

The Child's Experience of Primary School

Families lay the foundations for a feeling of security. At its best, the family is the base from which the child learns to face and cope with the anxieties of life.

Apart from home, school is the single most important place in the lives of most children. Their experience of school will play a vital part in their lives and will determine their academic, social and, probably, their occupational future. The reception year is crucial. Research shows that there is a continuous link between the progress that children make in their first year in school – in fact, the first six weeks – and the GCSE grades they will eventually achieve at the age of 16. Schools carry on from families, both in setting challenges, and in providing ways – different from those learnt at home – for managing difficulties.

Starting School

All changes are stressful and going to school for the first time is a big event for children, whatever their previous experience. These challenges may include:

- separating from their main caregivers for extended periods of time
- leaving home with its familiar surroundings
- managing on their own – being independent
- meeting different people, both children and adults
- learning new skills and performing new tasks
- competing and comparing themselves with others
- adjusting to the beginnings and endings of school terms (which may evoke memories of other changes or losses that were difficult for the child)

- possibly having a more formal structure for the day
- having a teacher whose caregiving / directive style may be different from the parent



Children who have had less experience of the above may find the transition to primary school more challenging and may require more time, patience, support and understanding to feel at ease in their new environment.

Reluctance to go to school

Many children are a bit reluctant to go to school at first. There are so many adjustments to make that it may take some time to settle in. But children who are still reluctant to leave home after the first few terms may need some additional support.

Reluctance to go to school may sometimes reflect a child's anxiety about leaving home.

Children who have not made the usual moves towards independence, find it difficult to be separated from their caregiver. Some children may not be able to face school because they are preoccupied with anxieties about what is happening at home:

- jealousy of their caregiver being with a new baby or younger brother or sister
- worry about how a parent is managing without them (if they have become a caretaker at an early age)
- anxieties about their parents social, emotional or mental health
- sudden or multiple changes at home e.g. moving to a new house frequently and without warning.

The anxiety may also be about difficulties with getting to school, conflicts with other children or the demands of the schoolwork.

If your child is reluctant to go to school, explore all the possibilities and discuss these with the school.

Getting on With Other Children

Our relationship to others forms an integral part of human existence. For children just starting out on this journey it may take them some time to sort out their place amongst the others. Children who have insecure relationships at home, for whatever reason, may not start out feeling confident in school. Jealousy, anger and upset may spill over into relationships with classmates. However, sometimes the transition to primary school may work in a child's best interests. For example, children who have felt highly competitive at home may find life easier at school amongst a mixed group of children and be able to create better relationships.

Groups and 'best friendships' usually emerge during the first year although they may not survive for a very long time. The ups and downs of friendships may be painful for children, but most of them establish ways of relating to one another in a more or less harmonious way. These are amongst the most powerful experiences of childhood, outside the home and set up the child's abilities to manage social relationships for the future.

As they move on to junior school, children tend to divide into same sex groups, often expressing some contempt for the other sex. This seems to be a preparation for adolescence – a way of establishing interests and attitudes appropriate to the culture of being a boy or a girl. Boys and girls will get together again in a few years' time.

Children who have 'girl friends' and 'boy friends' at primary school may be responding to social pressures or what they see on television or social media, rather than their own real wishes and capacity for relationships.

Most children will settle in well amongst the others. But children who are not able to feel comfortable amongst other children may have difficulties that would be worth exploring with the school.

Bullying

Parents are often worried about bullying as they feel a natural wish to protect the child when he or she is not physically with them.

Children of different ages have a different understanding of being bullied. Younger children complain that any child who is nasty to them is bullying whilst older children tend to experience bullying as being on the receiving end of a more deliberate and targeted campaign by a particular child or children.

In our modern society social media enables greater communication between children, often without the oversight of adults. Sadly, this creates more opportunity for children to experience bullying or criticism.

Children who have relatively secure relationships with adults and other children are usually able to enlist help in managing the situation, if another child or group of children is nasty to them. Children who are insecure or disadvantaged in some way tend to feel more vulnerable to being bullied.

Vulnerabilities may include:

- those who are new to a school and have not yet formed friendships
- those who do not relate easily to other children.
- those who are seen as different through disability, skin colour or language.

Vulnerable children are immeasurably helped if those around them understand their struggles, create an 'open door' approach if the child needs to express or talk about their difficulties and

finally work together to ease these difficulties for the child e.g. putting in place 'school buddies', building acceptance of difference into the curriculum, valuing the achievements of all the children despite difference.

Sadly, children who bully are often not too different from those they pick on and have often been bullied themselves. These children feel frightened or at a disadvantage and are unable to talk about how they feel, so they pick on more disadvantaged children to make themselves feel that they are 'better than somebody'.

It is important for all the adults around these children to help them with their inner feelings of fear or disadvantage in order to break the cycle of bullying.

For parents and caregivers, it is important for parents to take every complaint of bullying seriously, while trying to get a balanced picture of what's going on. If bullying and unhealthy relationships persist, parents and children should get together with the teachers to deal with the situation. Your child's school is likely to have an 'anti-bullying' policy and individual complaints will need to be looked at in this context. What is helpful for children is to see adults, both parents and teachers, acting together to protect them.

Getting on With Teachers

Children have to adjust to a range of new adults when they start school. Most children enjoy meeting different adults but are likely to feel more comfortable with some than with others. A child who is used to an easy-going, changeable or chaotic atmosphere at home, may well find a more structured class-room environment more difficult than a child from a home where boundaries are tighter, and their day is more predictable.

