

Settling in

Parent and carer booklet 3



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Social and emotional learning

By now children will have started school and be in the process of adjusting to new people, surroundings and routines. Each child will have their own way of settling in. Some children may have had difficulty during the initial stages of transition, some will have made the transition without any difficulty, others may be continuing to struggle, and some will be up and down. Sometimes difficulties do not come up during the first days of school – instead they appear later on. This is not unusual as transition is a process rather than just a single event, and like any process there may be ‘bumps’ along the way. Difficulties usually decrease over time and parents and carers should begin to notice some signs that their child is settling in at school.

Further information about common behaviours during transition can be found in the KidsMatter Transition to School: Booklet 2.

It is hoped that as we support children during the transition they will start to feel secure, relaxed and comfortable, enjoy learning, build relationships with others, and feel as though they belong and are included at school.

There are many factors that can influence your child’s transition to school and the experience of transition is unique for every child. All of the factors listed below can play an important role in supporting children to make a successful transition.

Multiple influences on transition to school

Individual factors e.g., the unique characteristics and strengths of each child and their general pattern of emotional reaction to change.

Family factors e.g., parent and carer involvement, parenting practices, and parent and carer attitudes towards school.

Factors relating to peers e.g., having a friend at school and positive relationships with classmates.

School factors e.g., the school environment, learning experiences, teachers, equipment in the playground, and similarities or differences to prior to school setting.

Community factors e.g., availability of and access to supports and services, social values in the community, and government and education policies.

Whilst families and schools are not the only factors that can influence a child’s transition to school, they can both play an important role in assisting and supporting children during this time. Booklets 1 and 2 have provided some ways that you can support your child during transition. Another way that you can continue to support your child is by encouraging them to use helpful coping strategies when challenges arise.



Coping skills

Coping skills include what we think and what we do to help us get through situations that are difficult or stressful. Throughout primary school it is likely that children will encounter some bumps in the road. By helping them to learn skills to assist them during this transition, you will also be helping children to develop skills to assist them through other transitions and to cope with future changes and challenges.

Not everyone finds the same strategies helpful and not every strategy is helpful in every situation. Learning a range of different coping skills can help us to be prepared for the different challenges we may encounter. Coping skills can be taught and are often learnt by watching others such as parents and carers.



Some examples of coping strategies that children and adults can use are:

Using positive self-talk: saying coping statements to oneself (e.g., “It’s going to be OK”; “I can do this”).

Asking for help: ‘coping’ does not mean that children have to get through everything on their own. Recognising when to ask for help is also an important coping skill (e.g., asking the teacher on playground duty for help because they have forgotten where the toilets are).

Talking with a friend or family member: support from others can help children to feel less overwhelmed during challenging situations.

Taking time out: if something becomes overwhelming it can be helpful to take a moment to calm down before tackling the challenging situation again (e.g., putting down their pencil and having a break before trying again).

Breaking down tasks: breaking a difficult task into smaller more manageable steps, or tackling one thing at a time can make the task seem less overwhelming and easier to take on.

Children at this age will need help with learning these coping strategies. They may also need prompts for when to use them before they can start to cope independently.

Some ways of managing or coping with challenging situations can be less helpful. For example, running away is a way of coping that may be helpful if being chased by a tiger but is less helpful when a challenge arises in the classroom.

It is not uncommon for children to want to avoid situations that make them feel scared or worried. However in everyday situations (where children at this age can reasonably be expected to cope), avoiding the situation can be unhelpful because it means that next time it will seem even harder to manage. It also means that children may miss out on an opportunity to learn that they can actually cope with the challenge. Supporting your child to develop the coping strategies above can help them to approach challenges with more confidence.



Helping children cope

There are a number of ways parents and carers can help their children to learn to cope during challenging times. Some suggestions include:

Listen to your child and acknowledge how they are feeling (e.g., “It sounds like you’re worried about who will pick you up from school tomorrow”). This can be a good opportunity for you to find out from your child what they are worried or concerned about.

Talk with your child to find out what they think might happen (e.g. “Can you tell me what you think might happen?”). Provide realistic information if your child is overestimating the likelihood of a particular event occurring or they cannot think things through logically (e.g., “We won’t forget to pick you up and Mrs Smith will be with you until we arrive”).

