

familySMARTS

EDUCATION | FAMILY STORY | TEACHER AWARDS | EARLY YEARS



Fun fact
Kindergarten is called *Grade Primary* in Nova Scotia and *Maternelle* in Québec.

welcome to kindergarten!

Your sweet baby is starting Kindergarten. You've bought the backpack, picked out the first-day outfit and charged the camera battery. Your little one is ready for this big next step. But are you? We talked to parents and teachers to help bust the most common Kindergarten myths, so your child's transition is a smooth one

BY HEATHER GREENWOOD DAVIS

MYTH #1 Tears when you drop her off means your child is having trouble leaving you

TEACHER TRUTH: Separation anxiety is a two-way street.

PARENT REVELATION: It's not them, it's you. "I think the one thing that parents know and expect, but still find surprising, is just how quickly your kids want to be free from you," says Carrie Anne Badov of Toronto, who will send her third and youngest child off to Kindergarten this fall. "Sometimes I drop my older son off and he's gone before I can even say anything. I'm left standing in the schoolyard, saying goodbye to air."

Tricia Yoshiki-Palumbo, a Kindergarten teacher in Brampton, Ont., says some parents react poorly to the separation—they're the ones who peek through the window, stand in line alongside their child holding their hand, or, in some cases, walk right into the classroom. "Sometimes you have to tell them, 'You can't stay here. You need to leave.'" The truth is, kids who may have tears at the gate are usually all smiles by circle time. And, really, especially for kids in half-day Kindergarten programs, they won't be gone long enough to miss you (or vice versa) too terribly.

"I wish I'd realized or had someone point out how short two hours is," says Jennifer Hicks, a Toronto mom of Liam, 11, Connor, 9, and Rylan, 5. "I can remember sending my kids off to school and thinking, 'Oh, finally they'll go to school; I'll have so much time to myself.' God, by the time you drop the kids off, get home and put away a few things, it's time to go pick them up again."

MYTH #2 Kids who can read, write and count before Kindergarten are better prepared than those who can't

TEACHER TRUTH: It doesn't matter what skills the kids come in with; it's what they leave with at the end of the one- or two-year Kindergarten program that counts. **PARENT REVELATION:** Stressing out over a child who isn't ready to learn is pointless. "Don't have your three-year-old sit down for half an hour to practise his letters," says 21-year veteran Kindergarten teacher Barb

Gorman of Newmarket, Ont. Instead, encourage him to recognize his name and the letters within it. (Being able to write it isn't even necessary, as fine motor skills muscles may not be fully developed yet.)

And the end goal is the completion of Senior, not Junior (if offered), Kindergarten. Tara Truscott admits she was worried when her second child wasn't writing well before going into Junior Kindergarten. "My four-year-old daughter, Chantal, (now eight) could write her name when she went to JK. My son Caleb started JK last September and couldn't. He couldn't write his name until about January," says the Markham, Ont., mom. "In May I got a Mother's Day card from him that said 'I love you Mom.' I was just like... He can do it now. It just happened all of a sudden. He can write his name a reasonable size, even though his 'I love you' is huge."

MYTH #3 Getting ready for school starts the night before

TEACHER TRUTH: There's plenty you can and should do with your preschooler long before you drop him off for his first day.

PARENT REVELATION: Starting early helps everyone. Some kids who have not attended daycare or preschool may find the busy classroom environment overwhelming, say teachers. "If you have time now, take them to social groups or playgroups to get used to taking turns, sharing and being around other children," suggests Anna Kujaristi, who has been teaching Kindergarten for five years in Markham, Ont. Yoshiki-Palumbo, whose school hosts a lemonade party for incoming Kindergarten students, agrees. "It's usually the ones who have never had an in-school experience at all

who are crying and puking in September."

Another skill you can practise at home? Listening. Turns out many parents are so focused on trying to get their child to read that they've stopped reading to them. Then when the child gets to school, he finds it hard to sit and listen to the teacher. "Sometimes you're mid-story and they just get up and walk away," Kujaristi laughs.

Parents whose first language is not English should read in their native tongue if they are more comfortable, Gorman adds. "What we're trying to do is teach the enjoyment of a book, listening to a story being told, turning the pages, looking at the pictures and discussing the book."

MYTH #4 As a parent, you're still in charge

TEACHER TRUTH: We share responsibility for your child's education.

PARENT REVELATION: There's a new sheriff in town. "All of a sudden I had this new authority figure who had come into our lives and was in charge, even at home. I didn't know that would happen in Kindergarten," confesses Badov. Hicks was surprised too. "The teachers certainly become a very important influence in the kids' lives at that age," she says.

