

**First Day Jitters**  
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*Today Contributor*

The first day of school is quickly approaching, and kids are anticipating that event with mixed anticipation and apprehension. Old pros, although understanding the routine and structure of the day, still experience a bit of the first day jitters as they wonder who will be in their classes and how they will fit in socially during the school year. Kids new to the scene (entering Kindergarten, middle and high school) may have additional concerns including how to find their way around the new campus, whether they will have someone to sit with in the cafeteria for lunch and how they will get along with the teachers and be able to compete academically.

**Kindergarten:**

The big enchilada, real school, homework, larger classes, longer days, and crowded hallways. Many children, especially those with older siblings, have longed for this rite of passage. But, others may be fearful of the change from the often small, loving and comfortable preschool situation. How to make this an easier, more fun transition for your little one? Well, attention to a few issues and some major empathy on your part may do the trick. Usually your child's concerns fall into two categories—getting through the day in one piece (schedules, how the day will proceed) and emotional fears. Let's begin with the basics:

**Getting the Lay of the Land:**

**Where's the bathroom and when can I use it?** Good question, one deserving of a very concrete, complete and definite answer! Many kindergarten classrooms are set up with a bathroom or two situated right in the classroom so that the little kids don't mingle with the older students or have to travel outside of the class (and find their way back!) every time Nature calls! Also, hand washing time is much easier if the sink is just a few steps away. Tell your child that the teacher will have a policy about when and how to use the bathroom. Often, it's on an as-needed basis, or the child may have to ask to be excused from the learning environment. But, it's usually a quick and easy process and the other students usually don't notice a frequent potty user, if that's one of your kid's concerns.

**What if I don't make it to the bathroom and have an accident?** Another good question, and again, easily answered! It's quite common for teachers to request an extra set of underwear and pants, packed in a large zip-locked plastic bag just for this occasion. Tell your child that this is quite commonplace, and to just alert the teacher to their situation and a clean change of clothes will do the trick. No one else has to know about it, and therefore this is nothing to be concerned about.

**What if I get hungry? Will they feed me?** Yep, and it's fun too. Explain about snack and lunch time, how your youngster will probably have the option of bringing both or buying lunch in the cafeteria. Discuss how snack will occur mid-morning and lunch an hour or so later in the day. Ask your son or daughter what they would like for you to pack, and let them consider making their own snacks and lunches either the night before or early in the morning. Discuss how snack usually occurs in the classroom at their tables (which they will be sharing with another child or two), and that lunch will take place in the larger cafeteria. Most kindergarten students are segregated during lunchtime to their own special tables and areas, so they don't mix with the older kids. Take your child to a buffet or cafeteria style dining establishment and explain that the lunch line at school will be similar. This may also be a good, teachable moment to discuss some nutrition tips about selecting the best foods during lunchtime. Most local newspapers offer the public school lunch schedules and you and your child can review them before the school week begins.

**Do I have to take a nap?** Sure, but you don't have to fall asleep! By kindergarten, teachers realize that most kids won't fall asleep (although some are out for the count within a few seconds of their heads hitting the cots!), but benefit from 45 minutes or so of rest and relaxation. Some teachers quietly read a book while others play soothing music. Emphasize that it won't be an incredibly boring two hours of lying quietly on a cold floor! It's often a sought-after respite by pooped-out kids and many enjoy listening to the stories.

**Will I have homework like my older brother has?** Yes, but it will be fun and interesting is the only sane answer to this question! Many little ones look forward to the idea of homework as it reeks of being a "big kid". Tell your child that there will probably be a few minutes of coloring, cutting or copying to do at the beginning of the year, but that it's all fun, enjoyable stuff and that you, as a parent, can't wait to help and get involved in the process. Make it a positive, exciting idea, not an activity to be dreaded.

**What happens first? Then what do we do?** It's a good idea to call the school and ask for a daily schedule of activities to review with your child. But, in general you can tell your son that the day begins by putting their book bags in their cubbies and meeting on the circle line for the morning ritual—the Pledge of Allegiance, a short discussion of the day's events, the calendar reviewed and perhaps a story read. Then it's on to some seat work, then center time, snack, recess, more seat work, and then lunch. Usually this is followed by nap or quiet time, and then the "specials" (art, music, and dance). Then it's pack up and get ready for dismissal time.

