

Regarding the school program

Some schools are now using much more relaxed programmes in the first years. Children are given time to develop so that skills such as reading and writing come more easily to them. Don't worry if your child still seems to prefer playing with blocks or puzzles rather than sitting still to write or read. Just as he walked when he was ready, so he will write when he is ready.

Trust your teachers and help in any way you can. One of the very best things you can do to help, of course, is to continue to read to and with your child. If you find joy in reading undoubtedly your child will too. Join your council library, use your school library if permitted, let your child choose the books. A love of reading is a wonderful base for all education.

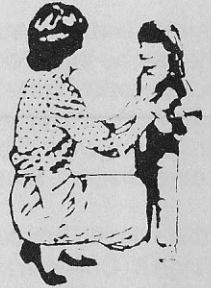
Similarly, let your child see you writing, and talk about it, whether the grocery list, or a letter to grandma. Help your child write a letter, perhaps, and see the joy when an answer arrives. This is the best way to get the message across that writing has a real life purpose.

Children absorb the joys of reading and writing from their environment and you, the parents, can provide a living example of those joys. What better preparation for the tasks at school?



EARLY EDUCATION REFORM GROUP PUBLICATION

GETTING STARTED



Soon your child will be off to school - such a big step for a small person! How will she cope? The first few days are sure to be exciting, full of joyful anticipation. She'll get up early, get dressed, and urge you to "get going".

Will this joy last? It does for some children but not for others. Perhaps you will find your child becomes a little anxious, even a little fearful, dawdling over breakfast, finding all kinds of reasons for not being ready yet.

Most children are enthusiastic at first, and many continue to be so. On the other hand, some appear to lose that enthusiasm fairly swiftly, and parents of such children may become disappointed and puzzled about what has happened. So let us take a look at school, and try to understand some of the quite difficult changes to which children must adjust if they are to operate comfortably.

First, they have to separate from parents, some of them for the first time, and go into a bigger and noisier situation than hitherto experienced. They have to learn to know and trust a new teacher who is herself learning about 25 new children and so has very little time for individual attention. The children have to mix-in and co-operate with this large group, many of them strangers. They may be required to share and take turns with these strangers.



They have to manage their personal belongings, and try not to lose hats, bags, shoes, handkerchiefs, lunchboxes and rain-coats. In most schools these very young children spend morning tea and lunch times in a busy, noisy playground, very different from their environment last year.

Many children take all these changes in their stride, and indeed seem to thrive on it, but many do not. Children not yet sufficiently secure in an emotional and social sense may find this new situation quite uncomfortable and stressful, particularly in the first few months.

They may find, for instance, that instead of being able to "do their own thing" for most of the day, as they did last year at home or kindergarten or pre-school, they are now asked to concentrate for much of the time on what the teacher is saying. Not only are they asked to listen, but they are expected to remember, and then carry out any instructions given. Some of these given tasks may be beyond the present capacity of some children, thus causing further stress.

All this intense concentration can be very tiring, and some children simply can't manage it. Children aged 5-6 years are still at an intensely "physically active" stage and "sitting still" is very difficult for them.

Being on the move, using the muscles of their arms and legs and trunks, is a very natural and important part of development at this stage. All the wriggling and fidgeting that goes on is just part of children trying to do "what comes naturally" - but it doesn't help the teacher! (Perhaps there is a lesson there for all of us who do deal with young children - less sitting still and more action).

Another part of school which may present difficulty to some children is the requirement, quite early in the year in some schools, to handle a pencil and learn to write. Some children are not yet sufficiently developed for the complex task of writing, but given time, most children will do this quite easily. Don't be in a hurry - if your child's writing seems sloppy and untidy don't comment on it. He is probably trying very hard.

There are a few simple things which all parents can do to help children make a happy, successful start to their many years of schooling. Believe in your child. No matter how difficult the first months may seem to be, remember that the great majority of children are quite normal - some just take a little longer to develop to their own unique, individual pattern.

When children come home from school in this first year they may be very tired. This is when home should be a warm, relaxed place, with no great demands to do this or do that. Remember that support and encouragement are far more effective than criticism.

Try not to use expressions such as 'You must try harder' or 'Why can't you learn like your sister used to' or 'How come Andrew next door is reading and you can't'. Such expressions of disapproval are very discouraging to a five year old who almost undoubtedly has been trying his very best to keep up with the other children.

Another important thing to remember is that you as parents can be very supportive towards your child's school. Speak positively in front of the child about the school and its teachers - if you are critical the child may develop negative attitudes. Ask the teacher if there is anything you can do to help, such as preparing craft materials, if you have the time.

Always read the notice-board in case teachers have a request - they are far too busy to talk to individual parents during school time. If you are concerned about anything, make an appointment and try to sort it out amiably with the teacher. Until parents and teachers fully support each other, education will never be totally successful.

Now for a few practical suggestions

Make sure all personal belongings, hat, lunchbox etc are clearly labelled with the child's name. If children cannot recognise their own name, add a small transfer or sewn-on shape such as an animal or flower. Mix-ups over belongings cause many upsets.

Let children pack their own bags in the morning - it will let them know what is theirs, and will also help their independence. Choose small easy-to-eat lunches, carrot or celery sticks, small favorite-filling sandwiches, small bundles of dried fruit. Too much to eat can bother a child - you can always increase the amount if asked.

Dress children in loose, easy-to-wear clothes. See they can manage any buttons or zips. Buckles on sandals are easier than lace up shoes. Teach that buckles go on the same side as little toe. Sandals are safer than thongs.

Reinforce any safety rules instituted by the school - there is always a good reason for them. Always be early for pick-up time - tired five year olds can feel very lonely and deserted.