Reassure your child when they feel unsafe or worried (e.g., “It is a big playground but there is an area for just the little kids to play”).

Help your child to label their scary thoughts if they are feeling overwhelmed by them (e.g., “That’s just a scary thought. You don’t have to keep it”).

Demonstrate a coping skill for your child (e.g., Using positive self talk: say out loud “I’m being brave, I can do it”).

Hold off on starting other new activities particularly when children are starting school. This can be helpful so that they only have one challenge to deal with at a time (i.e. getting used to school).

Encourage and talk positively about their attempts to cope.

Prepare for challenges by helping your child come up with a plan for coping. Break the challenge into smaller steps or parts. The plan will work best if you and your child come up with the steps together (from easiest to hardest), and if they agree to attempt the first step.

- It is important to start with something that your child is likely to be able to do successfully, as this can build up their confidence and help them to feel good about themselves. Providing positive feedback and encouragement helps children move on to the next step.
- When your child feels comfortable with the first step ask them if they are ready to give the next step a go. It may take some time for your child to feel ready to move on to the next step.
- It is not uncommon for children to need to go back to an earlier step next time and work through the steps again. It can take time and practice to get to the final step and achieve their goal.
- The aim is for children to feel confident in managing the step before attempting a harder one.

An example plan: Joining a group

Paz is nervous about joining a group of children she doesn’t know at the park. She and her dad come up with a plan for Paz to approach this challenge.

1. I sit in the park with Dad and watch.
2. I play near the group with Dad.
3. I say hello to the most friendly looking child.
4. I ask to join the group.

See www.kidsmatter.edu.au/transition/forfamilies for the following KidsMatter Primary information sheets:

- Helping children cope with fears and worries
- Helping children cope



How thinking affects feelings and behaviour

Another way you can help your child to cope is by understanding their way of thinking. The way we think about things affects how we feel and what we do. This means that how we think also affects how we cope with a challenging situation. Sometimes we have 'helpful' thoughts that lead to more positive feelings and behaviours. Other times we can have 'unhelpful' thoughts that lead us to more negative feelings about ourselves and can stop us from doing what we want to do. They can also prevent us from coping effectively. An example of how thinking affects what we feel and what we do is below:-



Example

Cassandra had been at school for two weeks and had made friends with Soo-Meng. When she got to school Cassandra saw Soo-Meng playing with Katia. She waved to Soo-Meng across the playground but Soo-Meng didn't wave back. Some thoughts that Cassandra might have had in this situation are:-

"Soo-Meng doesn't like me anymore" **(unhelpful)**

"Soo-Meng didn't see me wave" **(helpful)**

"Soo-Meng is too busy playing" **(helpful)**

If Cassandra thinks one of the more helpful thoughts she is likely to feel okay about herself (and her friendship with Soo-Meng). Cassandra might then play with someone else for the time being and ask Soo-Meng to play later. On the other hand the unhelpful thought is likely to make Cassandra feel sad or unhappy and behave in a different way, for example, Cassandra might avoid Soo-Meng if she thinks she doesn't like her anymore.

Getting into the habit of helpful thinking

It is normal for children at this age and developmental stage to think in more concrete (or 'black and white') ways than older children. This means that things often seem 'all bad' or 'all good'. As children get older they start to be able to think about things in shades of grey or as 'some bad' and 'some good' for example, 'I lost the game, but I still had fun!'. As younger children are still developing this ability, you can assist them by guiding them towards the habit of helpful thinking.

Some ideas for how you can support your child to develop the habit of helpful thinking include:

Acknowledge what your child is feeling and saying (e.g., "It sounds like you're feeling scared because you think something might happen"). Dismissing what children are thinking or how they are feeling (e.g., "Don't think that" or "Don't be silly") can lead children to believe that they are wrong to think or feel that way. Once you have acknowledged how your child is feeling you may like to do a bit of detective work and explore further what's happening for them.

Help your child come up with statements that are more helpful. It can often be easier to think of something else than to just stop an unhelpful thought. You can help your child by coming up with an alternative statement, such as, "I can be brave", "I can do it!" or "It's tricky but I'll try my best".

Highlight when something has gone well to help your child to notice for themselves. Watch out for the good things and point them out to your child.