### **Emotional Issues:**

**What if the other kids don't like me?** Ugh, the dreaded fear of many children. Empathize with your child, telling her that most kids have a little worry about this, but are pleasantly surprised at how nice and friendly the children are. Remind her that all of her fellow students will be new to the situation and needing to make friends. Explain that

she'll be placed, most likely, at a table with a few other kids and that she'll have a chance to quickly get to know them. Recess is also a great place to make friends, as is lunch. You may want to role-play some "small talk" with your child, especially if she is on the shy side. Rehearse with dolls or stuffed animals before the school year begins. Try scripts like, "Hi, my name is Megan, what's yours?" That's sure to get a positive response as well as being a good conversation starter. Discuss how to join into others' games, by saying—"Hey, that looks like fun and I know how to play four-square. Can I have a turn?" Another sure bet is to invite another kid to sit next to your child during snack time or recess. Explain to your child how others are probably feeling just as nervous or uncertain, and will love being invited to sit with, share activities, or play with your child.

**What if you don't pick me up on time?** That's a common fear of little ones, and something that is usually under your control. Tell her that you'll be in the car line on time (but don't promise to be first—that's definitely not always an option and really scares the kids when they don't see your car heading up the line!). Let her know that she may have to wait a few minutes for you, but that's normal and nothing is wrong. If your child rides a bus home or a van to day care, explain the process and how the adults will make sure that she'll be safe.

**What if the teacher doesn't like me?** Explain to your child that kindergarten teachers are perhaps the nicest folks on Earth! They've chosen to work with little ones because they love children and are usually warm, funny and understanding people. Emphasize how your child can trust the teacher and go to him or her with any concerns.

**What if I'm the dumbest kid in the class?** This is a good entrée to getting out the crayons, pencils and scissors and reviewing with your little one some of the skills that will be needed in class. Review the colors, shapes, and the alphabet letters that she knows. Practice cutting, coloring and copying—but don't overdo it. Praise her effort (regardless of the final product) and let her know that she's right on target for the beginning of the school year. Emphasize that raising her hand to answer questions (and not calling out the answers), sitting quietly on the circle line, and staying in her seat are responsibilities and skills that will need to be finely honed. It's a good time to begin working on some of these at home, in the weeks before school begins.

And, don't forget the excitement of shopping for the lunchbox, book bag, and school clothes. Many kids love to wear a new outfit the first day, but don't be surprised if your child decides on something that he wore at preschool. It may be comforting to take a bit of the old with him as he enters into the new!

Finally, if possible, visit the school beforehand. Try playing on the playground and looking into the classroom windows if a tour is available. Review the floor plan of the building, at least the part between arrival at school and finding her classroom. Discuss how you'll handle that the first few days of school. If you can, arrange for a short meeting with the teacher and a quick look at the classroom. Be prepared for a bit of

clinginess the first week or so. Then, on the first day of school, hand the child over to the teacher (she's the expert on this) and try to have a good day!

### **Grade School Kids:**

Children in the older grade school years are concerned about many of the above-mentioned issues, but are also becoming more keenly aware of the challenges of academics as well as fitting in with peers. They tend to be concerned about:

- Will they understand the material and answer correctly in class
- Will classmates laugh at them if a mistake is made
- Whether the teacher will be understanding or take strictness to a new level
- Whether they can keep up with the kids on the playground or in P.E. class
- Whether they will be chosen for sports teams or have to endure the embarrassment of being last
- How appropriate their new clothes are and whether their "look" will fit in
- What if there is a bully and how they should handle it
- Who they can hang around with before the first bell rings in the morning
- How to start a conversation that doesn't sound dumb
- Whether the kids who teased last year will still be focused upon them
- If their old friends will still be at school and available and want to hang around together

### **Kids in middle school:**

Tweens are often shocked when they finally hit the new campus. They have to learn to deftly maneuver between their locker and classes, figure out how to socialize in the hallways but get to class on time, and how to deal with a diverse group of peers who come from many different types of families, incomes and value systems. Whether truly interested or not in the opposite sex, many middle schoolers will talk about having a boyfriend or girlfriend and desire to hang out with friends at the movies or the mall. Campus communication, therefore, often centers upon socializing, music, sports and being cool. Many kids in middle school have their first brush with the drug culture (meeting peers who smoke marijuana or use inhalants) or who are not strangers to alcohol. In addition, first day jitters may also include concerns with:

- Who they will talk, walk and sit with between classes and in the classroom
- Whether their clothing is appropriate and cool
- Whether they will be welcome at the lunchroom table
- Where they will fit in—the preps, jocks, nerds, or the "random" group
- How they will adapt to six teachers and six classes a day
- Whether they will be able to successfully deal with a locker, remembering to bring books and folders to class
- How to deal with rough kids, those who tease or bully
- If they will get a boy or girlfriend and how to deal with it

### **High Schoolers:**

In talking with teens personally as well as professionally, I've found that their greatest fears continue to be social in nature. Sure, many are concerned about grades or getting along with their teachers, but as teens become more conscious of peers, fitting in versus being ostracized, and the potential of "becoming invisible" to others at school, it's the social dilemmas that seem to pervade their thoughts as they move into the new school year. Concerns about dealing with kids from different backgrounds, shyness, and making sports teams or clubs are worrisome to many teens as they contemplate the beginning of a new school year. Will this be the year that your son or daughter can finally relax and feel included with the group, or will it be filled with uncertainty and worry about having kids to hang around with in and outside school? In particular, those in high school are concerned with:

