



Ten Practical Tips to Prepare Kids to
Succeed in School by Building
Their Social and Emotional Smarts

www.wingsforkids.org

Beyond the Bookbag



WINGS for kids

Buying a backpack and stocking it with freshly sharpened pencils and brand new books is a great way to get kids ready for school. But there are other useful tools that parents should provide that go far beyond the bookbag.

The start of school brings social and emotional pressures that present enormous challenges for kids. Even the most capable, self-assured children approach a new year with worries. Will they make new friends and keep the old friends? Will they measure up to what's expected in academics and extracurricular activities? What if they can't find the new classroom? What if they disappoint their parents or teachers? How will they sit still at their desks after a summer of freedom?

Even when returning to a familiar school, the first days back are a bit like starting a brand new job for an adult. Children are learning to rely on themselves, and they can use some help from the caring adults in their lives.

Small lessons are the best way to strengthen social and emotional skills, making use of opportunities that show up every day. These tips provide easy, practical ways to teach these lessons. The tips come from WINGS for kids, a nationally recognized not-for-profit organization that developed these field-tested strategies on hundreds of kids over the last 10 years. WINGS promotes social and emotional learning in after-school programs.



1 Rituals Reassure and Stabilize

Self Awareness and Social Awareness

The routines and rituals of family life are very reassuring to children. They help to create a sense of stability. Use rituals to create a predictable emotional connection as they leave for school and return home.

If you drop your child off in a carpool line, maybe the ritual could be unhooking the child's seatbelt and offering each other a "high five." Maybe it's as simple as a kiss on the nose as your kid heads out the door. If you walk your child into school, at the classroom you could say, "1-2-3 Bye!" and then leave.

Get your child to participate in creating the ritual. Stick with it, even if your kids say, "Oh, Dad," and roll their eyes. This is the kind of routine your kids will secretly love, so ignore their protests.

2 Pump Them Up

Relationship Skills

Help your kids by boosting their confidence before school starts. Getting support and encouragement from adults really helps them cope with the pressures and fears they are feeling at this time of year. Don't just tell them they're wonderful in vague terms; that's not nearly as effective as catching your kids doing something good and giving them positive feedback—with specifics!

- "When you clear the dinner dishes from the table the way you did tonight, it is such a big help to me. Thanks!"
- "Putting your clothes on all by yourself made me very proud and gave me more time to make your breakfast."
- "I like how you shared your basketball at the park with that little girl, and you both had a good time playing together. That was so friendly and kind."

Kids crave attention and approval, and positive feedback with specifics makes them feel competent, confident and appreciated. See if you can give your kid 5 pieces of positive feedback a day before school starts—and forever!

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3 Beat the Morning Rush

Responsible Decision-Making

It's much better to arrive at school calm and collected in the morning, so it's worth the effort to decide in advance with your child how to make that happen. How about a trial run with a timer to see how long it actually takes to wash up, dress, eat breakfast and depart? Make it fun.

See what your child can do in advance—laying out tomorrow's clothes or putting the bookbag in the same spot by the door.

Talk about the importance of breakfast and brainstorm some new, nutritious choices. Decide together on an especially fast option to use when necessary -- like an energy bar and a carton of milk, or peanut butter crackers and an apple

Give spontaneous and appropriate rewards for even small improvements. "Since you've been doing a better job of eating your nutritious breakfast, I'm taking you out for a not-so-nutritious ice cream sundae to celebrate!"

If your child has trouble getting dressed or eating breakfast in a reasonable amount of time, provide some help. Let's say you've allotted 10 minutes for breakfast. Put a timer on the table set for 8 minutes. When it rings, announce that there's 2 minutes remaining. After 2 minutes, remove breakfast – be matter of fact, don't be negative –and move along purposefully.

4 Strategize Together for a Realistic Plan

Social Awareness and Responsible Decision-Making

As a family, discuss what would be a good routine to make the mornings before school and the evenings afterward run smoothly for all. Come up with a realistic plan. Don't expect a hot breakfast every day if the schedule just won't permit it.

Have each family member write on separate pieces of paper 3 things important to them on school day mornings – for example, sleeping as long as possible, or being on time for Friday morning band practice.

Collect the papers and spread them out where everyone can see them. Brainstorm together about what will give the most people what they want.

Give everyone a chance to talk. Listen respectfully to what they have to say. Be sure to include parents! Kids should not be trained to think that the world revolves around them. This is a community effort.

Write up the plan – or have the kids write it up. Find a central spot to hang the plan where all can see.

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5 Wrestle with Worries and Fears

Social Awareness and Self Awareness

Whether kids are thrilled to be starting school or not, it's normal to feel anxiety about what these new situations will bring. It helps when adults provide acknowledgement and practical strategies for coping with these pressures.

Pick a time to talk with your child about any worries about the beginning of a new school year. Write down the worries and talk about each in turn. "So, you are worried about finding your classroom?" "I see you are worried that nobody will like you."

Sort the worries into two stacks—can do something about/can't do anything about. Put each in a separate jar or bowl. "You can't control whether people like you—except to be your wonderful self!" but "You certainly can find out where your classroom is before the first day of school." Brainstorm solutions, write them down and put the plan in the appropriate jar.

A few days after school is under way, get together and talk about the worries again. Still worried? How did the plans work? Make adjustments.

6 Conduct a Dress Rehearsal

Self-Management

Do a run-through of the entire routine, from departure for school to arrival back at home.

Include rituals, classroom search, carpool line, everything. Even if your child balks at the idea, this can be helpful and reassuring.

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Making Introductions

Social Awareness

What seems obvious to adults often needs to be explained to children to make their social interactions run smoothly. Set the expectation that they should introduce themselves to students they don't already know.

Give examples using different scenarios. In a classroom, they should look at the student and say, "Hi, my name is Annie. What's yours?" On the playground, they should approach a student who is all alone and say something similar.

Help them come up with some followup questions. Encourage your child to try them out in advance and choose what makes them comfortable. Examples: "Did you go to Pinckney Elementary School last year?" or "Do you have a dog or a cat?" or "Do you know many people who go to this school?"

Choosing Friends

Self-Awareness and Social Awareness

Set aside time to talk about friendship. Start by asking what your child values in a friend. Write down the qualities. If your child has trouble coming up with ideas, suggest some—friends who are nice, funny, fair, play sports—and the child can prioritize them.

Then have your child come up with a list of qualities they don't want in a friend—friends who are mean, disloyal, bullies. You can help by asking them to complete this sentence: "I do not want friends who"

Talk about keeping these lists in mind when picking friends. Remind them to play with kids who match their friendship priorities, as opposed to the kids who seem popular.

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9 Share Memories that Matter

Social Awareness

One way to ease anxieties can be to tell stories of your own school days, especially with happy endings.

Let your child know it's normal to feel nervous. "I remember feeling sick to my stomach on the first day of third grade. I was sure I would not make a single friend. But on the playground, Maggie said to me, 'Hi, want to play?' And we are still friends, after all these years."

10 Staying Connected

Self-Awareness and Social Awareness

Acknowledge your own feelings as well as theirs, and model for your child what will help.

You might say, "When I miss you, I'm going to touch this pebble in my pocket. You can do the same. Let's make sure there are pockets in the clothes you wear to school."

For more information on building social and emotional smarts in kids, visit our website at

www.wingsforkids.org

