Preparing your child's first day at primary school

Deciding which school for your child to attend can be a huge task, and once complete you will have to start thinking about preparation for their very first day.

Here are some ideas to consider:

- Consider how you are all feeling: Starting school is as big a day for the parent as it is the child. You may have lots of mixed feelings and have lots of questions running through your head. Give yourself time to process these feelings and thoughts.
- Communicate with the school SENCO prior to your child's first day: It may be worth arranging a check-in, in advance, so that you know you can get up to date information about your child's progress.
- Create predictability: Before your child starts, meet, and take photos of the new staff, particularly key people who will be involved with your child. You could also take photos of the different classrooms and halls and use these in visual stories.
- Prepare your child: You could prepare your child by encouraging the wearing of their uniform before their first day. Allowing them to become familiar with the school and the surrounding area could also help. Could you go on walks or drives past the school, or spend some time in the school playground when it is empty?
- Involve your child in the process of starting school: For example, choosing a school bag, pencil case, trying on different uniforms, and selecting what they would like in their packed lunch box. All this will provide a sense of control at an unpredictable time in your child's life.
- Phased start: For some children it can be a good idea to have a phased start. For example, your child may do one day a week and build this up over the initial weeks. Speak with the school about this possibility and create a well-documented plan together that both you and the school can follow consistently. Create an accessible version (if needed) for your child.

- Use visuals: This might look like a visual countdown on the calendar for their first day or it may be a visual story which breaks down specific situations and events to prepare your child for what to expect. You could use a visual schedule for the school day to show your child what will be happening.
- Keep the rest of your child's routine consistent: Starting school is a big stage in your child's life, keeping everything else as familiar as possible can give them security and comfort.
- Create a communication passport: If your child has difficulty communicating, make a list of key phrases or behaviours and what those mean and look like. This helps to ensure the child feels listened to and recognised at school and will also be a good support for the teachers.
- Complete our 'All about me profile': This can be helpful for teachers when they first meet your child, it gives them a good snapshot of your child which in turn helps them to meet your child's needs as best as they can.
- Role playing/Creating experiences through imagination: Could you pretend to be a teacher? Or act out certain activities? If you know some of the other children in your child's class or the name of the teacher, use them during play.
- Establish a routine: When your child starts school, they will have a new routine which contains multiple steps. Help to prepare your child with a lot of practice. You could have the routine displayed visually somewhere at eye level in the house to remind your child. You could have each step laminated and use Velcro so your child can remove each step from the routine once it is complete.
- Encourage your child to use a transition object: This may look like a comforter or something which offers them familiarity and safety that they could take to school with them. Explain to school staff the importance of this object, as removing it could cause additional anxiety.
- Think in advance about uniforms: A shirt that is too scratchy or new shoes that are too tight could change a positive experience into a negative one quite quickly. You don't want your child to associate school with feeling sensory discomfort or pain. Talk with the school about uniform adjustments and why they are important to your child.
- Read books together about the first day at school. Talk through the different scenarios and parts of the day.

- Create a portable family album: Looking at your photos can bring your child comfort when they need it.
- Identify a safe face and a safe place: Is there someone on site that the person feels comfortable with, knowing they have access to this person may help alleviate worries. We all need people to support us, particularly when we are dealing with big life changes like starting schools.
- Be enthusiastic and positive: Talk to your child about all the exciting things that they will get to do at school particularly things you know the child likes. For example, “they will have lots of new trains that you haven’t played with before at your school”.
- Offer emotional support: Your child may be physically and mentally exhausted. Remember they will be trying to learn new routines, meeting new people, understanding their environment, all in addition to learning. Support them to relax in a way that is meaningful for them.