- Learning conversation starters so as not to appear, or to feel, awkward
- Whether clothing is the correct style
- Body image—how your daughter feels about her figure and the way she looks in her clothes, or your son compares his height and musculature to the other guys
- Hair style—never underestimate how a bad hair day can lead to early morning drama before leaving for school!
- Fear of harassment, teasing or bullying
- Ability to hold down a part-time job as well as to complete homework
- Getting a new start this year—will the kids remember the embarrassing moments of last year?
- Attracting an appropriate boyfriend or girlfriend
- Being the "third wheel" when their best friend begins a new romantic relationship
- Being able to move in and between different groups of friends without offending anyone

So, how can parents help their children with the first day jitters for these older kids? Here are some suggestions to consider:

- If your child is moving up to middle or high school, they probably know at least a few kids who will be going to the new campus with them. Try to get the kids together over the summer to strengthen friendships so that they will have someone to hang out with the first week of class.
- Encourage contact between kids who may not have touched base over the summer. This can be accomplished via telephone calls, emails or instant messaging. It's easy to reestablish friendships—just a few questions about "how'd you spend your summer" often does the trick.
- Most schools have an orientation night a few days before school begins. Be sure to attend, and encourage your child to go also. He or she may see some familiar and friendly faces to buddy-up with, or may be able to make some new acquaintances that can be strengthened if they find themselves together in class or in the cafeteria.

- Encourage the kids to plan to eat lunch together the first day or two of school, or to meet a few minutes early at the lockers. Comparing schedules and having someone to walk with to the next class or lunch comes in handy, and helps to relieve first day jitters.
- Also encourage your child to be friendly to new kids—that not only helps to ease their own anxieties, but it broadens your youngster’s social horizons and they may find that the new friends are just as compatible, dependable and fun as are their old buddies.
- Hold off on some school clothing purchases. After seeing what the other kids are wearing the first week or two, it’s nice to be able to pick up a few new outfits after school begins.
- Listen to your child’s concerns about hairstyle and set an appointment with a kid-approved stylist.
- Acne issues? Now’s the time to see the dermatologist to help your child make the best impression on that first day at school.

If your child is moving to a new school where he or she will not know others, consider these tips and share them with your child so that they know you’re there to help in any reasonable fashion:

- Again, make it your business to attend the orientation evening with your child in tow. He or she may meet a kid or two in the same boat, and they can swap phone numbers and make plans to sit together in the cafeteria the first day of school. To many children the thought of knowing no one and having to eat alone at the end of a table full of kids who already are friendly is a frightening thought. Many end up spending their lunch break sitting alone or wandering in the library.
- Take your child for a tour of the school so that he or she can become acquainted with the layout, bathroom placement, cafeteria, gym and library.
- Become active in the school if possible. This will allow you to meet other parents, and perhaps you’ll be able to stimulate some friendships for your child via the other moms and dads also volunteering.
- Highly encourage your child to join clubs, sports teams and to attend activities. Even if the kid could care less about the chess or drama clubs, at least she’ll be able to meet some other children and to begin to make friends and establish familiarity with the other kids. Sports teams are excellent avenues for encouraging friendships—practice time after school often leads to going over to other’s homes on weekends for sleepovers or just pizza and a movie.
- Become best friends with the school guidance counselor. These folks are concerned that the kids feel comfortable in their school and usually have creative ways of getting kids together.
- Encourage your child’s involvement in study groups. Invite the group to your home and be sure to provide lots of food. Believe me; they will want to come back to your house!

Perhaps most important, though, is to make sure that you are really listening to your child. Asking “Did you have a good day at school today?” will probably yield a quick

“Yes”, whether it’s true or not. Kids are often embarrassed to discuss their social fears, even with their parents. Ask more specific questions, such as:

- Who’d you eat lunch with today?
- Do you walk to class with anyone in particular or do you walk alone?
- Who do you talk to before, during and after class?
- Is anyone being particularly nice to you?
- Is anyone teasing or intimidating you?
- Have you found a favorite teacher that you would feel comfortable talking with if there was a peer problem?
- What groups, activities or sports teams are currently active, and would you consider joining at least one or more?
- How’s it going at your locker? Do you know anyone whose locker is near yours? Would you like to have your locker moved to be near your new friend?

Ultimately, it’s up to your child to make the connection and friendship with peers, but hopefully these tips will help you, the parent, make those first few weeks a bit less worrisome and more fun for your child.