



Moving Schools

September can be an exciting but nerve-wracking time for our children, whether they're starting primary or secondary school, or switching schools due to a move. Siobhan Mason discovers ways to make the transition go smoothly, whatever their age

Whether they're four or 11, we worry about our children establishing friendships and adapting to the change of routines and demands of a new school.

Although many of us may recall being thrown in at the deep-end in our own childhoods, schools do much more these days to ease the journey for our children – with parents encouraged to support them.

Pre-school to primary

When making the transition from pre-school to primary school, anything that helps familiarise

your child with their new school will make those first days less daunting. Reception teachers often visit children in their home, while taking your child to open days and the summer fair also helps. Many parents start up Facebook groups for new reception classes to arrange play dates before term starts. Ask the school or your local Facebook groups if one exists already; if not, think about setting up your own.

At Twerton's Bath Area Play Project's (BAPP) Hut Pre-school, children get to know what their local infant school looks like thanks

to a book with pictures of the school that graces the bookshelf all year. "It includes photos of the classrooms, and even of the school pegs," says Caroline Haworth, BAPP's Director. "We talk about what it's going to be like at school, and help children get used to certain routines, such as washing their hands before they eat."

"Taking your child to open days and the summer fair helps familiarise them with their new school"

"We encourage children to have a go at putting on their own shoes and hanging their coats on their pegs from an early age," Caroline goes on. "We also encourage them to pour their own drinks (even if it's messy), butter their own toast, and

Writer profile



Siobhan Mason, mum to an 11-year-old girl and 13-year-old boy, went to three primary schools herself as she moved house a lot. At one school, she didn't like the person sitting next to her in class. After her parents spoke to the school, her teacher suggested that everyone move places the next day, before winking at Siobhan. Siobhan presumes (and hopes) teachers today would be a little more subtle!



The curriculum for reception children is primarily play-based, making your child's experience similar to pre-school (Photo: Bath Play Project)

The after-school chat

It's good to have a few alternatives to the "How was school?" question, which can be too much of an open question for a tired four-year-old. Caroline Haworth suggests: "Who did you play with today?" "Did anything make you laugh?" or "Did you try any new foods?"

"If you ask your child if they made any friends, they may think 'What is a friend? Is it someone I played with once or someone who came to my house?'" says Caroline. "Instead, say 'Did you learn anyone's name today?' Then you can ask questions about that person the next day."

use a knife and fork, because these skills will help them be independent at lunchtime. If it takes a bit of time, it doesn't matter because we have it! It's tempting for parents to think 'it's quicker if I do it,' but the more practice and praise children get, the quicker they become."

Parents can help by encouraging these independence skills at home.

When the big day looms, Caroline advises parents to park their own anxiety. "Try not to drag out drop-off. If they're upset, acknowledge it, but follow up with firm reassurance. Say something like, 'I know it's upsetting, I'm going to miss you too but I'm going to be back soon.' Children who cry when their parents are leaving are almost always fine once they've gone."

It's worth remembering that children are still following the

same Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum as pre-school. "It is 'big' school, but it involves similar routines" explains Caroline. "It's only really the setting that's different. Plus, they are surrounded by professionals who have seen hundreds of children start school, and are there to support them."

Changing schools

Sometimes children move schools due to relocation or an issue with the school they are at. It's always best to solve issues at the current school if possible, but if moving is inevitable, remember that children are more adaptable than we think.

Although your child's new school will receive transfer documents from their old school, it's a great idea to supplement them with extra information on your child, including

any outside school interests and achievements. Visiting the school first and reading up on their policies (such as anti-bullying) are important, especially if the reason for leaving one school was because you were unhappy with the way in which something was dealt.

Moving schools is also the perfect time to equip your child to cope with change, according to educational psychologist Dr Linda Mallory.

"It's important that there is room and space for them to say goodbye, and to acknowledge the sadness at doing so," she says. "But it's equally important to help them see what they are gaining from a situation."

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In their guide for families of service personnel, the Ministry of Defence have a children's activity pack for those moving schools. In the section 'Looking Forward, Looking Back', children are given a chance to reflect on the time at their old school. It asks them: 'What have you enjoyed? What didn't you enjoy? What will you miss? What will you be pleased to leave behind?'

It also encourages them to make a list of things they'd like to know about the area they're moving to, gives them space to keep pictures of friends, and suggests picking six objects to remind them of the school or area they are leaving. It's a great resource for helping your child process the change ahead.

When you watch TV or read stories with your child, Linda suggests discussing how characters, whether it's Harry Potter or a Marvel character, cope with change. "Children are more likely to air their concerns when talking about the third person," she says. "They're also more likely to have a conversation if you do a physical



Suddenly being the young one again when moving to secondary school can be difficult, but forming new friendships is one of the great opportunities of this change (Photo: Hayesfield Girls' School)

Encourage positive thinking

We can empower our children to cope with any challenge by helping them to think calm thoughts, rather than stressful ones, according to Dr Linda Mallory. "If your child says 'I don't know who I'm going to play with,' support them to think, 'I didn't know who I was going to play with last week, but I found someone and I was OK.'" Or remind them that they've been in the situation before and thrived.

