

Back to School - Top Tips from our OT's and Therapists

With good preparation and the right support, we can help children manage back to school worries. Here are our top tips to help children start the new term feeling ready to learn!

Teachers will often suggest what they find is best depending on a child's age and ability. But including your child in the shopping experience helps to make sure their needs are understood and by giving children some choices they can feel a part of the back-to-school prep!

What goes in the pencil case?



Having the right tool matters!

- Choose the right size colouring materials; some schools prefer 'twistables' – while younger children can do better with shorter chunky crayons.
- Various pencil grips or jumbo triangular pencils can help make writing easier.
- If your school allows felt tip markers – watch out for strong smells especially if your child is more sensitive to smells. Look for odour free types instead.
- If your child finds certain smells calming, then including a scented pen might be right for them!
- Helping your child to select their favourite colour/character themed pencil case can help them feel more excited about packing for school.
- Avoid deep pencil cases where things get lost down the bottom and children lose time in class trying to find the essentials. Ones with compartments can help keep things organised.

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Motivation Through Fun

Match a child's favourite character / colour / special interest when choosing school bags, lunch bags, drink bottles



Think about your child's experiences

How can I make this more attractive or fun for my child?

How can I make sure it's easy to open and close, easy to keep clean (machine / dishwasher friendly items help parents!)?

Is it comfortable to carry?



Shopping Tips

Try before you buy!

Have your child put their backpack on to ensure they can tolerate the fabric and straps.

Shoulder strap pads are useful for additional comfort especially in later school years when bags get heavier.

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Dressing for the occasion



The School Uniform

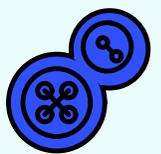
Comfort is key and again the less laundry demands the better for parents. Some schools are quite fixed in their uniform (e.g. crested items) but most allow mainstream shop options for shirts / polos / skirts / trousers etc.

- * Does your child hate the feel of stiff fabrics? Look for softer materials (e.g. jersey skirt/pinafore/trousers)
- * Does your child hate the feel of clothes tags? Remove /trim these before school starts to prevent irritations.
- * Do edges and seams bother your child? Look for seamless socks and tights.
- * Does your child struggle to tie buttons/zips? Look for easy fastening items – most stores now have 'accessible' uniform items with Velcro fasteners.
- * What sleeve length is more comfortable for your child? Long or Short?
- * Choose shoes that are comfortable, hard wearing, and easier to get on and off – Velcro straps can help especially for younger children. Light up shoes may help a child who responds well to visual stimulation or simply be fun! Elasticated laces can help older children who want to wear lace up shoes that look like their friends.
- * Coats – Look for larger zips or larger buttons that are easier open and close or rain ponchos might be a suitable alternative or again Velcro fasteners are handy.

A week before returning to school do a dress rehearsal to make sure everything fits and is comfortable. Then hang the uniform up in your child's room as a visual cue for the transition back to school. Put your child's name on all uniform items or an identifiable logo of their favourite character. Stick-on name labels can be used. If labels are irritating, try using a clothing stamper or clothing marker. Driving past the school to show/remind the child where they will be going is also a good idea to help prepare.

Dress Rehearsal Time

Remember to practice doing up zips and buttons at a relaxed time of the day with your child.



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Support children's organisational Skills



Use Visual Checklists

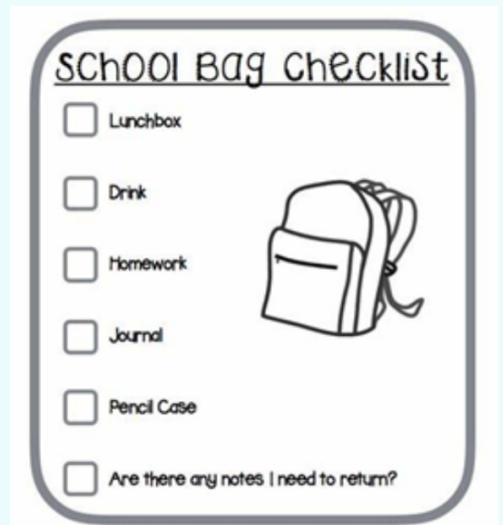
Have a list of what your child needs to put in their pencil case depending on school preferences



Use a daily checklist for the school bag

Stick this on the fridge or keep on your phone.

Put important reminders (e.g. PE days) on your fridge to help avoid forgetting extra school items.



Use Subject Folders (zipped clear A4 folders work well)

This helps to keep the matching worksheets / materials together.

At home, you could use coloured trays to keep homework organised.

Colour code books and/or materials



Colour coding books may provide additional visual cues to promote organisation e.g., a different colour for each subject.

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Dealing with big emotions



Prepare your child in advance for school

Try a visual count down calendar to count the days left to school.



For younger children thinking of it in terms of how many sleeps before school can help understand the days better.



Remember children take clues from the tone we use so when we present as calm and supportive it can help allay fear/anxiety.