Remind your child of times when they have coped with something similar in the past (e.g., "Remember when you started day care you felt really nervous, but then.....").

Model helpful thinking. Children learn a lot from watching and copying their parents and carers, so try to show them how you use 'helpful' thinking by thinking out loud, as this can help your child learn how to do it (e.g. "I'm feeling nervous about meeting the other parents at school but once I say 'hello' it won't be too bad").

Children are still trying to learn about and make sense of the world around them. Sometimes the way children have made sense of a situation can cause them to become upset and this may not be the result of "unhelpful thinking" (e.g., "the doctor just gave me a needle because I was naughty"). If you think your child has misinterpreted something, try to explain the event and what happened more accurately.

Helpful thinking is about promoting positive coping skills and encouraging children to feel good about themselves. This will help children to feel confident to give things another go.

See www.kidsmatter.edu.au/transition/forfamilies for the following KidsMatter Primary information sheets:

- How thinking affects feelings
- Understanding and managing feelings



Strategies for checking how your child is coping

Providing opportunities for children to talk about school, as well as other things that are going on in their lives, can help parents and carers to check how they are getting on and coping. Finding a regular time to talk with your child can be difficult in a busy day, and it is important to find a time that works for your child **and** you. Some ideas for finding a regular time to talk with children are to take advantage of:

- the walk or drive home from school
- the time spent together during dinner
- the time spent while doing the dishes or putting things away.



Helping your child to express themselves

Booklet 1 and Booklet 2 have some suggestions on starting conversations and assisting children to express their feelings. Some other strategies that you might use with your child to help them express themselves are:

Using open ended questions tends to encourage longer answers whereas closed questions tend to encourage shorter or one word (e.g., “yes” or “no”) responses.

- Open ended: “What do you think about...?”
“Tell me about...”
- Try to avoid asking too many questions one after the other or your child might feel as though they are being interviewed!

Using prompts and encouragement that can be both verbal (e.g., “And then what happened?”, ‘uh-huhs’) and non-verbal responses (e.g., looking, nodding, smiling etc.), and show that you are interested in what your child is saying.

Putting a label on things provides your child with a language for emotions. It can also help put an action or an emotion into words (e.g., “You seem really excited about going to the zoo”).

Getting involved in your child’s play, using stories or asking your child to draw and then tell you about it, are all ways to help your child express how they feel when they have difficulty telling you in words.

Remember that it is not always easy for children to know what is bothering them, and they may not always want to express it. Providing warmth, support and reassurance may be what your child needs during these times.



Assisting your child with guided problem solving

Once your child has shared their thoughts and feelings, you may need to support them to work through the issue they have raised. Guided problem solving can be a useful strategy to use when children are having trouble coming up with an effective solution to a problem on their own, and builds on the problem solving strategy from Booklet 2.

Guided problem solving brings together many skills that have been introduced already in the *KidsMatter Transition to School: Parent Initiative*, such as active listening, encouraging positive self-talk (i.e., a belief that a problem can be solved), and talking with and observing your child.

The key steps involved in guided problem solving are:

STEP 1

Let's work together

Setting the scene to work together with your child is an important first step. Show your child that you are interested in, understand and value their viewpoint by saying something like, "I'm glad you told me...", "Thank you for telling me about...", "This sounds like it is really important...", or "I'm sure this is something we can work out together". It is important for parents and carers to be positive and to let your child know that you are sure that you will be able to come up with a way to solve the problem or cope with the situation together.

Showing children that we are willing to listen and work with them can encourage children to seek help in the future.

STEP 2

What is the problem?

Use your listening, talking and observation skills to:

- understand what your child needs and wants
- understand what they are worried or concerned about.

Sometimes a problem may involve more people other than your child (e.g., another child or adult). In these instances it is important to also consider their view of the problem, and what their wants, needs, worries and/or concerns are, in order to help your child resolve the problem effectively.

STEP 3

What can we try?

Help your child to brainstorm a range of creative ideas for how they might resolve the problem. You might like to use the three finger problem solving strategy from Booklet 2.

Be sure to check back with your child to see if the strategy they selected worked well, or if a new strategy is needed.