Children can't control other people, but they can try to control how they react to others. "If your child is thinking 'She doesn't like me,' or other unhelpful thoughts which are likely to make them feel stressed, encourage them to tell themselves: 'I am a fun person' or 'I am a nice person to sit next to.'"

activity alongside them, such as table tennis, playing a board game or just messing about."

"Help your child be confident that although things are changing around them, the one thing that is constant is them," she adds.

"Noticing what's the same and what's different in every situation is a basic but powerful cognitive skill that can help your children cope with any change."

Primary to secondary

At 11, children seem more robust than that tiny four-year-old you sent off on that first day at primary school. But going from being the oldest in a small school, to the tiniest in an enormous school can be quite a jump.

"Some students join secondary school from a very small primary setting, where they knew every student in their year group," says Sue Geoghegan, Transition Co-ordinator at The Corsham School in Wiltshire.

"Some may make longer journeys that include independent travel. Others will see changing lessons and classrooms more than five times a day as the biggest change."

"However, secondary school presents opportunities to make new friendships, develop independence and learn new life skills. And children quickly find that these new opportunities outweigh any anxieties they have about change."

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All secondary schools ease their pupils into the changes ahead by running taster days, open evenings or mornings, and an induction day in year 6. They also liaise with feeder primary schools and parents to discuss transition needs.

"Spending a whole day getting to know each other, and the

Photo: Kingswood Prep

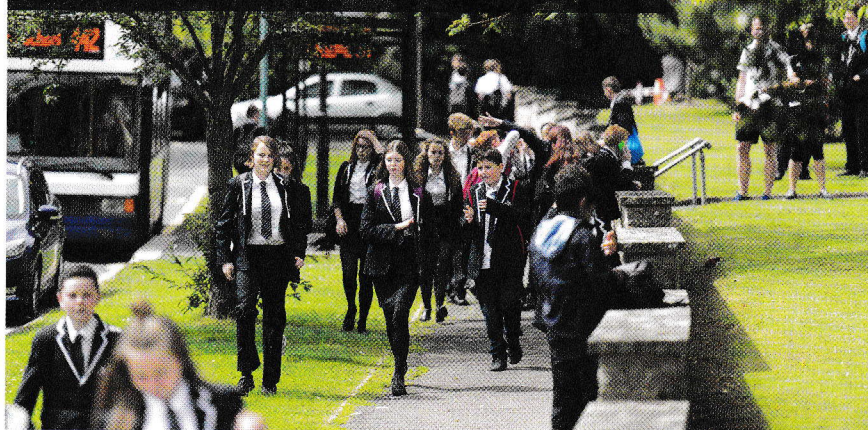


Staying away from home

Alison and Andrew Ward, who run High Vinnalls, the Kingswood Prep School Boarding House, offer the following tips for helping new boarders settle in.

- Don't call at bedtime. Children who receive early evening calls from home settle better to bed.
- If you receive a teary call home, remember that children are often having a great time with their friends immediately after.
- As hard as it is, try to limit calls in the early days, so children get a good chance to bond with others.
- Make sure you have everything on the kit list – it can be stressful if a child needs to borrow during their first week.
- If you have a weekly boarder, support your child at home by taking an interest in their homework. Boarders don't like returning on a Sunday evening and then having to do homework.

If your child will be taking the bus to their new school, you could practice the route with them so that they know where to go on that first day (Photo courtesy of Oldfield School)



"Don't worry excessively about the mixture of emotions that your children experience when moving school," she adds. "Working through uncomfortable feelings enables children to grow their personal resilience and learn how to deal with future setbacks in a positive way."

Whatever school or class transition your child is making this September, supporting them with a listening ear and an extra dose of patience will help them (and you too) adapt successfully to the exciting changes ahead. ■

school, through positive activities really does help to boost students' confidence prior to them starting in September," says Sue. "It's also a good opportunity for them to practice their new route to school. But we recognise that there are normally some students that require additional support, and that may include more visits to the school or contact with the Transition Co-ordinator," she says.

Hayesfield Girls' School in Bath offers a summer school for those who feel anxious about the upcoming change, as well as for those who need extra academic support. "Year 7 students also create a set of five-minute videos aimed at new students, that include

tips and advice on how to make the transition to secondary school a success – there's always some Hayesfield humour added in!" says Emma Yates, the school's head.

As a parent, you may miss that contact time you had with the teacher at primary school, but schools give out key email addresses, making it easy to contact the school with any concerns.

Friendship worries often trump academic worries for new pupils, as they lose some friendships and make new ones. "This process can be upsetting," says Emma, "but we tend to find that our pupils work things out very well by themselves without the need for adults to be involved."

Useful resources

- For tips on starting primary school, look at the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years' guide on getting your children ready for school www.pacey.org.uk
- The Ministry of Defence's Activity Pack for moving schools is useful for any child moving primary schools. **Search for Moving Schools on GOV.UK**