2015

The first day of school sets the tone for academic achievement

Cathrine Marguerite Neilsen-Hewett
University of Wollongong, cnhewett@uow.edu.au

Publication Details
The first day of school sets the tone for academic achievement

Abstract
There are many transitions in life (starting school, moving house, changing jobs) and how well we cope depends largely on our perceptions of the event as well as the level of support we receive. The transition to school is a particularly significant time, heralding a new stage in a child's life. Whether your child is feeling slightly anxious about starting school or bursting with excitement, all children (and parents!) benefit from a bit of planning and preparation in order to ensure the transition to school goes as smoothly as possible. There is consistent evidence to show early positive school experiences are important for your child’s social and emotional wellbeing and academic achievement. In contrast, children who experience a bumpy start to school are more likely to continue to experience difficulties throughout their school life.

Keywords
first, achievement, tone, academic, sets, school, day

Disciplines
Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

This journal article is available at Research Online: http://ro.uow.edu.au/sspapers/1771
The first day of school sets the tone for academic achievement

January 30, 2015 6.34am AEDT

Cathrine Neilsen-Hewett
Senior Lecturer, Director of Academic Studies - The Early Years Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Wollongong

The first day of school can be tough for the parents as well as the kids, but it’s important it’s a good experience. AAP

There are many transitions in life (starting school, moving house, changing jobs) and how well we cope depends largely on our perceptions of the event as well as the level of support we receive.

The transition to school is a particularly significant time, heralding a new stage in a child’s life. Whether your child is feeling slightly anxious about starting school or bursting with excitement, all children (and parents!) benefit from a bit of planning and preparation in order to ensure the transition to school goes as smoothly as possible.

There is consistent evidence to show early positive school experiences are important for your child’s social and emotional wellbeing and academic achievement. In contrast, children who experience a bumpy start to school are more likely to continue to experience difficulties throughout their school life.

How parents can support their child’s transition to school
While the time leading up to that important “first day” is often critical to success, transition to school also encompasses the first few weeks of school as children and families become increasingly settled into the school environment and become familiar with new routines, rules and relationships.

The first day at school

Leaving your child at school for the first time can be incredibly emotional. Most teachers will encourage you to say a quick goodbye. Some children, like mine, rush off without even a second glance, leaving the parent (me!) feeling somewhat deflated and alone. Others may become distressed or anxious at the idea of being separated from you.

If this is your child, reassure them that they will have a wonderful time and that you will be there to pick them up at the end of the day. Perhaps show them where you will meet them.

The more connections you can establish between the home and the school setting, the more familiar this new environment will be and the better connected you will feel.

Parents can do this by talking to their child about his or her day, asking very specific questions like “who did you sit next to in class today?” or “did you listen to a story today, what was it about?” Parents can help the teacher to learn more about their child by making a small photo book that they can share with the class about their family or activities that they like to do outside school. Parents can even pop a little reassuring “I love you” note from home in the lunch box.

Keep new things to a minimum

Predictability is important for children prone to separation anxiety problems. Starting school can be incredibly exhausting for young children, so it is important not to introduce too many new things at once. Children take great comfort from the familiar, so avoid starting any new extra-curricular activities during the first term.

Connect with friends on arrival

Most schools have adopted a buddy system, where older children are partnered with new kindergarten children. Connecting with familiar peers is equally important; having a friend or knowing how to make friends is critical to successful transition. Parents can foster these relationships by inviting children to play after school or on weekends.

Don’t forget to look after yourself too

Starting school is a shared experience between the child, the classroom teacher, the parent and the broader school community. Parents new to the school environment can feel alienated and unsure, especially if their own memories of school are not positive.

Make time on your child’s first day to start connecting with other parents. Often schools will organise a morning tea. If not, grab a few parents and head down to the local coffee shop. It’s perfectly okay to feel a little upset, just be aware that your child will pick up on your emotions, so save that tear for post-separation.

Give your child time to settle in. It is not unusual for children to show signs of stress or anxiety during the first few weeks of school. As your child becomes more familiar with school and the
classroom context, connections with their peers and teachers improve, as will coping strategies. If, however, your child continues to exhibit signs of stress or anxiety make an appointment to discuss this with your child’s teacher.

How do I know if my child is anxious?

Common signs of stress or anxiety in children include:

- Increased fear of new situations or being alone;
- Physical symptoms or complaints such as stomach aches and headaches;
- Difficulty sleeping or nightmares;
- Regressive symptoms – a child who was dry at night may start wetting the bed;
- Social withdrawal from friends and peers or excessive clinginess; and
- Changes in behaviour, mood swings, irritability, or increased aggression.

Children may complain of physical illness such as nausea or stomach aches in a morning before school, only for this to disappear when they are allowed to stay home. School refusal often occurs during times of transition and can result from a number of factors including fear of the unknown, difficulties with peers, being separated from parents, or fear that they will not do well at school.

As a parent it is essential that you keep your child in school as time away from school can actually enhance your child’s anxiety rather than resolve it.

Back to school