Children who have had a good experience of appropriate authority figures (such as a firm but fair parent) are likely to have both positive and challenging experiences with teachers over the years but are most likely to find ways of managing and learning from these differences. However, some children may not have experienced helpful authority figures in their lives and may react to teachers' directions and instructions with opposition or anger. In this case, it is helpful for parents and teachers to get together and think about what the underlying difficulties may be and how the teacher's authority is being perceived by the child. If parents and teachers can think together, changes may then be made at home and at school.

What does attention-seeking mean?

One of the main adjustments that children must make in school is to be being one amongst many. How they manage this will largely depend on their experiences in life so far.

Children who are secure in the attention of their parents and family are likely to feel comfortable with their fellow pupils, and confident that they can get the attention of the teacher when they need it. If a child, for whatever reason, feels 'unattended to' by caregivers, they may instead seek to gain the constant attention of adult figures at school. These children may employ a number of strategies:

- clinging to the teacher at all times
-

developing tummy aches or frequently bursting into tears

- creating or involving oneself in drama's with others
- getting the teacher's attention by doing something naughty

These children are 'rewarded' by the protests of the teacher, and often of parents at home. They may well develop a habit that will become disruptive in school in the long-term.

Learning

Schoolwork can arouse a number of anxieties in children and their parents. Can they do the work? Do they understand it? What do they do if it doesn't make sense? Trial and error are an important part of learning. If we do not have the confidence to try something, and possibly fail, then we are unlikely to learn new skills and have new experiences. Children who are confident and secure in themselves tend to adopt a more trial and error approach. Children who are less self-confident or are preoccupied with other worries, may need additional help to learn. Broadly, children will fall into one of the following categories:

- Some children will have no difficulty in asking for help and they will be able to persevere until they understand something new or challenging.
- Some children feel terribly persecuted by the idea of not knowing or understanding something and may pretend that they do know or may feel that they don't need to know the information anyway.
- Some children find learning too anxiety provoking and may need many opportunities to learn, particularly in less stressful environments such as small groups or one to one.
- Get actively involved with the life of the school if possible— attend parents' evenings and volunteer to help whenever you can. This helps the child to feel you are taking an interest in their world away from you.
- If your child is struggling with learning, try to understand what may be at the root cause of this and work with school to try to find ways of lessening the child's anxiety or difficulty so that he or she can learn with greater ease.
- Children learn best when they are happy and secure. Encouragement and praise enable a child to learn much better rather than criticism.
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Homework may be an important part of your child's school career. The way parents respond to their child doing homework will have a big impact on the child's willingness or enthusiasm to complete it.

- Take an interest in your child's work and find out what's going on at school without being intrusive: children need to be allowed some privacy and do not always take kindly to questions like 'What happened at school today?'
- Take tales of bullying seriously and investigate but try to keep an open mind and resist searching for someone to blame.
- Remember that we have all had some sort of experience of school ourselves and this may impact upon our worries or concerns about our own children going to school. Try to be mindful of separating your own experiences from the actual experiences of your child.

Competitiveness

One consequence of a greater emphasis on schoolwork and achievement as children progress through the school system is that children begin to compare themselves and what they can do with one another. When marks are given for work, the question arises about who gets the best marks.

Sometimes parents are more competitive about their children than the children themselves, storing up trouble for the children, particularly if they do not achieve all their parents would like for them. This may be linked to a parent's feelings about their own experience of school. Fear of letting down their parents, as well as themselves and their teachers, may add to a child's nerves about sitting for SATs – undermining their confidence and possibly leading to results that do not do justice to their real ability.

Children and their parents cannot avoid the pain of comparison and the reality of their children's successes and failures. Parents can give their children the most positive support by concentrating on what has been done well.

Looking only at what could be done better risks undermining a child's confidence in their achievements and reinforcing feelings of failure. An open recognition of the issues and valuing all of a child's strengths – not just academic achievements – can make all the difference to how children see themselves.

Difficulties with learning

It is important to sort out what lies behind a work problem. Has previous work been missed? Does the child have intrinsic learning difficulties? Is the child preoccupied with worries or concerns, at home or at school, and doesn't have space in their minds to learn? It is always helpful to establish the nature of any difficulties as early as possible, to minimise the length of time the child is working at a disadvantage.

Educational psychologists are there to help with the diagnosis and treatment of many of these problems and can give advice on learning difficulties, and on many of the other

issues raised in this leaflet.

Leaving primary school

The move from primary school to middle or secondary school is a major change for everybody. Children and their parents are bound to have mixed feelings about leaving behind a familiar environment.

Challenges in secondary school may include:

- Moving from a feeling of being a 'big fish in a small pond' to a 'small fish in a big pond'
- Having multiple teachers as opposed to one teacher for the whole day
- Being taught in different classrooms in different parts of the school
- Increased expectations for quantity and quality of work and homework
- Greater expectations of children to be more independent with their learning and other aspects of the school day e.g. getting dinner, preparing for PE.

There are also many exciting advantages of moving up to secondary school:

- A greater breadth of curriculum and opportunities to specialise in chosen topics e.g. in GCSE's
- Opportunities to make new friendships
- Greater experience of responsibility and autonomy
- A 'fresh' start

All children need support when they make this move and many schools recognise this, visits to the new school in the final primary year can be very reassuring for anxious pupils, as well as their anxious parents!

About this leaflet

Understanding Childhood is a series of leaflets written by experienced child and adolescent psychoanalytic psychotherapists to give parents, grandparents, carers and professionals additional insight into children's feelings and view of the world and to help make sense of their behaviour. Originally written for the Child Psychotherapy Trust they have been reviewed and updated and are

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