

■ GOOD SCHOOLS GUIDE ■

FIRST DAY BLUES

GETTING READY FOR THE FIRST DAY IN KINDERGARTEN

Both parents and children can have mixed emotions of excitement and nervousness, but early preparation can help make the big day one to remember, writes **Douglas Parkes**



The first day of kindergarten is a momentous occasion. For a young child, it represents a new stage in their life, outside home and away from mum and dad. For some, starting school is an exciting experience, full of new and wonderful possibilities. To other children it can appear scary, full of unknowns they are not yet equipped to understand and process. Similar thoughts and feelings are not just confined to the kids, either. Parents often have their own mixed emotions. Swelling pride sits beside sadness and apprehension when they wave goodbye on their child's first day at school.

"First days are always hard, even for us as adults," agrees Fairchild Kindergarten School principal Betty Yau, who goes on to say that, for children, the biggest anxiety on the first day of school will be separation from their

main carer, in most cases the parents, or their helper.

"There is also the lack of familiarity with the school environment, and with the new teachers in the class," she adds.

As well as the unfamiliarity of new people and places, communication can be a stressor in the beginning of school life. The relationship between a child and parent is often so strong and established that sometimes a child does not have to speak in order for a parent to know how they feel or what they want. "But with a new adult [teacher] this bond may not have been established yet – and this could cause the child to feel anxious if not handled carefully," explains Ruth Hanson, head of early years at Nord Anglia International School (NAIS) Hong Kong. "Also, a child may have worries around the setting

and being able to know and understand the environment. Where is everything, the routines, knowing the other children, the unspoken rules – all of these are new and therefore need to be considered carefully for each child."

To ease these nerves, Yau suggests parents do a form of "soft marketing" ahead of the first day at school by explaining to their child that they will be joining a new school and meeting new friends, where there will be many new things to explore.

As part of this process, an early visit to the chosen kindergarten can be invaluable. Yau recommends the family visit the school together – whether for an open house, a school tour or trial lesson – as this lets the child become familiar with the space and get excited about going to school.

Both children and parents are likely to experience separation anxiety.

Photo: Fairchild Kindergarten

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Bridging the distance between school and home in some way, if possible, is another piece of advice. “During your visit, take photos of the classroom and the school spaces, and class teacher if this is allowed,” advises Yau. “This provides the chance to bring school into a conversation at home and helps to emotionally prepare your child.”

Role-playing at home can help too, says Yau. Before school starts, try on the school uniform at home, pack your child’s school bag together and talk about what’s in the bag – items such as a water bottle and change of clothes – as this can help build a routine for the future and settle your child for when it comes to the real thing.

Of course, each pupil is an individual and, ahead of the big day, parents should consider their child’s emotional development. How do they cope with change or frustration? What about their social skills – how well do they respond to others, are they used to being involved in small groups? What is their level of independence – can they go to the toilet alone or feed themselves? And finally, their language development – how do they communicate their needs or ask for support or help?

“Each child will be at a different stage in their development of the above and as parents we can support our children in these areas,” says Nord Anglia’s Hanson. “We can reassure them about the up-and-coming change, we can take them to play spaces where they will play alongside other children, we can give them phrases and words to greet others and ask for help, and we support them in their growing independence by gradually developing their self-help skills.

“Don’t panic – share with your kindergarten how your child manages with these and remember, a



New pupils at Nord Anglia International School enjoy a weeklong settling period. Photo: Handout



Kindergarten is a time to grow accustomed to and become comfortable with classroom learning, not develop a lifelong aversion to it



Making new friends at Fairchild Kindergarten. Photo: Handout

kindergarten’s role is to care and teach your child, in partnership with you. So, even if your child struggles with any of the above, a good kindergarten will understand that their role is to continue to develop these areas with your child.”

Both Fairchild and NAIS take proactive steps to ensure their youngest pupils are eased into school life.

At the latter, each child has a settling period that can last up to a week, “which supports them and gradually builds up to the moment when a child can happily separate from their parents/carer for the full kindergarten session” says Hanson. Before that separation, teachers get to know both parent and child, and “stay and play” dates are arranged when parents or carer and child come to their new kindergarten for playtime. Here there is no separation time, just lots of playing and getting to know teachers, classmates and the new environment.

“During this settling time, and over the coming weeks, we focus on establishing a ‘sense of place’ for each child, so they understand the environment and know where key spaces are and how routines work,” explains Hanson.

“We also focus on developing a ‘sense of belonging’ for each child, so they feel safe and connected to the adults and other children in the setting. And finally, we focus on each child’s ‘sense of ownership’, so they begin to know that this is their kindergarten and they happily and confidently understand how they can play, learn, move and belong in their kindergarten.”

Similarly, Fairchild work closely with parents to ensure as smooth a transition as possible. The school shares photos and biographies of its teachers ahead of the first day along with a welcome letter which contains the class schedule so parents can talk to their child about what to expect before they arrive.

Communication with parents is crucial. Teachers meet parents and child as they arrive at school and keep in touch with parents by calling them and letting them know how their little one is settling in. Fairchild uses the Storypark app to share photos with the family too. The school also prepares a learning story showing parents videos and photos of their child in action, as well as twice weekly highlights from class. “In this way, we work in tandem with parents,” says Yau.

Parents themselves are not immune from anxiety either. Henrik Hoeg, managing director at the Jadis Blurton Family Development Center, cautions that parents need to be aware of the behaviour and emotions they model in front of their young ones at this crucial juncture.

“If you are the parent that waits anxiously as the school bus fades into the distance, visibly upset, your child is likely to mirror that too. There is nothing wrong with feeling a bit teary-eyed sending your child off to school, but be aware that you may be communicating that leaving is scary and negative. Your child won’t necessarily understand the complexity of the emotions involved for you; they simply see your distress as they are disappearing around a corner with a bus full of strangers.”

Hoeg says this awareness should extend to after school as well. You may be tempted to grill your child on every minute detail of their day, but don’t go too far with your interrogation. Be aware that you might be communicating that your child’s every movement is under the microscope. If you worry incessantly about their daily learning and friendships, then so will they.

“Kindergarten is a time to grow accustomed to and become comfortable with classroom learning, not develop a lifelong aversion to it,” says Hoeg.

In fact, everyone involved is likely to be nervous. First days anywhere are like that. Hanson remembers her first day teaching and her anxieties over whether the children would like her, what their parents would think, and how she would get along with her new colleagues.

“I was so nervous but wanted desperately to do a good job,” she says. There were hiccups along the way and days when things didn’t go to plan, but Hanson admits those were the most valuable learning experiences and that thanks to the support around her, she made it safely over those bumps in the road.

“We can all get nervous when joining a new group, class or job for the first time,” she says. “Will we enjoy it? Have we made a mistake? Should I have picked a different option? It’s good to understand that with every new experience comes excitement and challenges, and both should be expected and welcomed, for that is how we learn and grow.”