

All Change: a back to school guide for parents



This September thousands of children across the country will be starting school for the first time or moving from the relative sanctuary of primary school to the imposing new world of secondary school. Aside from leaving home, this is probably one of the most significant life transitions your child will make and how you, their parent, help them through this transition is an important job. Don't be intimidated though, it can be a relatively straight forward one if you can follow a few **simple principles**.

You can talk about it too much. And you can not talk about it enough! How many times have you asked your child "How was your day at school?" for them to reply "Fine". End of conversation? How do you know they really are fine and not struggling to manage something that feels enormous to them, but quite routine to you? It may be hard to remember what it was like when you first started school, but begin by putting yourself into your child's shoes. That's a good first step, then ask yourself the important question of 'Is this the right time to talk?'

Pick your moment. Straight after the first day of school/new school is probably not the best time to ask about your child's day. It has most likely been a pretty taxing day in terms of information and social overload, so, instead, do something together that brings you closer: whether that's playing with your younger child; having a meal; watching some TV or gaming with your older child to let them decompress after the day. Later on, when your child is in a calmer, more reflective state of mind, they are more likely to offer you some information about what's been happening, especially if you express genuine curiosity about what's it's been like for them, as opposed to an interrogatory questioning that will have them running to their bedroom!

Home is the secure base. John Bowlby, founder of attachment theory, famously said that all humans need a 'safe base from which to explore the world'. For your child to make the big transition from home to school, or from primary school to secondary school, having a sense of there being a secure base at home, a 'bolt-hole' they can come back to when they've been out in the world, is immensely reassuring. It also acts as a spring board for your child to go out and have new experiences, relationships and even encounter all the negative feelings that often go along with this exploration. Which brings us to...

Stay with the feeling. Tempting as it may be to reassure your child, or jolly them along, if they say they feel 'scared', 'lonely' or just even 'unsure' about this transition to a new place, staying with the negative or sad feelings is really important for them. To validate and empathise with your child's feelings is to help them to understand these feelings as normal and be able to manage them secure in the knowledge that you understand and that you can help them cope. Simply to say it will be 'alright' or 'don't be scared' for example, is to invalidate how your child feels, and this may leave them feeling confused about why they feel the way they do, and possibly that they are wrong or 'weird' for feeling that way. After all, being happy all the time isn't normal!

Friendships really matter. As much as the safe haven of home is the secure backdrop to your child's life as they make these transitions, the older they get the more likely they are to share these experiences with their friends rather than with you. This is to be encouraged. Every parent wants to stay emotionally close and connected to their child, but facilitating a move away from family to peer group is an important part of every child's development, even though this can feel really hard for parents. Empathising with your child, seeing how the world looks from their point of view and being genuinely interested in how they see things, will all help them to not only feel understood by you, but help them understand themselves and other people in their world of school. Being good at relating to others is as essential to surviving a transition to school as is being academically able - probably more so. So don't minimise the importance of your child's friendship group.

Siblings. While a brother or sister can at times be the most annoying person in your child's life, they can also be the most brilliant ally when it comes to school. If you have older children who have already managed the transition, then getting them to be the 'expert', telling their younger brother or sister all the good stuff about school, will not only make them feel good, but will show to your younger child that transitions can be managed.

Finally, as parents, **try to manage your own anxiety!** A worried or tearful face at the school gates or back at home after the first day at school suggests to your child that this is something that can't be managed. So whatever it takes, try to get your own feelings in check before you start asking your child about their own! It will really help.

Dr Sheila Redfern has contributed to a resource produced by Heads Together, a campaign spearheaded by their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and Prince Harry aiming to normalise the conversation about mental health. The resource is available [here](#), and supports this blog in guiding parents and family in how to engage and initiate potentially difficult conversations with children and young people who are undergoing big changes, such as starting school or moving to a new one.