

Starting School ~ The Kidpower Way *Seven Steps to a Positive Experience*

Kidpower is an educational charitable organization that, since 1989, has brought "People Safety" education to over 1.2 million children, teenagers, and adults, including those with special needs, from many different cultures - close to home and around the world. For publications; free articles, podcasts and e-newsletter; and information about our services and locations, please visit www.kidpower.org.

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The first days of a new school year can be an exciting and anxious time for many families. Children are often thinking or saying:

- *"It will be nice to see my friends."*
- *"I hope the teacher likes me."*
- *"I hope the other kids like me."*
- *"I hope it won't be too hard."*
- *"I am worried about that kid who picked on me last year."*
- *"I am sad that summer is over."*

Most parents also have mixed feelings. As adults, we know that having a positive beginning for any new experience sets the stage for a successful and happy time. Getting off to a poor start can be like starting to twist on a jar lid the wrong way— it's usually fixable, but takes some effort to get unstuck and start over. At worst, an unhappy beginning to a school year can be very upsetting for everyone.

Here are seven steps for planning and "People Safety" skills to prepare your children to start their school year in the best possible way.

- 1. Take a realistic look at your child's emotional school-readiness.** Some children are cheerful extroverts who plunge into any new experience with a great deal of energy and interest and who easily overcome any minor bumps on the way. This is great, but they might accidentally cross the boundaries of other children or teachers without even realizing that their behavior is causing a problem for someone else.

Other children are more reserved and more sensitive. They are often very thoughtful and aware, but more likely to worry about change and more likely to be hurt if someone says something thoughtless or unkind. They often agonize about what other people think of them.

Qualities like being more sensitive or less sensitive, more outgoing or more reserved, louder or quieter, are all normal and have both benefits and potential liabilities. The sooner children can learn to be in charge of their qualities so these are gifts instead of problems, the happier and more successful they will be – not only in school, but in life.

Be sure to sound excited about school starting, while making space for your child to have mixed feelings. Be matter-of-fact rather than anxious in discussing potential problems and treat these problems as an opportunity for your child to grow, rather than as a potential disaster.

- 2. Be clear about both safety and learning expectations.** Unless something gets in the way, most children love to learn. However, it can be hard for any of us to learn if we are feeling anxious, sad, ashamed, unwanted, or discouraged. Make sure that your child's school is committed to providing a safe and supportive learning community and that your child's teacher is positive, firm, and caring in her or his classroom management.

Tell your child clearly, "I expect you to feel respected and safe at school. And I expect you to act in safe and respectful ways towards others." Be explicit about what this means, using specific examples relevant to your child.

- 3. Make a plan for potential problems.** If your child is struggling with some academic subject, explore ways to make learning easier. Sometimes children need major support, but often a little bit of help can make a huge difference. As one father told us, "At age eight, my daughter was having trouble reading. **Even though nothing seemed to be wrong**, I pushed for an assessment and we found that her eyes were slow in tracking repetitive movements. Within a few weeks of adaptive physical education, the eye problem was fixed and she started to love to read, instead of dreading it."

Children also need support if they have potential emotional or social problems. For example, one mother wrote, "My daughter is in a circle of friends who are constantly comparing grades. She is always feeling anxious about how well she is doing at school."

The following is our reply to her concern, which includes a number of People Safety skills for helping children build their emotional self-care skills and better relationships with others.

"Good for you for noticing a problem and being proactive about it, instead of just letting it go. This can become a wonderful opportunity to practice some ways for your daughter to practice communication skills to protect her self-esteem. Knowing how to talk to herself and others can serve your daughter her life long.

First of all, you can introduce the issue with your daughter by saying something like, "I have noticed that you tend to feel bad about yourself about grades, and I think it is very important for you to feel good about yourself, no matter how well or poorly you do on a test or in a class. Feeling bad about yourself just makes you upset and does not help you to learn or do better in school. The purpose of school is to help you to have a happy, successful life. Feeling bad about yourself will NOT help you to be either successful or happy. Learning what you need to learn in school is important, but lots of very successful people did horribly in school. Einstein didn't learn to read until he was nine years old, for example! Doing well in school is not nearly as important as learning to be happy, in spite of things not going the way you want them to - so let's use this as an opportunity to practice NOT comparing yourself to your friends and changing unkind messages you say to yourself to positive messages."

You can then brainstorm and practice different answers to friends commenting or asking about performance or grades such as, "I've decided to practice not comparing myself to other people. I don't want to talk about that. Let's talk about what we are going to do this weekend." etc.

You can brainstorm different hurtful things your daughter says to herself and practice by saying those things out loud to her while she physically throws them away and says, "I'm proud of who I am. I don't have to be perfect to be great. Mistakes are part of learning."