Gorman admits that she's aware of the influence she has over her students' lives at home and at school. "The neat thing about Kindergarten is that, as teachers, we're probably the first non-family adult they build a very strong bond with," she says.

But parents would do well to think of the new relationship as an alliance as opposed to a challenge: Keeping lines of communication open and teachers informed about developmental or emotional issues (every-

thing from bedwetting to a death in the family) at home will help them help your child at school. "We all want the kids to succeed," adds Gorman. "We want this to be a team effort so the child is getting the same message at home and at school."

MYTH #5 Everything he'll need to know he'll learn in Kindergarten

TEACHER TRUTH: Well, almost everything. There's still some things to learn at home.

PARENT REVELATION: You'll learn as much as they will. Not all of your child's learning will happen in the classroom. "I think sometimes parents are surprised at how much involvement and responsibility they have to have," says Hicks. "It's not all going to happen in those two short hours a day. You still have to be reading to your kids every night if you want them to enjoy books; you have to be talking to them about what they're watching on TV if you want them to be sociable."

And while you may think Kindergarten is as good a place as any for your child to learn algebra, trust that the teachers know how to keep your child on pace for a lifetime of learning that is both academic and social and follow their cues to help out at home, teachers say.

So what makes a Kindergarten teacher's life easier? Independent dressers and kids who can blow their own nose and manage by themselves in the bathroom. Says Gorman, "If your child has those things, we can handle everything else." CF

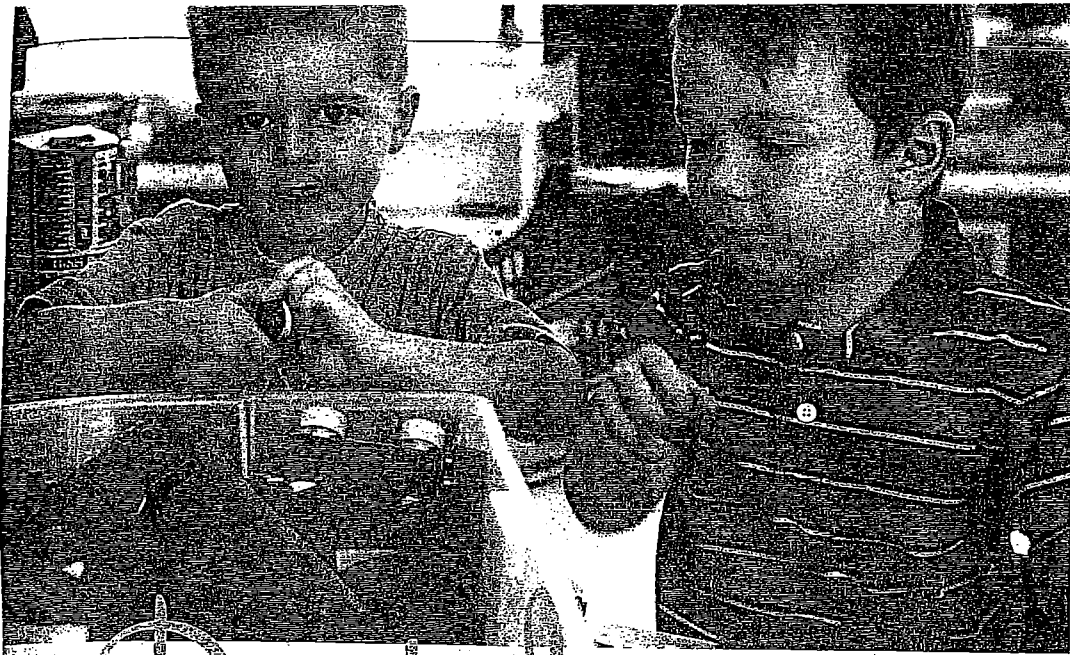
Both of Heather Greenwood Davis' kids are Kindergarten graduates, but she still remembers their amazing teacher.



5 TEACHABLE TIPS TO HELP YOUR CHILD BE CLASSROOM READY

Skip the drill-sergeant alphabet tutorials and try these instead

- 1 Help your child recognize her name** Use dry-erase boards, sidewalk chalk or macaroni and glue. Be creative and have fun. If she learns to write it, that's a bonus.
- 2 Set her fingers to work** Holding a pencil properly is hard for first-timers. Get fingers ready with playdough, bead-stringing, picking up Cheerios with tweezers and playing with building blocks.
- 3 Encourage the use of scissors (blunt-edged safety scissors) and set her free with scrap paper** Challenge her with straight lines, then curved, then squiggly. Or cut out wide strips of paper and let her turn them into confetti. The fine motor skill development will help her in Kindergarten.
- 4 Read to your child** Forget about teaching her to read for now and focus on letting her hear the sound of your voice—in class kids need to learn to sit still and listen to stories. And put down the book from time to time and make up a story or two.
- 5 Count often** Whether it's cars while waiting for the light to change, dropping coins in a piggy bank or doling out snacks, practise number recognition in your community, and work on memorizing your home phone number.