Getting the full picture

Parents and carers are often the first to recognise if their child is having difficulties. Sometimes, the problems are more obvious at school where school staff have the opportunity to observe the behaviour of a range of children of a similar age.

Observing your child can help to give you an idea of what is happening for them. Some things to look out for are their behaviours, emotions and thoughts and also whether there is any impact on their learning and social relationships.

When gathering observations about children, finding out what other people notice is important. Talking with other people who have regular contact with your child, such as your child's classroom teacher or other family members, can be helpful to get a picture of how your child is coping in different settings and with different people. In particular, teachers can often provide a helpful insight into learning and behaviour in the classroom.

Keeping a record of this information can be extremely useful for working out what is happening for your child, and can be helpful to have on hand if you feel that you would like to discuss your concerns with your child's teacher or get some further assistance.

Gathering some extra information about the difficulties, such as how often and how long they have been occurring, and what (if any) impact they have on everyday functioning (e.g., learning and social relationships), can be helpful if seeking help from professionals outside the school.

If you think that your child might be having difficulty, or if you notice ongoing changes in their behaviour and emotional wellbeing, it can be helpful to get more information about what is happening for your child. When gathering observations focus on specific things that happen.

Some important things to consider are:

- How often is the difficulty occurring?
- How long has the difficulty been occurring for?
- Where and when does the difficulty occur?
- What usually happens before the difficulty arises? What helps to make the problem easier?
- Has learning been affected?
- Have social relationships been affected?

These kinds of questions are useful for any kind of difficulty, not just difficulties during transition.

Ongoing difficulties

Whilst most difficulties during transition are temporary and tend to go away with time, sometimes difficulties can be ongoing, such as continued distress and avoidance of school (resistance and reluctance to go to school, complaining about or being upset about going to school, pretending to be ill). Other signs of ongoing difficulties are increased fears, worries, crying, temper tantrums and negativity towards school.

These behaviours and reactions are similar to those discussed in Booklet 2, however, the important difference is whether they are **ongoing** rather than **temporary**.

Ongoing difficulties can be challenging for families, and you may want some extra assistance or information.

Getting help

What your school can do to help

If you are concerned about your child, a good place to start is your child's teacher and other school staff as they have a lot of knowledge about child development and learning. They also observe your child during the day with children of the same age. Schools can often provide links to assistance in the wider community, such as providing you with useful resources and information and linking you into a range of health and community support services.

What types of assistance may be available?

Assistance does not always mean a referral to a professional service, there are many different levels of assistance and support and it is important to find the right one for you and your child.

Some of the options for assistance are listed here:

- Within the school people that can assist include teachers, the welfare team, support staff, parent and carer networks and peers. The school may also have information, resources and activities available.
- Within the wider community some people that can assist include GPs, paediatricians, psychologists, counsellors, occupational therapists, social workers, speech pathologists, and friends and family. The community may also run information sessions, activities or groups.

It is important to remember that all the support and assistance that you give your child during this time helps them towards a good start at school.

It is also important not to forget about yourself! If your child is experiencing difficulties you may at times feel concerned, overwhelmed or frustrated. You may also want some extra support even if it's just a chance to have a chat with a friend or have some time out.

See www.kidsmatter.edu.au/transition/forfamilies for the following KidsMatter Primary information sheet:

- Getting in early for kids mental health

Also see the KidsMatter Transition to School handout:

- Getting assistance for you and your child





TRANSITION TO SCHOOL: PARENT INITIATIVE

KidsMatter Primary information resources

The KidsMatter Primary information resources, designed for parents, carers and teachers, contain information on specific topics that you may also find useful for supporting your child during the transition to primary school. These can be found at: www.kidsmatter.edu.au/resources/information-resources/

The KidsMatter Primary information sheets that relate to this Booklet, and provide further useful information, include:

- Getting in early for kids' mental health
- Making sense of children's emotions
- How come they're so different?
- Helping children cope with fears and worries
- Helping children cope
- How thinking affects feelings
- Understanding and managing feelings

Further information about other resources for supporting children during the transition to school can be found in the KidsMatter Transition to School: Parent Initiative information sheet: 'Other resources on transition to school for families'.

This resource is part of the KidsMatter Transition to School: Parent Initiative.

The team at KidsMatter welcomes your feedback at:
www.kidsmatter.edu.au/transition



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