4. **Stay in touch with what is going on.** If possible, volunteer even a couple of hours a week in the classroom or on the schoolyard so that you can help out and also stay aware of potential problems at school. Try to go into the classroom when you bring your child to school and pay attention to what you see around you. Do your best to notice problems when they are small. Pay attention to changes in your child's behavior.

Encourage children to tell you about what happens at school. Many children are tired of school by the time they get home and don't give much information when asked general questions like, "How was school today?" At the same time, most children like to share what's going on in their lives if they are listened to without being lectured or having to hear negative comments about themselves, their school, their friends, etc.

To get a child talking about school, try doing some fun activity together and start by asking specific questions that are tied to a child's interests, such as, "I noticed that there is a lot of construction in the school yard. Do you know what they are doing?" Practice using what we call Mouth Closed Power, and just listen with positive interest to your child's answers. Be curious rather than judgmental.

Ask occasionally, "Is there anything you have been wondering or worrying about that you haven't told me?" Listen supportively. If children bring up a problem, take a deep breath and thank them for telling you. Be a good actor and smile and stay calm even if you are feeling angry or worried inside. Find other trustworthy adults, such as your partner, family and friends, to talk to if you need to vent about what is happening to your child at school, but make sure these people understand the importance of not bringing up the problem with your child or telling other people.

If children have done something wrong, they may need to face a consequence, but make it clear that you are very thankful they came to you for help. When possible, work with your child to come up with his or her own solutions to the problem or figure out a plan for you to take action when necessary.

5. **Offer support to your child's teachers and schools.** Teaching is a hard job and schools face many challenges. Take the time to get to know your child's teacher and be part of your school community. Most educators are extremely dedicated individuals who deserve our gratitude for all that they give to our children.

Don't only talk to the people caring for your child when something is not going the way you think it should. Every time you see these people, smile and wave no matter how busy or distracted you are.

At least once a week, express direct appreciation to your child's teacher for some small "ordinary" thing that has helped your child to have a good time at school, to solve a problem, or to learn. Send a note. Make a kind comment. Tell another adult while the teacher is there what a terrific job she or he did in handling something. At least once a month, do the same for your child's school secretary and principal.

6. **Prepare your children to set boundaries and to advocate for themselves.** In an ideal world, people would always be kind to each other rather than being mean to each other. However, even people who really care about each other annoy and bother each other sometimes. This is as true at home as it is at school.

The Kidpower method includes many simple People Safety skills young people can use to increase their well-being everywhere they go, including:

- Acting aware, calm, and confident;
- Setting firm respectful boundaries with peers and others they know;
- Knowing how to walk away from trouble;
- Knowing how to get help when they need it;

- Speaking up for themselves and others;
- Staying in charge of their words and their bodies;
- Knowing the difference between being passive, aggressive, and assertive in their body language, tone of voice, and choice of words;
- Protecting themselves emotionally when others are thoughtless, unkind, or even cruel (or when they say hurtful things to themselves); and
- In an emergency, as a last resort, knowing how to use physical self-defense.

Rehearsing how to handle specific problems will help to increase confidence, reduce anxiety, and build competence. For example, you can teach children how to protect themselves emotionally from insults. One famous Kidpower technique for taking the power out of hurting words is by practicing: as a supportive adult says the words out loud, the student imagines catching them and throwing them away. Doing this physically and out loud at home will help a child to do this in his or her imagination at school.

Help your child practice throwing the mean things that other people are saying into a trash can. Have your child then say something positive out loud to himself or herself to take in. For example, if someone says, "I don't like you," you can throw those words away and say, "I like myself." If someone says, "You are stupid" you can throw those words away and say, "I'm smart." If someone says, "I don't want to play with you" then you can throw those words away and say, "I will find another friend."

You can also teach children to project an attitude of confidence. We are all more likely to be listened to and less likely to be picked on if we greet the world with awareness, calm and confidence. Awareness, calm, and confidence means keeping one's head up and back straight, taking brisk regular steps, looking around, having a peaceful face and body, and moving away from people who might cause trouble. Have your child practice by walking across the floor while you coach her or him to be successful, by saying, for example, "That's great!" "Now take bigger steps." "Look around you." "Straighten your back." etc.

7. **Advocate for your children when things go wrong.** Remember that, as parents, our job is to make sure that our children are in places that are emotionally and physically safe and with people who are creating a supportive, effective learning environment.

If something goes wrong, be prepared to advocate in a respectful, powerful way for your child. Look for solutions rather than blame. Try to keep a sense of perspective by being fair and realistic, keeping the whole picture in mind as well as the needs of your child. Ask for help and keep asking until you get the help you need to ensure the well-being of your child.