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Is Your Primary 1 Child Integrating Well In School?

Going from K2 to P1 is like moving from a small startup to a big MNC

by Balvinder Sandhu / April 24, 2024

Credit: 123rf

It's an exciting phase as a family when your child begins primary school. After all, they've finally graduated from kindergarten and are starting "proper" school (no naps and not much play from now on!). However, you might also worry about them integrating in school. Will they fit in? How will they cope? This could also be the case if you've moved into a new neighbourhood and have had to change your child's school.

While most children adapt to this change fairly easily, it's not uncommon for some to struggle. David Seah, social worker at Care Corner Families for Life, says that one common reason children don't integrate well in school is unfamiliarity, as children take time to adapt to a new school, because it involves a change of environment, faces and routines.

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He likens it to adults who have worked in a small, local company for some years, then move to a huge foreign multinational corporation that runs on a much faster work pace, with a heavier schedule and unfamiliar people from different backgrounds.

"This is particularly the case for our children who are being promoted from kindergarten to primary school. All their lives, they've been in a preschool class of around 15 to 20 students; now their primary school class size has doubled. Before, their entire preschool could have comprised about 100 students; now, it could be around 1,000," he explains.

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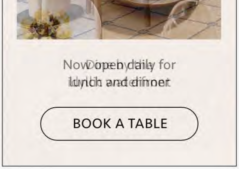

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“Moreover, their school environment is now completely unfamiliar to them: not only is it a bigger compound with new routines such as the flag-raising ceremony, canteen break and having to say goodbye to parents at the school gate, our children now have to adapt to waking up earlier for school and coping with a more demanding pace of learning,” he adds.

Another common reason could be that they’re facing some challenges at school, such as bullying, which might make them feel unsafe and isolated. In such a case, they may withdraw socially and find it hard to focus in class, which might then affect their grades, says David. As children’s cognitive abilities are not fully developed, they are not mature or equipped enough to cope with such drastic changes and challenges.

Credit: 123rf

Is your child acting up?

David notes that there are certain types of children in particular who might struggle more with integrating in school:

- Children with low self-esteem – they may feel inadequate and reluctant to try integrating
- Children with weak social skills – they may find it challenging to make and keep friends and get on well with others
- Children with poor problem-solving abilities – they may feel overwhelmed by the difficulties in integrating and may not know how to come up with solutions to manage or solve these difficulties

Your child might tell you that they don’t like school or they could show their displeasure in other ways. David advises parents to look for the following signs in your child:

- having more frequent meltdowns
- exhibiting physical ailments and symptoms such as headache, stomach ache and fever
- refusing to attend school or suddenly refusing to do things they previously enjoyed doing
- withdrawing or avoiding school-related topics like their teachers and classmates
- displaying stress signals such as crying and refusing to go to school over a prolonged period.

It’s important to attend to this situation as being unable to integrate into school could impact their mental health. Depending on how they see their situation, children will feel and respond differently, but may not be able to express how they feel in words, David says.

Your child may feel anxious as they grapple with uncertainties. For example, they may feel worried and fearful over not being able to meet the expectations of those around them.

“It could be their teachers’ expectations for them to be orderly and quiet in class and to follow school rules; or their parents’ expectations for them to be on par with their peers when it comes to their grades,” David elaborates.

Children may also feel anger and resentment towards their parents, if they feel that their parents have unreasonably high expectations of them adjusting well or excelling in school but are not providing them with the emotional and practical help and support they need.

They may also feel grief and sadness, as they miss their teachers and friends from their preschool or previous school. “If left unaddressed, over time, some children may struggle with poor mental health and a small minority may even develop adjustment disorder,” David cautions.

Pay attention to their emotions

It is, therefore, important to talk to your children about how they’re doing in school – and we don’t just mean concerning their grades. So, if your child tells you they don’t like school and have no friends, for example, it’s important to allow them to express their feelings. Do this without interrupting, minimising or brushing off what they’re saying, says David.

He suggests asking something like: ‘I’m sorry to hear that you’re feeling this way/going through this. It sounds hard/scary for you. Can you share with me what happened?’

David says it’s also crucial to pay more attention to what’s happening in our children’s lives. This would require us to be observant of our children’s moods and emotions and to be open and curious in asking them questions about their day in school. For example, we could ask questions like: “What did you do today?”, “What did you enjoy?” and “Was there anything that you didn’t like?”.

“We can also make an effort to praise and affirm our children’s attempts at integrating in school,” says David. “For example, if we notice that they are cooperating with us in their morning routine before school, learning to buy food in the canteen and making small talk with their friends and classmates, we could say something like: ‘Good job for buying food yourself today!’ or ‘I know it wasn’t easy for you to talk to your classmates, but I’m so proud of you for trying’.”

Credit: 123rf

How to help your child adapt better in school

If you feel like your child isn't integrating well in school, there are other non-verbal things you can do to help them flourish.

David gives us the following tips:

1. Create a safe, loving and interesting home environment

Children thrive on familiarity, so what we can do as parents is to be present for them during what could be a scary and challenging life transition. For example, we can be intentional in asking them questions about their day in school, empathising with and talking to them about their feelings, and communicating our love for them. If possible, it might also be helpful if a parent or trusted caregiver is around after school to supervise and spend time with them.

We can also keep to predictable routines such as sticking to their regular morning, meal and bedtime routines. Also, do interesting things with our children so they can relax and have fun, such as baking with them, bringing them cycling or visiting the park or beach.

2. Have realistic expectations

If we expect our children to smoothly adapt to their new school without any meltdowns, to make many friends and to excel in their studies right away, we may need to ask ourselves whether our expectations of our children are reasonable. We should put ourselves in our children's shoes to try to understand what they're going through, expect that there will be hitches and hiccups along the way as they adjust, and to see what we can do to help them overcome the hurdles.

3. Build their self-esteem, social skills and problem-solving abilities

Build their self-esteem. If our children struggle with poor self-esteem, this will inevitably affect how they handle obstacles and difficulties in school. What we can do as parents is to make them feel loved, such as by speaking their primary 'love language' – whether that's spending quality time with them, speaking words of affirmation or showing them affection by hugging and cuddling them.

Another way we can build their self-esteem is by helping them set goals, such as buying a drink from the canteen vendor or asking a classmate to play or eat together during recess. We can also acknowledge and affirm their efforts to integrate in school, which will help to build up their confidence.

Build their social skills. If our children have difficulty making friends in school, we can help them brush up on their social skills by sharing some ways we can make friends and what being a friend looks like. For example, we can suggest they try sharing snacks with their classmates and asking them about their favourite cartoons and hobbies.

We could also role-play with them different scenarios on what that could look like. We could even set an example by getting to know their classmates' parents and setting up playdates to create opportunities for them to get to know one another. The key is for us to show an interest in their friends and classmates.

Build their problem-solving abilities. We can help our children grow in this area by working through the challenge with them, step by step. For example, we can ask them questions to help them think about the problem they're facing, come up with a workable solution together and put this plan into action.

We can then follow up on the results and encourage them when they take small steps of progress. For example, if our children struggle with talking to classmates because they don't share any common interests, we could explore the possible topics to talk about with their classmates, find out more about these interests together and find ways to make conversation with them.

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