It's important not to minimise or dismiss a child's big feelings about school and naming those feelings can be the start of helping a child feel more grounded.

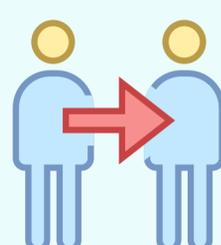


Feeling games/cards may be useful to play out the feelings as talking may not be at the child's level.



Focus on sameness

Discuss what will be the same in school e.g., friends, uniform, school, bus etc.



Look for the positives and the fun!

While your child is enjoying an activity they love (painting, drawing, singing, Lego, computers, PE or freely playing with friends) use it as a chance to point out all the fun things they will get to do at school.

Build familiarity with the School Environment

Explore the school website with your child to make them familiar with teachers and the environment to reduce possible fears.

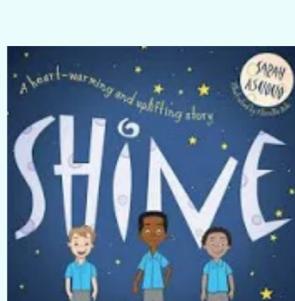
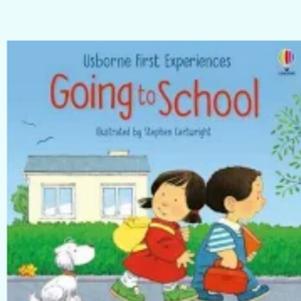
If siblings have been in the school before encouraging them to share practical info (where the school hall is, where the toilets are, what's in the play area, etc.).

Use Storytelling to Prepare

Provide an easy to follow story or visual story (comic / social story).

You might like to choose a book from your library about starting school to open the conversation.

Here's a few our team really like.



You might like to create a visual social story using pictures of the school, setting out where they will go and who they will meet (school social media accounts and websites are useful for gathering images). Free school social story templates are widely available online (e.g. on [twinkl.com](https://www.twinkl.com)).



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Support
and
Soothe



Sensory Fidgets

Chewable pencil toppers and fidget toys such as pop-its may be helpful to take to school or for use on the journey. If school is reluctant to allow these, you could think about lining a pocket of their school uniform with a soothing fabric they like (depending on if child is sensory seeking or sensory avoiding).



Teamwork: Link with School

Does your child need a break card, or a buddy system put in place or access to a quiet area to promote self-regulation? A visual schedule of the school day routine/activities would promote predictability, reduce anxiety, and help with transitions from one activity to another.

This is especially important during Covid – all parents have natural worries about safety and knowing the steps the school is taking can help parents and children feel more prepared this term.



Consider Lunchtime

If your child has noise sensitivity could they wear foam inserts to drown out background noise or access a quieter space first to eat their lunch. Will they be able to tolerate smells of other children's lunches?



Transitional Items

If your child is struggling to separate from you in the mornings then think about how you can help bridge this emotional gap. Having a key-ring with a photo of you and your child attached to school pencil case/school bag, or a squishee in their pocket to squeeze and imagine they are getting a squeazy hug when they need it.



Or you might like to put little surprise notes in their lunch box with heart stickers/messages, or get fun cookie cutters and cut sandwiches into hearts/stars?



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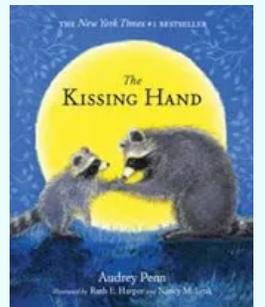
Goodbye Rituals

Goodbye rituals help build trust and reduce anxiety



Think about your child's experiences

For children with strong separation anxiety, developing consistent bye-bye rituals are really beneficial. The story of the 'Kissing Hand' is one of our favourite ways to introduce a goodbye safe ritual.



You might like to develop your own unique high five and always use this when leaving your child at school gate.



Then at the end of the school day it's really important to be there on time for school pickups, (we can all struggle with that sometimes we know) and allow some downtime/quality time to reconnect (even if possibly only for a few minutes). It all helps!

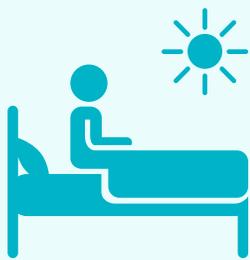


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Developing Good Routines



Re-establishing sleep routine



Establish a better sleep routine as children may be used to staying up late over the holidays. Start the wind down for bedtime earlier each night in the week leading up to school and practice getting up earlier with the children.

Set up familiar morning and after school routines

Here's an example of an after school routine

1. Have snack (crunchy items can help shift pent up energy or feelings)
2. Have some activity time or downtime (can be brief)
3. Do homework + allow movement breaks if helpful for concentration (e.g., bunny hops/bounce on the trampoline)
4. Empty lunch box
5. Pack away school bag
6. Put away uniform (with help depending on their needs)
7. Time to Play till dinner and bedtime!

