

First Days of Pre-K

Overview

The first days of pre-K are important for setting a positive tone for the school year. Careful planning prior to the first days of school enables children to feel comfortable and adjust to their new surroundings. The beginning of the year is also a critical time to make families feel welcome and comfortable, and to send a clear message that you view them as key partners. Below are some key best practices for teachers and leaders to consider as they plan for the first days of pre-K.

Supporting Families and Children over the Summer

Connect with your families over the summer

- Send an enthusiastic welcome letter to families.
 - Sample program and teacher welcome letters are available here: <https://sites.google.com/site/prekreadiness/family-engagement>
- Teachers can call or meet with families to begin learning about them and their children.
 - These are especially important ways to connect with families with limited literacy skills or limited knowledge of English. Where possible, provide oral and written translations for families. You can encourage families to find a trusted friend or family member who can translate documents and conversations for them throughout the school year.
 - This is a time to get to know children and their families. The information from families will help you and your staff create welcoming, respectful connections with families and lay a strong foundation for learning throughout the year.
- Provide informal welcome events at your program to build meaningful connections with and among families, children, and staff. Suggestions include:
 - Play dates.
 - Potlucks.
 - Site tours.
- Provide families with important information for the first days of school, including:
 - A schedule for the first day(s) of school.
 - Clear information on drop-off/pick-up procedures.
 - A list of staff's contact information and roles (leader, nurse, social worker, etc.).

**Make sure to consider the preferences and needs of the families you serve when choosing methods for building connections with and among families over the summer and throughout the school year.*

Help families prepare for their child's transition to pre-K

- Share tips with families on how to prepare their child for pre-K, for example you can encourage families to:
 - Ask their child how s/he feels about starting school.
 - Practice separation with the child by letting a trusted friend or family member care for the child for a short period of time.
 - Take the child to the library for story time to practice being in a group of children.
 - Establish predictable bedtime and wake-up routines that provide the child enough time for rest and getting ready in the morning.

- Encourage families to support their child in becoming more independent through:
 - Dressing by herself/himself.
 - Toileting independently.
 - Clearing her/his plate after meals.
- Share tips with families on how to part from their child on the first day, such as:
 - Developing a consistent way of saying goodbye (e.g., hugging, saying specific phrases of love to each other).
 - Telling their child where family will be while the child is at the pre-K program.
 - Placing a family photo inside their child's backpack.

Supporting Families during the First Days of School

Maintain a welcoming *tone* for families

- Communicate to all staff, including school safety officers, the central role that everyone plays in welcoming families.
- Assign staff members to:
 - Greet families at the entrance of the building.
 - Support families with questions or concerns as they arise.
 - Provide families with necessary resources or handouts.
 - Support families or children struggling with separation.
- Staff should greet families warmly and respectfully.
- Set aside time during the first days of school to meet with families and collect key information about families and their children.
 - Incorporate this information into the curriculum, physical displays, and interactions with families and their children.
- Develop a plan to support families whose preferred language of communication is not English.

Maintain a welcoming *physical* environment for families

- Display welcome signs throughout the building in languages representative of families served, and display family-focused items, such as:
 - A map of the world, with stickers placed on families' countries of origin.
 - Photos of children and their family members in classrooms/hallways.
- Prominently display photos of all staff members with their name and role identified.
- Set up a Family Bulletin Board with key information posted, such as:
 - A schedule for the day.
 - A school calendar, highlighting upcoming events such as an orientation.
 - Lesson and curriculum information.
- Designate an inviting space in the building for families in which they can:
 - Connect with each other.
 - Obtain necessary resources, such as a Family Handbook and orientation materials.

Establish Routines & Structure for the First Days of School

Plan classroom activities to build children’s independence and support their transition into pre-K

- Stagger entry dates and/or times so children can get used to the classroom and routines in small groups.
 - Alternatively, consider allocating adults so that you can divide each class into smaller groups as you teach children about routines and practices.
- Invite children to bring a special object to school, such as a stuffed animal.
- Read books to children about coping with separation. You may want to read some of these books multiple times to help children handle transitions. Great books to read include:
 - *The Kissing Hand*, by Audrey Penn.
 - *A Pocketful of Kisses*, by Audrey Penn.
 - *Where’s Spot?*, by Eric Hill.
 - *Love you Forever*, by Robert Munsch.
 - *Franklin Goes to School*, by Paulette Bourgeois.
- For children who continue to be upset throughout the first day of school:
 - Review the flow of the day so that children know when family will arrive.
 - Invite children to use the “Cozy Area” to support self-regulation.
 - A “Cozy Area” is “a clearly defined space with a substantial amount of softness, where children may daydream, read, or play quietly.” (See ECERS-R, Scale 3: Furnishings for relaxation and comfort).
- Read books and plan simple, short activities that enable children to work independently. Activities and read-alouds may include:
 - *All By Myself*, by Aliko.
 - Simple puzzles.
 - Manipulatives or table toys.
 - Pegboards with pegs.
 - Crayons with plain paper.
- Take children on a tour of the classroom.
 - Orient children to different activity areas, including the job chart and centers area.

Plan Circle Time Routines & Activities

- Convene children for an active and brief (5 -10 minutes) circle time meeting.
 - If some children are not ready to participate, allow them to watch from a safe distance.
- Introduce attendance routines, greetings, and good morning songs to open circle.
- Introduce the ‘flow of the day’ chart so children know what they will be doing and when meals, rest, and dismissal will happen.
- Teach one or two simple songs or finger plays using children’s names and repeat each day.
- Teach and review procedures such as:
 - Going to bathroom.
 - Walking in hall.
 - Signal for stopping & listening.
 - Different areas in the room.
 - What to do when we enter the classroom.
 - What we do when we get ready to leave school.
 - Outdoor play and safety routines.
 - How to line up.

- Incorporate opportunities for oral language development in circle time. Activities may include:
 - Children discussing favorite objects they bring from home.

Plan Choice Time Routines & Activities

- Orient children to available choice activities.
 - Use visual cues, such as pictures of learning centers.
 - Explain and demonstrate your center management system to children and practice using it.
 - Use various methods to identify how many children can work in each activity area.
- Plan choice activities for the first days of school, including:
 - “I Can Week” (e.g., I can paint; I can read; I can cut; I can glue; I can play in sand and water; I can read; I can build).
- In the event an assigned teacher or paraprofessional is absent, a qualified substitute teacher or a qualified substitute paraprofessional must be assigned to provide coverage.

**Note that with all of these activities it is important for the lead and assistant teachers to work closely together to ease the transition for children. For example, one teacher might sing songs with the large group while another teacher works with an individual child or two.*

Resources

- Sample Program and Teacher Welcome Letters
<https://sites.google.com/site/prekreadiness/family-engagement>
- Australian Early Childhood Initiative Article: Creating a Welcoming Environment
<https://www.kidsmatter.edu.au/early-childhood/blog/creating-welcoming-environment>
- HelpGuide.org article: Separation Anxiety in Children
<http://www.helpguide.org/articles/anxiety/separation-anxiety-in-children.htm>.
- DOE Staggered Schedule and Full Day Schedule
<http://schools.nyc.gov/Academics/EarlyChildhood/educators/UPK.htm>
- Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale, Revised Edition (ECERS-R)
<http://schools.nyc.gov/Academics/EarlyChildhood/educators/ProgramAssessments.htm>

For More Information: Contact the Division of Early Childhood Education by emailing EarlyChildhood@schools.nyc.gov.