your child's teacher and school staff. This includes talking to the school about your child's needs and interests, and discussing ways that the school can support your family.
- Stay informed through attending information evenings and activities at the school.
- Look out for social opportunities where your family can build relationships with other families throughout the school year.
- Take an interest in your child's learning. Talk to your child's teacher about what they are learning and how you can support this at home. Ask your child about their day and acknowledge their efforts in learning tasks.
- Look out for opportunities to share your knowledge, ideas and experiences with the wider school community (eg volunteering, sharing cultural traditions and customs).

Remember, everything you do makes a difference in supporting your child's learning and development, and building a positive relationship with your school community. If you are not sure how to be involved, ask your child's teacher or other families for ideas.

Starting school is a huge milestone for your child, but the changes also have an impact on the whole family. It is important to monitor your own emotions and consider how your routine will change. Supportive relationships and building connections with your school community will help your child and family during this time.

For more information

If you would like more information, KidsMatter has produced a range of resources to support your child through early childhood and primary school. The following information sheets related to this topic are available online at **www.kidsmatter.edu.au/families/information-sheets**

KidsMatter Early Childhood information sheets:

- *The building blocks of healthy family relationships*
- *Family relationships: Suggestions for families and staff*
- *Supporting parents and carers to look after themselves*
- *Promoting self-care: Suggestions for families and staff*

KidsMatter Primary information sheets:

- *Belonging at school makes a difference*
- *Why connect at school?*
- *What makes a positive school community?*

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