

the child's experience of primary school

Understanding Childhood is a series of leaflets written by experienced child psychotherapists to give insight into children's feelings and view of the world and help parents, and those who work with children, to understand their behaviour.



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

When they start school, most children have already had some experience of a pre-school or nursery setting. They have already faced some big challenges:

- leaving home with its familiar people and ways of behaving
- 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.

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

With the rhythm of the school year - periods spent at school interspersed with holidays - children have to adjust to beginnings and endings, and the feelings these evoke. Memories of other changes and losses may be stirred up.

- School hours are shorter than those of some nurseries or family centres so children and parents may face another upheaval with different childcare arrangements.

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Children who had a close tie to their carer may take time to adjust and get used to the separation.

- Some children may find the more formal structure and demand for obedience and concentration too much. They may want to do their own thing and may resent what they may see as adults imposing limits on their freedom.

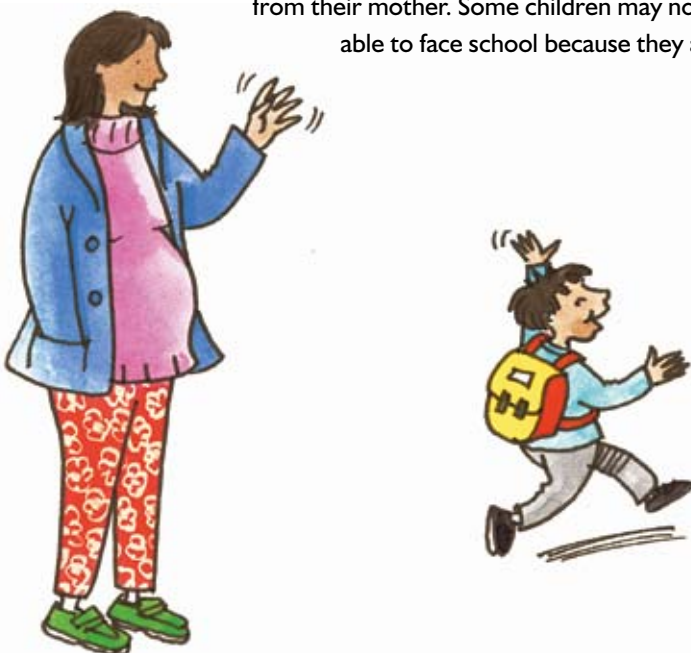
Reception class children are too young to put much of their experience into words. They learn to manage situations and master their anxieties through play. Playing games at school with strict, stropky or kind teachers provide children with ways of thinking about their new experiences with unknown adults and unfamiliar tasks.

It is normal for children's behaviour to regress at this time. While they're struggling to manage at the new school, children may become more babyish or demanding at home.

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 have a more serious problem. This could be to do with difficulties in relation to other children or problems with schoolwork. A frequent reason given for school refusal is bullying. This needs to be taken seriously and explored, but it may not be the whole story.

Reluctance to go to school may also 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 mother. Some children may not be able to face school because they are



preoccupied with anxieties about what is happening at home in their absence:

- jealousy of their mother being with a new baby or younger brother or sister
- worry about how a depressed mother is managing without them
- anxieties about their parents.

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

Useful Understanding Childhood leaflets

Separations and changes in the early years

Sibling rivalry

Divorce and separation

Getting on with other children

It may take children some time to sort out their place amongst the others. Children who have problematic relationships at home, for whatever reason, may not start out feeling confident in school. Jealousy at home may spill over into relationships with classmates. However, 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.

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, 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. If you think there is a problem, it is worth discussing this with the class teacher, sooner rather than later.

Bullying

Parents are often worried about bullying. It is usually a small part of school life and there are other features of school life that affect their children's development, like getting down to learning, making friends and accepting the role and authority of the teacher.

Bullying is basically a problem in a child's relationships with other children. However, what feels like bullying to one child, may feel like just teasing to another. 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.

Children who are insecure or disadvantaged in some way tend to be more vulnerable to being bullied. 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 bullied are nearly always those who are at a disadvantage:

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

Until they find their way around a new girl or boy may go through a period when they feel picked on. However, some problems – including those which are racist in origin – do not go away so readily.