Required reading

Dos and don'ts for a successful first year

DO Read the notes and newsletters that come home

"We have a special helper of the day, and every year I have one poor child whose parents never read the newsletter, so when it is that child's turn to be the special helper, he hasn't brought in his show and tell. It can be quite upsetting for that child," says teacher Barb Gorman. Plus, she says, "if the teacher took the time to write the newsletter, copy it and put it in each child's bag, you can be pretty sure that it contains information that the teacher wants the parents to know."

DO Dress your child according to his skill level

"They should be able to get themselves dressed and undressed, including any buttons and zippers," notes Markham, Ont., teacher Anna Kujaristi. "A lot of parents dress their children in nice pants with belts on the first day of school. The kids look great, but then they can't get them undone or done up." Ditto with overalls and shoes with laces, she adds. "We don't want to set the kids up for failure."

Mom tip: Send an extra pair of socks and underwear in a resealable bag, and keep it in your child's backpack in case of emergencies.

DO Practise using a backpack and snack container before school starts

"At home, try putting their lunch in their lunch bag and let them unpack their own lunches or snacks," suggests Gorman. "Not only can they say, 'Mommy I don't like this,' but you're going to also see which containers they have trouble opening." And keep sweet snacks to a minimum. "It's not brain food," points out another teacher.

Mom tip: Pack snacks rich in brain-boosting omega-3s such as DHA-enriched yogurt and bread and omega-3 enriched eggs.

DO Help your child learn key life skills

"A lot of kids don't know how to blow their nose. You'll pull the tissue for them and they lean forward and expect you to hold it while they blow," one teacher explains. "No offence, but I don't want to be blowing 20 snotty

noses." **Mom tip:** If your child has a runny nose, send her to school with a tissue in her pocket and remind her to wash her hands after blowing.

DO Put them to bed early

"I have a lot of kids coming to school tired," says one teacher. "Then I will see them in the Home Depot with their parents at 9 p.m. and I'm thinking, 'I should be in bed and here's my four-year-old student who's still up!' And it really shows. They want to go home before the day has started. They're exhausted." At this age, children need as much as 10-12 hours of sleep each night.

DO Set the tone for the day before leaving for school

Give your child a little reminder of what is in store that day, whether it's gym, computer lab or library, to ease their anxiety and to remind yourself what they need in their backpacks, before running out the door. "Days are much worse if I'm stressed," says mom Carrie Anne Badov. "Those are always the mornings when we have issues going quietly and co-operatively into the classroom."

DON'T Assume nut-free is an option Pay attention if your teacher says there are allergies in the class. According to Statistics

Canada, close to 90,000 kids are allergic to peanuts, and, as a result, most schools are nut-free zones. Don't send your kids to school with any foods that contain peanuts or tree nuts or may contain traces of these nuts. Many pre-packaged snacks are manufactured in nut-free facilities and labelled as such. If your child eats peanut butter for breakfast, you should wash his hands and face, brush his teeth and change his clothes before he goes to school.

DON'T Let your child leave home without checking her backpack first

"We discourage toys from home because it's a distraction," says Gorman. Valuable items and school supplies are not always welcome either. However, kids who are particularly attached to an item like a blanket or special toy will usually be allowed to keep it in their backpack so they can go and touch it for comfort. **Mom tip:** Talk about show-and-tell days. Help your child decide the night before what to bring, and ask him three or four questions about the item. This will help develop your child's public-speaking skills.

DON'T Send your child to school without toileting skills

Practise having your child use bathrooms outside the home so she is comfortable with the idea of going at school. And make sure she knows how to wipe herself and wash her hands. "Kindergarten teachers don't wipe," confirms Gorman. "Every year we get somebody who says 'My son needs help. Can you just wipe him when he poops in the bathroom?' No... we can't." **Mom tip:** Teach your child the proper handwashing technique: Wet hands, use soap, lather for 15 seconds (as long as it takes to sing "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star"), rinse, pat hands dry, turn off the faucet using the same paper towel and dispose of the paper towel in the garbage.

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