

10 ways to help your child prepare for the first day of school

We still have two book reports to write and who knows what else to do before school starts. But my top priority is ensuring that our son is feeling ready to take on his first day of first grade.

So, with school beginning next week, I called La Keita Carter, Psy.D., director of the psychology division for the Loyola Clinical Centers, to ask for advice on how to help children gear up for starting a new school or a new grade.



She offered this advice for smoothing the transition:

1. **Have a natural, laidback conversation with your child.** *“Say, ‘Hey, let’s go for ice cream. Let’s play Scrabble. Then talk about what’s so exciting about starting school. You can use your own experiences—and obviously don’t pick the experiences that were bad. Make it seem natural so it doesn’t feel like a big step. All of that gets scarier and scarier and scarier.”*
2. **Choose your words carefully.** *“If you say, ‘You’ll get to use the big bathroom down the hall,’ some children will be frightened. Make sure you’re not using adjectives that are scary.”*
3. **Reframe the experience when you talk about it.** *“You’re not necessarily looking at the brighter side of things, but looking at it in a different way,” she says. Remind children that they aren’t losing friends who were in class with them last year at preschool, or in a different school, or a different class. “Tell your child you aren’t losing friends from last year. We’ll be able to stay in touch and invite them over. You’re gaining more friends.”*
4. **Talk about how the school year can give a new beginning.** *“You have the chance to start totally over.”*
5. **Discuss what will change and what will stay the same.** *“Play up the things that*

won't change to make them feel more comfortable, and talk about the things that will."

6. Think about things that don't need to change. Consider reusing the same backpack and lunchbox. Point out that your child will have the same type of cubby or locker.

7. Keep a video diary or scrapbook to record your child's thoughts every year. Then you can share them with your child at the start of the next year: "See, you had those same feelings last year and you made it through the whole year."

8. If you are worrying about the school year, channel that energy into productivity. Write a series of notes that you put in your child's lunchbox every day. Or, if you have a very anxious child, get the phone number of a parent so your child can meet another child before the school year-and you can meet another parent.

9. Remember that your child is taking his cues from you. Relax. "Your child works off of your energy. One of the things you can see at a very young age, when a child falls, the first thing they do is look at mom and dad, and if they have a look of horror, the child is going to start crying," she says.

10. Trust that your child will make a smooth transition. "This is what children do. They start at the bottom and they work their way up," Carter says. "That is normal, and children will do that naturally. If you give people a supportive nurturing environment, they will naturally do what they are supposed to do, which is grow."

How are you helping your child prepare for the start of a new school year?