

Dear Parents,

October 2014

Is school becoming more of a reality at your house? Now that children have been in school for a few weeks, they are coming to some new understandings of what that may mean. Most children are able to be at school without a family member and are beginning to learn how to rely on teachers. Though children have been able to separate from parents, children are still getting oriented to school. Though school is exciting with interesting equipment and activities, it is still hard work for children.

Think of the procedures children now contend with: wash hands when you get to school, clean up when you hear the clean up music (and stop playing with that toy you've been so interested in), come sit at group time (though you're still thinking about that toy), find a place to sit for snack, pass snack, pour your own juice, dispose of your own cup and left over food, and on and on. So many things to remember – and then actually make yourself do.

Children work hard to follow the many procedures at school. They are also working to figure out how to make a friend, how to get a toy, maybe how to sign up for a turn. This all takes concentration, some self-discipline, and delayed gratification. Children look to teachers to learn what is acceptable at school and what is not. Teachers spend time modeling behavior and words for children. Children soon emulate teachers, often repeating the exact words they have heard teachers use.

Some parents have asked me what they could do to support their child's transition to school. Here are a few ideas:

Be emotionally available for your child. It can be a struggle for children to keep themselves together at school. Working so hard at school can often translate into lower frustration levels at home. Children may cry more or feel unable to do things at home that had been easily accomplished before the start of school. Many will be very tired. Some may want to be carried more than usual. There can be a little backsliding on toileting – due to the stress of beginning school. Maybe the distractions and stimulation of the classroom make it a bit more difficult to feel the need to use the bathroom or children may put it off in order to not have to leave the play or put down the coveted toy. If parents understand that regressing or backsliding may be a result of working so hard at school, it will be easier for parents to anticipate these changes and not be overly concerned about them. Parents may need to spend a little more time with their child. Children in general may need a little extra TLC.

I think it's always helpful to acknowledge and verbalize for a child, "I know school is fun but I also know you really work to listen to the teachers." Or, "It must be hard to wait for a turn at group time". Or, "You've worked so hard at school, should we just sit together for a while and read your favorite book?" Letting children know that you understand school is fun but also sometimes confusing or difficult validates their experiences and feelings. It is a wonderful way to bolster your child. It is also a way to open the door to other conversations. It is giving your child a safe way to begin to piece together their day and gives them an opening to tell you more.

When you talk about school at home you can help your child remember the sequence of events for her/his class. It shouldn't be a quiz, but just a gentle reminder of how the morning or afternoon is

organized: “Yes, after play time everyone does help clean up.” “When the class is cleaned up then everyone gets to have group time and sing songs.” “After group time you get to go down to the gym.” (Remember to use the order of your child’s day). Knowing the schedule and what comes next is usually reassuring to children. Often anxieties show at transition times, when children are ending one activity and moving on to the next. It can help children to relax when they know what follows the activity they are just ending. So going over the schedule with parents can help children feel more confident that they know what is happening and coming next at school. As you talk about the schedule children might also relate what happened at these times of the day.

Try not to ask your child too many questions right after school. So many things happen in a morning or afternoon at school that it can be difficult for children to order the events in a compact, linear way. Also, when children emerge from school they are often tired and struggling to make the transition from school to home. It may be more productive to speak with your child about school at a later time. Perhaps at dinner when others are sharing the events of the day, your Park West child may be able to tell a part of what happened at school. Often a specific question is easier for a child to address: “Did you ride a bike in the gym?” “Did you get a chance to use the dress ups?” “Did you have crackers for snack today?” “Did you sing the song about the little fish?” Some children will be able to fill you in on every detail. Others may not be very interested in recounting their day. It can be difficult for children to decipher what was different about today. What did happen today, or was that yesterday? Assisting in the classroom can help parents have a sense of a child’s time at school and this may help you with what kinds of questions to ask. Bath time and bedtime are other relaxed times when your child may be able to talk about what happened at school.

You might want to speak with your child about the names of the other children and the teachers – again in a subtle, comfortable way, though I suspect that most children already remember their teachers’ names. By now most of you have received a laminated page of thumbnail photos of the children and teachers in your class. These photos can lead to lots of conversations about what is happening at school. Many parents have told me that their children play school at home pretending to be Sarah or Melinda or Joseph, etc. It can be reassuring to children when they feel they know their classmates and teachers. You may have noticed that at group time, the songs often involve the names of the children, to acknowledge each individual as a member of the group, but also to help everyone begin to remember their classmates’ names.

Another way to help your child is to speak with confidence and enthusiasm about school. If you seem anxious, your child will pick up on it. Exude confidence in teachers, the school experience, and your child’s ability to do well and have a good time at school. Remind your child that if s/he needs help at school, s/he should seek out a teacher. Reinforce that teachers are at school to help children. Part of transferring trust from home to school is being sure that the people at school will help you. Your enthusiasm and reassurances validate the school experience for your child and gives school your seal of approval.

Best,
jane