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FACT SHEET

Tips for Transition to Full-Day Kindergarten

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Seven tips for the transition to FDK

- Expect children to be exhausted, and clear their after-school schedules for at least two weeks in preparation.
- Help students get 10-12 hours of sleep per night.
- Practice hand-washing, going to the bathroom, zipping coats and backpacks, and buttoning pants independently.
- Practice mealtimes at the table and getting students ready for school lunches.
- Visit the school ahead of time to develop familiarity with the space.
- Meet your child's teacher before school starts, if possible.
- Maintain open lines of communication with the teacher to discuss student progress and any issues that may come up.

School District U-46 is preparing to welcome more than 2,600 children into full-day kindergarten this year, a massive expansion of a program that, in recent years, was offered to a small portion of students.

As the District works to stock 30 new classrooms and bring new materials to 80 others, parents and children can be doing their own preparation work at home. The transition to kindergarten can be a scary time for families but knowing what to expect can help.

Expect kindergartners to be exhausted

Some children will start kindergarten without having gone to preschool or childcare and the level of bustle and activity will wear them out. Others will shift from half-day programs to six full hours in school.

Apryl Lowe, Principal of Illinois Park Early Learning Center in Elgin, recommends parents prepare for the inevitable exhaustion by clearing their children's after-school schedules for the first two weeks of classes.

“Even if they are used to all-day childcare, it’s just different,” Lowe said. “This is school all day and that’s hard.”

Parents can help their children prepare by making sure they get 10 to 12 hours of sleep each night, being patient with them if they need naps, and recognizing their fatigue may limit how talkative they are after school in the first couple weeks. Even though parents are sure to be excited to hear about their children’s first school experiences, Lowe recommends asking simple questions at the beginning of the school year like “What did you eat for lunch?” instead of more complicated, open-ended ones.

Practice independence skills at home

Kindergartners show up to classes with one teacher and sometimes more than two dozen students. It is important they have mastered simple self-care procedures like hand-washing, buttoning their own pants, and zipping up their jackets.

Carrie Merritt, a Special Education kindergarten teacher and a member of the U-46 Full Day Kindergarten Committee, says parents can help their children with these skills before school starts. Getting a backpack early will allow students to practice putting things inside it and zipping it up. Parents can let children go to the bathroom by themselves and make sure they practice good hygiene during and after.

Beyond self-care procedures, children should know how to sit at a table for a meal with other people. Having lunch at school may be a new experience for them and families can ease the transition by having meals together in preparation.

Get to know the school

Many schools will host open houses or supply drop-off days before the first day of school, giving kindergartners and their parents a chance to see inside the school building and possibly even into their future classroom. This is a good chance to introduce students to the space in which they will be spending much of their time and the teacher with whom they will be spending it.

Due to the massive logistical challenge of preparing more than 100 classrooms for a new full-day, play-based kindergarten experience, some schools will not be ready to open before classes start. In this case, parents can walk by the school buildings or visit the playground ahead of time, taking advantage of an easy way to introduce their children to the school on their own schedule.

“The more familiar the kids are with the school, the easier the transition,” Lowe said.

Parents should also prepare for a rocky transition. Kids may cry about being left with a room of near-strangers and this often ends up being harder for the parent than the child. Generally students cheer up quickly and it’s the parents who often spend the day imagining the worst. When that is not the case, and children continue crying for half an hour or more, Lowe says parents can expect a call from the school. During these first few weeks, no news is good news.

Focus on the first 20 days

The first 20 days of school, or the first month of classes, is a good time to set a solid foundation for the year. Teachers will begin the first weeks of school talking about their expectations in and out of the classroom. Students will learn how to walk down the hallway, how to eat lunch with their peers, how to use the bathroom in school, and how to take care of classroom materials.

Many of these processes may be familiar for students coming in from preschool. For children who are being exposed to school for the first time, it is especially important that a groundwork be laid in the first 20 days.

“It’s really setting the structure and routines that are going to support kindergarten children throughout the rest of the year,” said Peggy Ondera, U-46 Director of Early Learning Initiatives.

Beyond these routines, students and entire families should spend the first 20 days developing a sense of community. In this time, children should begin to feel safe, comfortable and connected to the school, the teacher, and other students. Parents should be sure to focus on developing these relationships, too, and open channels of communication with teachers.

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