

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 for children* 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*

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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