

Introducing Your Child to The Growing Place Montessori

Adjusting to school can be tough for any child, even one who's been in school or child care in the past. You can help ease your child's transition with these ideas and activities. The important thing is to keep preparation positive and fun.

Explore your own feelings

Children gain much of their perspectives of the world through their parents' eyes, and this includes how they might feel about starting school. Be mindful of the attitudes you are modeling for your child with respect to childcare.

Are you confident in your choice? Are you apprehensive about leaving your child? Do you feel guilty for returning to work? Follow your instinct and make sure the school environment reflects your feelings and parenting style.

Before you present the concept of a new school to your child, do some soul searching and make sure you are confident, positive, and peaceful about this new step in your lives.

Approach him with encouraging, positive feelings about the situation, taking care not to overembellish ("It'll be so fun and exciting!") or inadvertently throw in anxiety-producing thoughts ("Mommy won't leave you" or "No one will hurt you") and never belittle your child's fears or concerns. Most children have an open mind until they have reason to feel otherwise.

Educate Yourself

Take time to really understand the school philosophy and Montessori principles; study recommended articles and books if necessary, and ask any questions you might have of the Director.

Make sure you have a thorough awareness of behavioral expectations and disciplinary strategies, and model and practice them at home ahead of time if at all possible.

Encourage independence at home

Montessori believed that children are capable of far more than adults give them credit for, and a pillar of her educational

program includes children as contributing members of their social group. By the time they are able to walk, most children are capable of participating in personal care and simple household tasks. For the youngest children, this includes assisting with diapering by bringing diapers, handing wipes, disposing of soiled diapers, and assisting with dressing, as well as self-feeding and use of realistic tableware (not sippy cups and bottles). Children as young as three can fold clothes, wash dishes, clean up after themselves, and assist in preparing meals. Encourage your child to do as much as she can on her own.

Help your child routinely practice personal care (for example, self-feeding, wiping noses and bottoms and reflexively washing hands before meals and after bathroom use). Primary age children will be expected to complete such tasks on their own, and should likewise be able to dress and undress themselves without another person's help. Set your child up for success by avoiding overalls, belts, and onesies unless your child can capably take them on and off on her own.

These suggestions require realistic expectations and patience on the part of parents, but will ultimately result in a sense of accomplishment and self-confidence in your child.

Plan more social activities

All children in a group environment

Introducing Your Child to the Classroom Environment

At The Growing Place Montessori, we require our students to be introduced to the classroom environment at least once before beginning attendance. These visits must be supervised by a parent. Here are our suggestions for the optimal transition to the classroom:

- * Visit the classroom about three times in the 3 or 4 days immediately preceding your child's first day of attendance. Stay for 45 minute to 1 hour intervals during different times of what will soon become her regular school day. It is recommended you expose your child to drop off time, Montessori work time, and lunch time prior to attendance. Inquire about the classroom schedule to determine the best times to visit.
- * Remember that the teachers are the authority figures in the classroom; model respect for their authority and follow classroom rules at all times during your stay. Use manners and courtesy with teachers and students, and show respect for their opinions and requests.
- * Be as boring as you can to your child; act like a wallflower as much as possible. You want to be a reassuring presence for your child, but you want him to be engaged by his new environment, not by your comments and observations. Remember, your goal is to help your child develop a sense of trust and confidence in the classroom without you, so empower him to participate in class activities without your help as much as possible. It's okay if he is shy with others or if he is more comfortable observing than participating.
- * Step out of the classroom for short intervals and observe your child through the window. Wait until she seems somewhat comfortable or engaged by an activity if possible. Tell her you have to go fill out paperwork or use the restroom, and that you will be back in a few minutes. Gauge her reaction closely during your absence, and when you return, slip in as quietly as possible and observe her from a distance. Gradually lengthen your time away, and on your last visit, spend the entire time observing from outside of the classroom (unbeknownst to her if possible).
- * Don't immediately rush to your child's aid if he seems anxious or starts to cry. Allow the teachers and the environment the opportunity to comfort and soothe him; it will be their role when he starts school and it is beneficial for him to see you support, not usurp, their efforts. If you observe such a behavior, reinforce with your child how nice it was when his teacher/friend made him feel better when he felt nervous/shy/scared.
- * If anything comes up during your classroom visits that you are unsure of how to best handle, feel free to consult our staff. We want to do all we can to make your transition as seamless as possible.

are expected to peacefully coexist with other students. If your child hasn't spent much time in a group with other children, then activities such as sharing, taking turns, and playing cooperatively can be very difficult. Help your child get used to being part of a group by arranging playdates with one or two peers or enrolling him in a music or tumbling class.

Likewise, model the behavior you expect from your child in your own social and family settings by saying please and thank you, speaking in turn, respecting other's feelings, sharing, and so forth.

