# First-Time Students Need Tender Loving Care

by Valerie Mullen and Carol Sneed

Sending *our children off to school for the first time is a milestone on the road of parenting that many of us will never forget. Sometimes it's harder on us than our children. It's the first big step in sending our children off into the world to let someone else nurture and teach them, and it's usually taken with mixed feelings.*

As our child's first and most important teachers, we have the joy and responsibility for providing experiences that will help to make this first school experience successful. For parents of a "kinder" who will have his or her first school experience this fall, we'd like to offer some suggestions to help make this transition a positive and successful one for you and your child.

If you are new to the area where you live, some pre-registration steps will make the first day run a lot more smoothly: Find out where your neighborhood school is located and call to make an appointment to complete the registration forms. Most schools will have someone in the office during August.

Take your child along so she can see the school and a kindergarten classroom. Locate important places like the bathrooms, office, playground and where buses load and unload or where you will unload and pick up if you will be driving your child to school.

Don't forget immunization forms, birth certificate and any special documents or reports that will help the school best meet your child's needs. If your child has attended a preschool, have these records sent also.

In addition, there are various fun activities that you and your child can do together for fun to make the transition to school a successful one. Reading to your child cannot be overemphasized. Find time to stop by the library regularly and let your child select books and participate in the summer reading programs. When reading to your child, ask questions about what you have read: Recall the plot, predict what will happen next, discuss colors, let your child tell you the story, or even better, help him write and illustrate his own story.

Listening to cassette recordings that accompany books is great when traveling in the car.

Playing games with your child is another very useful readiness activity. The list of appropriate ones is endless but you can make up your own lotto ("matching") and memory ("concentration") games using pictures from magazines and catalogs. Card and board games are great as well as guessing games like "Twenty Questions." Games are an effective way for your child to learn to follow rules, take turns, solve problems and learn to have fun even if she doesn't win.

There are various opportunities for a "kinder" to experience free and low cost group experiences: library, parks, vacation Bible schools. These are good opportunities for you to observe your child in a group setting and get clues about how well he listens, follows directions and cooperates, and how long his attention span is. These are good indicators of how well your child will adapt to the kindergarten environment.

Cooking projects involve numerous skills and will be fun, too. They involve following directions, counting, measuring, using the timer and learning about food and nutrition. Choose simple projects like making a smoothie or pudding, or a counting activity such as setting the table, or find things within your daily meal preparation to let your child do. As you work together, you will help her learn by pointing out things like sequence, numbers, textures, shapes and colors of the foods you use.

Children learn best when they are actively involved in the learning experience. It's important to let them know that it's OK when mistakes happen—that's one of the ways we learn.

Development of muscles and coordination is essential to preparing for reading and writing. Teachers usually refer to large motor and small motor activities (using small muscles like fingers, toes, eye muscles, etc.). Both are very important but it's good to remember that control of the large muscles is what helps the development of the small ones. So, plan lots of opportunities for your child to be active: running, jumping, kicking, hopping. Take advantage of our beautiful parks and playgrounds and our public swimming pools when you can.

To develop small motor skills, find time to let your child scribble and draw with all kinds of supplies: crayons, markers, chalk, watercolors, pencils, pens, etc.

Practice with child-sized scissors is invaluable and may need supervision and assistance for a while. Local toy stores have special preschool scissors that help little hands and fingers develop the strength and control to use the more challenging ones used by adults. Have left-handed scissors available if that is what your child's preference is. Forcing a child to use his right hand when he prefers the left can be very troublesome.

Using junk mail, have your child cut and glue all kinds of great pictures and collages. You can make it even more challenging by finding specific kinds of pictures like shapes, animals, colors, faces, food groups, cars, etc.

On a daily basis, have your child do things that involve following directions. Give one or two simple activities at first, then add more when your child is ready; for example, telling a "kinder" to clean her bedroom may be very unsuccessful if you don't start out by giving her one or two specific directions. With practice, she will know what activities you mean for her to complete when you say, "Clean your room."

Last and most important, get your child on a sleeping and eating schedule that is compatible with his school schedule before school starts. Most families tend to be laid back in the summer, and it may take two to three weeks for your child to adapt to a new schedule. Most children need 10 to 12 hours of sleep each night if they are going to have energy for an active day of learning.

Nutrition is very important, and like sleeping habits, can be irregular in the summer. In hot weather without schedules driving us, it's relaxing to snack on what we want when we are hungry. Like sleeping, getting back to eating regular balanced meals takes some getting used to and should accompany the two to three weeks of changing the sleeping schedule. A child simply cannot make it through a day of kindergarten, even when it's half a day, without a nutritious breakfast. A child who is tired, hungry or sick is unable to see or hear well, and cannot concentrate and learn.

Readiness for school is nothing more than common sense. A child who is comfortable with other children, can communicate well, has some familiarity with learning and listening, is patient, well-fed and healthy is a step ahead of one who comes to school lacking any or all of these advantages. To a young child, being even a little bit behind can lead to feelings of inadequacy and failure that can stay with her throughout her school experience. A child who enters school confidently is better able to develop and keep a lifelong love of learning.

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