

Your Child's First Day

Starting child care? Your child will probably need a little while to get used to the new routine – and you might too! You can take the stress out of things by planning ahead, preparing your child and settling your child in over a few weeks.

Starting child care: planning ahead

Preparing children for their first day in child care will help them settle more easily. It's a good idea to start several weeks before the big day.

Getting your child used to the **child care daily routine** is a good first step. To do this, you can ask the child care setting for a copy of its daily schedule and make this part of your child's routine at home. If you try to follow the setting's lunch, play and nap times, your child might take less time to adjust when care starts.

Young babies will usually follow their personal routines in child care settings.

If your child knows who will be looking after her, it might make things easier. In the weeks before starting, you can find out who **your child's main carer or educator** will be. If you can get a photo of this person and talk about the person by name, this person will be more familiar to your child.

You and your child can also **get to know the new child care setting** and carers by making short visits together to the setting. Your child will get used to the new smells, toys, sounds, faces and voices. You can gently encourage your child to play with the toys and do some activities while you're there.

Reading or telling stories can be a safe way for your child to explore strong emotions and understand new events. You could try picture books about starting child care or making new friends. Your local library might have some suggestions. Or you could make up stories to share with your child about the experience. It's good to include all the feelings and experiences your child might go through – for example, happiness, fun, friendship, sadness, anxiety, apprehension and tiredness.

And talking positively with your child about the new environment, friends, carers and activities will help both you and your child feel positive too.

Preparing for child care: the night before

Organising practical things the night before can save you from a last-minute rush in the morning. This can help take the stress out of the first few days and weeks at child care.

Here are some tips for the night before starting child care:

- Try to ensure your child eats a healthy dinner.

- Get your child into bed in enough time to make sure he gets a good night's sleep. If your child doesn't sleep well, this might affect his experience the next day, so let the carers know.
- Make sure all items that your child is taking to child care are labelled with your child's name – for example, bottles, comfort items and clothing.
- Pack all the things your child needs, including bottles, formula, nappies, hat, spare clothes, food (unless provided by the child care service), medicines and medical record. Packing special comfort items if the setting allows them – like cuddly toys, blankets or books, or a family picture – is also a good idea.

If you need to pack food for your child to take to child care, there are a few things to remember. You should transport meat or dairy products from home in an insulated lunch box with a frozen drink bottle to keep the temperature below 5°C. At the service, the food should go straight into a fridge. You can transport expressed breastmilk in an esky with an ice brick to keep it chilled.

The first few weeks at child care

If you can, it's good to **ease your child into the new care program**.

You can do this by staying with your child for five minutes for the first few days. You could try reading a book together or watching your child do activities. As you and your child become more comfortable at child care you might take your child in and leave more quickly.

When it's time to go, let your child know you're going and when you'll be back. **Give your child a hug and a kiss, say goodbye** to the carer and leave.

Your child is more likely to feel safe and secure in the new child care setting if she sees that you have a good relationship with the carers and educators, especially her main carer. If your child can see you trust the carer, she's more likely to trust the carer too.

Tips on Saying Farewell

Saying goodbye can be emotional for you and your child. We want you to know that it is OK to feel this way. Below are a number of tips that may help you to say goodbye when it is time to start your day:

- Let your child know that you are leaving and when you will be back. This is helpful, even with babies.
- Settle your child in an enjoyable activity before leaving.
- To increase your child's feelings of safety, let them bring in something they love from home such as a teddy or blanket. These items can be gradually phased out as they become more settled.
- When you are ready to go, say goodbye to your child briefly and try not to drag it out.
- Keep a relaxed and happy expression on your face when leaving.

- Gently encourage your child to separate from you by giving them practice. It is important to give them positive experiences of separations and reunions.

Children are incredibly intuitive and pick up on the emotions of their primary caregivers. If we feel doubtful and stressed about leaving our child with others, it is reasonable to acknowledge that our children are going to pick up on these emotions. So how do we best prepare our child for this transition whilst still managing our own emotions?

Trust your gut instincts. You may have visited numerous centres to choose the one that feels right and is going to suit not only our needs, but more importantly the needs of our child.

If your child is **still breastfeeding**, and if it's possible for you, you might want to think about visiting the centre during the day to give your child a feed. Many centres encourage breastfeeding mothers to visit, and it might help your child settle into care.

If your child is generally happy to go to his child care setting, shows you things he has made there and talks excitedly about his day (if he's talking), chances are he has settled in well and is enjoying his new environment. Your next challenge might be getting him to come home!