Give him a sense of what to expect

If you've done your homework, you should have a pretty clear idea of the environment to which your child will be introduced. It's the rare child who isn't at least a little anxious about starting school, and you can most effectively calm her fears with information. Be descriptive and realistic, and explain what to expect when she gets to school — where she'll be going, what she'll be doing, and who will be in class with her. Before school begins, visit the classroom environment (see inset). You can also read stories about starting school. Some suggestions are Franklin Goes to School, by Paulette Bourgeois; Starting School, by Anne Civardi and Stephen Cartwright, and Starting School, by Janet Ahlberg.

Read to your child every day

Setting aside at least 15 minutes a day for reading time will make this a comfortable and familiar ritual in the classroom. It will also aid your child in his own future reading endeavors, since children who don't have early experiences with books often have difficulty learning to read later.

Reading aloud to your child is also a great way to help him develop listening skills. Stories with rhythm are particularly engaging, so look for books that repeat phrases. When he starts remembering the phrases, ask him to "read" with you. For instance, if you read The Three Little Pigs, after the wolf says, "Little pig, let me come in," let your child fill in the next line, "Not by the hair on my chinny-chin-chin."

Practice listening skills

Teachers often encourage their busy young pupils to sit quietly and listen. You can help your child prepare for this request by occasionally asking him to sit quietly and close his eyes. Then ask him to tell you about the sounds he hears. Discuss what's making the sounds and where they are coming from.

School children also learn to listen and follow directions that involve more than one step. Start asking your child to do a series of things, such as take his shoes to his room and put them in the closet. Or go to the bathroom and wash his hands and then come and help you set the dinner table. You can also play games that require your child to listen to directions, solve problems, and take turns. For instance, play I Spy in the car or on walks around your neighborhood. Give hints about something you see, "I spy with my little eye something that is...tall." Your child has to ask you questions about the object until he guesses what it is. Simon Says is another good listening-and-direction-following game.

Nurture the artist in residence

Creating art — whether it's singing, finger-painting, or molding clay — helps children develop the visual and fine motor skills they need for all academic endeavors. Keep paper, paints, crayons, and other art supplies on hand and encourage your child to create whenever he wants. Tracing, doing puzzles, simple mazes and connect-the-dot pictures will also help your child develop beginning academic skills.

Introduce the classroom environment

The Growing Place Montessori requires children to visit before they start attending. Visiting ahead of time is helpful so the child knows firsthand what to expect: what the room looks like, who the teacher is, where the bathroom and playground are, what normal routines are, etc (see inset).

Give Your Child Ownership

Encourage your child to participate in preparing for school, such as purchasing a lunch bag, gathering nap items, labeling his coat, etc. Tell him these are his own belongings that he will use every day at school and make sure he knows what they look like. This will not only involve him in the preparation process, but will make him feel more comfortable when he sees familiar objects in his new school environment.

Come up with a good-bye ritual

If this is the first time your child will be away from you, he may worry that you're not coming back, or that you'll get lost and won't be able to find your way back to the school to pick him up at the end of the day. Invent a special parting ritual — such as a high-five, or saying something like, "I'll be back to get you soon, long before we see the moon" — that you do each time you drop him off. Don't drag it out or let on that you might be upset, too. Just do it matter-of-factly and

confidently and he'll learn to do the same.

Our school policy is for parents to bid ALL of their goodbyes BEFORE entering the classroom or playground, teaching your child that once starts his school day, he is met with a warm welcome, filled with hellos rather than goodbyes.

During the first few days, allow extra time to get him ready and out the door in the morning, too. The more calm things are at home, the easier the separation will be.

Ask questions about your child's day

Ask what she had for snack, which friends she played with, what jobs she did, and whether she finished her lunch. Look over the work she brought home. Comment on your child's hard work and acknowledge its importance to her, no matter how easy or simple it may seem.

Be consistent

Young children are creatures of habit. The more your child can come to expect the same things, day in and out, the faster the transition to school will be. At least for the first couple of weeks, plan to drop off and pick up your child at precisely the same time each day. What may seem like just a few minutes to you might mean entering or leaving the classroom during a completely different activity, and could make a huge difference to your child.

Variations in routine will be more readily accepted once your child is well adjusted to school.

Have patience

Children can vary widely in their ability to transition to the classroom environment; some will take a few days with little resistance, and some can take weeks of tears each morning at drop off. Work closely with the teaching and administrative staff to discuss any concerns you may have on your individual child's progress.

Rest assured that we have years of experience working with a wide variety of children, and we will be sure to inform you if we feel your child is having an unusually difficult transition or if she is simply not ready for a school setting.

Sources: Teachers and administrators, parentcenter.com, U.S. Department of Education's Learning Partners program, parentingpress.com