Children with a physical disability that marks out their difference may find themselves particularly at the mercy of bullies. Disabled children are immeasurably helped if those around them accept their disability and value their achievements. Children who haven't come to terms with their differences will respond with additional sensitivity to bullies and will reinforce the bully's motive in bullying.

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 parents to take every complaint of bullying seriously, while trying to get a balanced picture of what's going on. If bullying and bad 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 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.

Children who do not have fundamental problems with authority are likely to have both good and bad experiences with teachers over the years and find ways of managing and learning from the differences. However, a few children have ongoing problems with every teacher they meet and may have deeply rooted problems with authority. In this case, it is helpful for parents and teachers to get together and think about how their authority is applied and how this may affect

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 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 preoccupied parents, they may have problems in their relationship with teachers, often in the form of 'attention-seeking' behaviour.

There are some children who feel unable to manage their position in the group without the help of the teacher, and who may continue after the first terms in school to demand the exclusive attention of the teacher or learning assistant. These children may employ a number of strategies:

- clinging to the teacher at all times, becoming his or her little shadow
- developing tummyaches or frequently bursting into tears
- getting the teacher's attention by doing something naughty

These children – more often boys – 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.

Getting down to 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?

Children who are afraid to make mistakes will never be in a position to learn from them and this will affect their learning as a whole. Making mistakes is important for learning.

Children respond to difficulties in various ways:

- Some children have no difficulty in asking for help and are able to persevere until they understand. Children who are able to ask for help when they don't understand will make progress whatever their ability.
- Some feel, optimistically, that they understand, or pretend to understand, when they don't and get thoroughly out of their depth.
- Some children who know that they don't understand feel reluctant to ask for help. They may enlist the help of a friend, but this can cause further problems in the long run as it may appear that they understand when really they don't.

Every child needs to make progress with their

Helpful suggestions

- Get actively involved with the life of the school if possible – attend parents' evenings and volunteer to help whenever you can.
- Children respond better to encouragement and praise for effort and enthusiasm rather than criticism.
- Parents can help their children with homework more effectively by being available when they ask rather than trying to teach them. Finding a time that suits your child, not when they're trying to relax with their favourite TV programme, works better too!
- 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.
- It is painful hearing about the ups and downs of school friendships and who is and isn't the 'best friend'. Try and lend a sympathetic ear without getting too involved.

work. Worrying about other things will affect their capacity to concentrate on the task in hand. Falling behind with the work will then add to the worries.

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.



Problems with work

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 feeling the effects of early or ongoing negative experiences, at home or at school? 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. Moreover, children going to secondary school will have been used to being a 'big fish in a small pond' and that changes overnight. In secondary school, newcomers may not be able to distinguish senior pupils from staff.

They often face an anxious time of choosing a new school, applying, and waiting to hear if they've been successful.

In the new school there will no longer be a main relationship with one teacher throughout the year and the opportunity for some play. While many younger children have already been given some homework, the demands really increase after primary school.

At this stage children have to be more organised than ever before, managing to get their work and kit together for each lesson and getting their homework in on time. 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!

Useful Understanding Childhood leaflets
Supporting teenagers

Further help – organisations

In every area there are organisations that provide support and services for children and families. Your GP or health visitor will be able to offer you advice and, if needed, refer you to specialist services. To find out more about local supporting agencies, visit your library, your town or county hall, or contact your local council for voluntary service.

YoungMinds Parents' Information Service

Information and advice for anyone concerned about the mental health of a child or young person

Free Parents helpline 0808 802 5544

Web www.youngminds.org.uk

Parentline Plus

Support and advice for anyone parenting a child

FREE parentline 0808 800 2222 (24hr)

Textphone 0800 783 6783

Web www.parentlineplus.org.uk

Advisory Centre for Education

Registered charity offering support and information for parents about state education in England and Wales for 5-16 year olds

Phone 0808 800 5793 (general advice)

Phone 020 7704 9822 (exclusion line 24 hr)

Web www.ace-ed.org.uk

BBC

Useful site with good links

Web www.bbc.co.uk/schools/parents

There are likely to be similar useful organisations in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

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