How to talk to children about **starting a new school** - at any age

Starting a new school can feel daunting for children at any age – whether they're beginning nursery or moving up to primary school. The transition to secondary school can be especially challenging, with its larger, unfamiliar environment, different structure, and increased demands on their time and attention.

These transitional moments are big milestones in a child's life. They offer key opportunities to develop independence, confidence, and a growing sense of identity.

How we talk to children during these times can make a real difference in how they adjust, settle in, feel secure, and thrive.

This guide, developed in collaboration with Dr. Fiona Pienaar, offers practical support for parents and carers. It includes helpful dos and don'ts and tips on building routines and emotional support to help children through times of change.



Let's build children up, not knock them down

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What children can worry about?

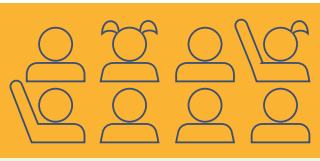
It's completely normal for children to feel uncertain about starting a new school. Understanding their concerns can help you support them with empathy and confidence.



- **Will I make friends?**
  Worries about fitting in or being left out are common at all ages.
- **Will I get things wrong?**
  Children often fear making mistakes - whether it's in the classroom or finding their way around.
- **Will I like my teacher or classmates?**
  Uncertainty about relationships can impact how safe and comfortable a child feels.
- **Will I feel homesick?**
  Especially in younger children, but older children may feel this too.
- **Will I get lost or confused?**
  Big new buildings, routines, and schedules can feel overwhelming at first.

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Tips to help children **feel more secure and confident**



1. Talk about what to expect

Explore the school's website or use books, photos or stories to make the idea of school more familiar.

Share simple, reassuring experiences from your own school days.

2. Practise and prepare

Take the route to school before they start so it feels familiar

Try on the uniform, practise packing a school or gym bag, or organising what they'll need for the day.

3. Start routines early

Build a steady wake-up and bedtime routine in the weeks before school starts.

Keep mornings calm with predictable steps like breakfast and chatting together.

4. Celebrate small wins

Making one friend or learning a new name is an achievement worth acknowledging.

Praise effort and bravery, not just results.

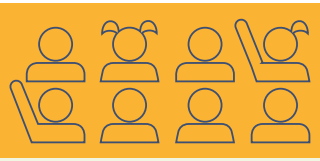
5. Stay connected

A shared goodbye phrase or a small keepsake in their pocket can ease separation.

Remind them that even when apart, you're still thinking of them.

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The dos and don’ts for **communicating effectively**



Acknowledge their worries instead of brushing them off

Try saying: *“It’s normal to feel a bit nervous when starting something new.”*

Avoid: *“There’s nothing to worry about - you’ll be fine.”*

Dismissing their feelings can make them feel misunderstood. Validating their emotions helps them feel supported.

Be positive, but realistic

Try saying: *“There might be ups and downs, and that’s okay - we’ll figure it out together.”*

Avoid: *“It’ll be the best time of your life!”*

Balanced reassurance helps children feel safe, even when things don’t go perfectly.

Focus on listening more than fixing

Try saying: *“Would you like to tell me what you’re nervous about?”*

Avoid: *“Just be brave and talk to someone - you’ll make friends.”*

Listening helps children feel heard. By giving them time to talk and process things, they’re more likely to open up and work through worries with your support.

Help build confidence without pressure

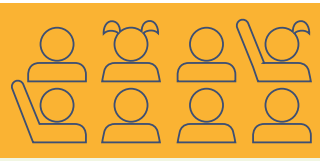
Try saying: *“It might take time to feel comfortable and get used to new ways of studying.”*

Avoid: *“You have to work hard if you want to do well.”*

Encouraging gradual steps helps reduce anxiety and builds confidence at their own pace.

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The dos and don’ts for **communicating effectively** 2



Speak positively about school - even if your experience was different

Try saying: *“I remember starting a new school - it felt big at first, but I got used to it.”*

Avoid: *“It’ll be the best time of your life!”*

Your attitude shapes how they view the experience. Empathy and optimism help build confidence.

Reassure without interrogating

Try saying: *“It’s lovely to see you - want to tell me a bit about your day when you’re ready?”*

Avoid: *“Did you make friends? Who did you sit with? What did the teacher say?”*

Too many questions can feel overwhelming. Give them space to share in their own time.

Encourage a growth mindset

Try saying: *“It takes time to adjust to new situations.”*

Avoid: *“You’ve never been good at... sport / maths / English / making new friends.”*

Praising effort and persistence helps children see challenges as part of learning, not a sign of failure. It builds resilience and motivation over time.

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Additional suggestions that **can make a big difference**

Create a calm, structured environment	Begin new routines early and stick to them when school starts. Involve your child in preparing for the day to build their sense of control.
Be available emotionally	Let them know they can talk to you about anything - even if it seems small.
Stay calm yourself	Children pick up on your tone and mood. A calm, steady presence helps them feel safe.
Support healthy habits	Encourage sleep, balanced meals, exercise, and relaxation time.



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