

Kindergarten is a Big Step for Child and Parent

One way parents can prepare for that momentous first day of kindergarten is by thinking of themselves as bridges. Starting kindergarten is one of the big steps a child will take; it's a rite of passage. By accompanying the child into this new experience, then gradually letting go, you can be a bridge from a familiar security of the family to the independent world of school.

Parents can begin this process of supporting their children's gradual independence in the summer preceding kindergarten by sending them the message that you trust them. When children are given appropriate freedom and responsibility, they feel trusted. Feeling trusted empowers them to feel competent and confident to handle new situations.

You can send this empowering message when you:

- ❖ Encourage your child to spend more time with friends.
- ❖ Begin to let your child solve problems in his own way. For example, if it's his job to put away his toys, give some choices about how and when to do it. Then praise success when he does it his way.
- ❖ Assign a few simple chores that your child is capable of doing, like setting the table or folding the laundry. Treat these as his/her special responsibilities and let them know how much you appreciate their cooperation.
- ❖ Encourage your child to take responsibility for his own belongings by doing such things as hanging up his coat, putting away his pajamas, cleaning up his toys, etc. This habit is particularly important because kindergarteners will get praise from their teacher if they are able to keep track of their own things.
- ❖ Teach your child how to take care of herself. Self-care skills build feelings of competence and confidence.
- ❖ Let him choose his clothes, dress himself, brush his hair and teeth and handle other grooming activities.
- ❖ Help your child practice zipping up her jacket and getting a backpack on and off. The more a child can do alone on busy school mornings, the better it is for child and parent alike. Such self-help skills have a big pay-off in school. When children can get their own coats off, they do not have to ask for help and may, in fact, help others. Such acts can begin friendships.
- ❖ Rehearse school-related activities. One of the biggest stumbling blocks for kindergarteners is managing a lunch box or lunch tray. Many can't remove the wrapper from their own sandwiches or get a lid off a yogurt container. Buy the lunch box ahead of time and take a few lunch box picnics, even in the backyard. Help your child practice opening and closing the lunch box, and getting the juice box open. Being able to do this on their own is another way children win praise in school.
- ❖ Give your child opportunities to recognize his name in print. The ability to identify their names over a coat hook or cubby enables children to find their own special places in the classroom.

Giving your child more freedom and responsibility in these concrete ways also helps you feel more confident that your child is capable of succeeding in taking the big step to kindergarten. And a transition it is. Parents change too when their children go off to school; their lives are passing. Moving from caretaker role to one of less responsibility for the child can be scary and elating at the same time.

Give yourself credit for the fact that you've raised this child for five years and now he or she is competent to go off to school. A treat—whether it be coffee with the other parents at the bus stop or a bit of quiet time before you go off to work—is an acknowledgement that you too are embarking on a new stage of life.

Source: Sue West, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, New York State College of Human Ecology, Cornell University. **Parent Pages** was developed by Cornell Cooperative Extension of Suffolk County.