

Starting School: a journey for the whole family

A child starting school is a significant event for all members of the family. They are about to embark on a journey that will help them grow as a person, where they will learn new skills and most of all, where they will have lots of fun. Yet still, a child starting school can create anxiety for everyone in the household: the parent who is worrying about handing over some responsibility, a sibling who will not have their 'best friend' around each day and the child themselves as they are about to step into the unknown. There is a lot a family can do to prepare for their child starting school and as a headteacher of a local school and a mum to two children, I am hoping this article will help prepare for what should be a celebratory event.

When you receive confirmation of your child's place, which will be around the 16th April, the hard work has actually already been completed. Parents have a choice which school they wish to send their child to and it is important for families to make the right choice for them. It is essential that families make contact and visit their local schools finding out about the school's vision for their pupils. When visiting, you will instantly gain an impression of the school and its pupils and be able to identify whether the ethos of the school is perfect for your child. Even in Covid times, schools have been able to talk to interested parents and school websites are very useful places to find out as much as you can about the school, its staff and pupils. Seven years in primary education is a significant period of time so the decision has to be right. It is equally important that you choose both a second and third choice when applying for a place as unfortunately, there are times when your first choice is not given, and this happened to me with my son. As we had visited all of the schools previously and found out about each one, we were happy with the place he was given.

Once you know where your child is going to start school, you can begin to prepare as a family. I would advise becoming a member of the school community before your child actually starts: begin to follow the school on Facebook or Twitter so you can gain a feel for what happens on a daily basis at the school, and spend time working your way through the website. If your child attends the pre-school setting, contact other parents and begin to set up a social network. If there are events taking place for the local community at the school, attend these as a family so that faces become more recognisable and so you all begin to become familiar with the school environment. Ask the school to send you the newsletters and visit the website to read the school's policies. All of this ground work will help and support you all as a family in September and reduce the anxiety of everything being new and unknown.

There is a lot a family can do to prepare for starting school in the months prior to September before you begin to think about the numbers and letters of the alphabet. As a pre-school child, your child will be working on the Early Years Framework. Speak to their pre-school supervisor and find out what they would recommend your focus on at home. Practitioners in Early Years focus on developing the characteristics of effective learning. These characteristics describe factors that play a central role in a child's learning and in becoming an effective learner. The characteristics of effective learning run through and underpin all seven areas of learning and development in the Early Years Framework. They represent processes rather than outcomes.

For us here at Winkle, we would encourage parents to work on developing their child's independence skills: Can they put on their coat and do it up by themselves? Are they able to wash their hands properly after visiting the toilet? It is important that a child learns how to look after their own needs. Schools will of course help and support your child in developing these skills, but a joint approach from school and home is always the most effective. We would encourage practising listening and following instructions at home. Classrooms can be busy places and so children need to practise listening to instructions and following them straight away. Begin with clear one-step instructions using as a few words as possible and gradually build up to more complex instructions. Your child will also benefit from playing lots of games with family members learning how to take turns, share and most importantly lose. This practice will help your child prepare in the best way possible for classroom life.

Your child's name is important and it would be beneficial for your child to be able to recognise their name before starting school. Attach name labels to their uniform early and play lots of hiding and hunting games where your child tries to find the clothing that belongs to them. This will really help them when faced with thirty school jumpers after a PE lesson! Your child may be able to write their own name, but do not worry if they can't as there are many activities parents can do to support this. Firstly, work on gross motor skills. Gross motor skills involve the larger muscles in the arms, legs and torso. Gross motor activities include walking, running, throwing, lifting, kicking, etc. These skills also

relate to body awareness, reaction speed, balance and strength. Alongside these skills, parents can also work on fine-motor skills which will help develop the coordination of smaller muscles and prepare your child well to write their name. Using tweezers to pick up pasta shells, threading cheerios onto spaghetti and playing with playdough will all help.

As a parent, you will know that reading, writing and maths play a large part of the Early Years Framework. If you feel that your child is ready to learn to count or recognise the sounds made by the letters of the alphabet, it is important you find out which schemes of work the school uses. This way, you will ensure that your child is learning in the correct way to best prepare them for school. Do not worry if your child is not ready. Playing games with them which help to develop their focus and attention, and supporting them concentrating on an activity will help prepare them for learning when they start school. At Winkle, we encourage our pupils to talk, to investigate and to challenge. These skills can be easily developed through play with parents before your child starts. Reading is key and we would actively promote parents spending lots of times reading to and with their child, talking about stories in great detail and visiting libraries to develop the love of books.

As September approaches, all parents will feel a number of emotions and it can be difficult to remain positive. It is ok for a parent to worry about their child starting school, to feel nervous about letting go, but also excited for the journey ahead. Help all members of the family by focusing on the positive aspects: your child will gain many more friends and as parents, you will become part of a community where you will feel valued and can take an active role. Create a countdown as a family, turn buying school shoes into a celebratory event. Each year, my family bake a 'starting school' cake where we all get to pick the toppings: as my children have got older, we appear to have more toppings! Your child needs to know that it is ok for them to not be at home each day and that they can have a good time away from their parents. Equally, it is imperative that your child knows there will be ups and downs and that sharing and talking about worries will help.

When the big day arrives, cuddles will be needed for all! Starting school is exhausting so be prepared for your child to be extremely tired. It is important to talk to the school staff about how your child is settling in. At Winkle, we promote an open-door policy as we firmly believe that giving parents the opportunity to ask questions or raise concerns, helps all parties to best support the pupils on their educational journey. When asking your child if they have had a good day, you may be receiving a lot of information back. This is normal and we encourage parents at Winkle to look at our Facebook page so you are aware of events taking place which can promote conversations at home about what your child has done at school. All parents wish their child to have lots of friends. It is important to not worry or panic about this in the first few months of school. It takes time to develop relationships and all schools focus on this as children begin to bond in classes. Once again, talk to your school if you have any worries.

Overall, starting school is a momentous occasion: one you will never forget. It is the start of a positive relationship between family and school where your child is put at the heart of everything.