

IF THEY DON'T WANT TO GO TO SCHOOL AND OTHER COMMON QUESTIONS

How do I get my child ready for their first day of school or starting at a new school?

The first day of school will be full of excitement and possibly nerves—for both you and your child.

If possible, arrange a visit to meet the teacher before school starts. Often schools will offer an opportunity for new students to visit the school or even a half day to visit their new class. It may be possible to meet some of the other families and arrange a playdate or two at the playground before school starts. We can also practice the school run in the weeks leading up to the first day of school.

When the first day arrives, we can help orient our child. We can show them practical things like where their bag goes, where the toilets are, where and when lunch will be, where and when pickup will be. This will give our child some important points of references. When so much about the experience is still unknown and uncertain, this orientation will help our child feel some safety.

One thing that can help a child feel comfortable in a new school environment is having the ability to care for themselves. This can include: taking their shoes on and off, blowing their own nose, using the toilet independently (including pulling up and down their trousers/skirt and underpants, as well as wiping themselves), and being able to get changed for gym classes. When they can take care of their body, they will feel confident in other areas too.

What's the best way to say goodbye at drop-off?

The best advice Simone received when her children started at the Montessori preschool was to give a short, happy, and confident goodbye. Each day, she would say the same thing, “Have a lovely day at school. I’ll see you after story time. Love you lots!” and then confidently let the children shake hands with their teacher. At pickup time, Simone would almost always say, “It’s so nice to see you!” It is best not to burden our child with any feelings of guilt or sadness we have. We can process this ourselves with another adult rather than saying things like, “I’m going to miss you so much.” Our children need to know that their adult can hold space for them if needed.

It is easier to say goodbye to our child when we are confident in our choice of school. Our child will pick up if we have any concerns. We need to feel confident in our choice so we can give our child the message that this is a safe place for them, that we like the teachers, the classrooms, the program, and that they are going to have fun and learn a lot in this environment.

Before our child starts school, it will be very helpful for them to become accustomed to being away from us, for example, with a babysitter or other caregiver. We can start with a short duration of time if this is new to them and build up to being away from us for at least the length of the school day.

If our child is having a hard time separating from us, we can provide understanding as well as reassure them they will be okay. “Are you feeling sad right now? I understand. Your teacher is here, and I know you will be safe with them.”

The rainbow ritual can be helpful (this is also helpful at bedtime). We send the colors of the rainbow from our heart to their heart (“I’m sending the color red—the color of strawberries, tomatoes, roses, and fire engines—from my heart to your heart. Now the color orange . . .”). Children feel connected to us by this rainbow, which can feel very concrete to a young child. This rainbow ritual was developed by the Quest for Life Foundation to help children deal with sad or difficult news.

What if my child doesn't want to go to school?

It can be hard if our child shows reluctance to go to school. They may complain, resist getting dressed in the morning, or gripe about a stomachache or other physical ailment.

The first step is to observe our child to get more information. There can be many reasons a child does not want to go to school. For example, they may be having learning difficulties, they may be having problems socially, or they may simply be tired. Choose a neutral time to talk with them to find out more (not when we're trying to get out the door!). If we have concerns, we can also make an appointment to speak to our child's teacher to get more information about what is going on at school (if possible, our child can be included in this conversation so they can be involved in any solutions).

Whatever our child is having difficulty with is an opportunity for learning and growth. If they are struggling socially, we (along with their school) can help them to build the skills they need—for example, how to introduce themselves, how to ask if they can join a game in progress, telling a friend they don't like it when they are mean to them, etc.

If we allow them to stay home from school, it can become even more difficult to get them to go the next day. Instead, it's best to provide understanding while at the same time helping them to get to school, giving as little help as possible and as much as necessary. "I can see that you really don't feel like going to school today. I believe you. And I'm going to help you to get there. Let's see what we need to do. . . ."