Starting School for the First Time

Your child will be eligible to start Junior Kindergarten the year they are four years old, and Senior Kindergarten the year they are five. All schools in the province now provide the play based Full-Day Kindergarten.

For most parents preparing children for school can be a stressful time, and it can be even more so for parents of a child with special needs. Students with special needs may require additional kinds of support. This can make the entry into school more complex, requiring planning and coordination ahead of time and throughout their school years.

It is important that you become a partner in your child’s education by familiarizing yourself with the special education system. This includes learning how to work effectively with school staff, professionals and community agencies, to get the support your child will need to be successful.

The Ministry of Education has a document called Planning Entry to School: A Resource Guide designed to facilitate the planning process of preparing your child to begin school. The document can be found at the Ministry of Education website at http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/parents/planningentry.html

You can check pages 28-31 for specific information for students with special needs.

To help ease the transition to school you can use the following strategies:

1. Know your child:
   1. Make sure you understand the child’s diagnosis, strengths and needs
2. Make sure that your child’s assessments and reports are up to date
3. Make copies of reports to share with school staff

2. **Become familiar with the school:**
   1. Take your child on visits to the school or ask for a tour
   2. Spend time with your child in the playground
   3. If your child will be walking to school, practice walking the route to school and identifying landmarks
   4. If the child will be using a bus, arrange to practice getting on and off the bus (Some school bus companies provide a School Bus Safety Day to allow children and parents to ride a school bus together)

3. **Provide school supplies:**
   1. Pack your child’s back pack with the supplies they will need and have child practice opening the backpack and getting items out
   2. Pack a lunch in the child’s lunch bag and have a picnic to practice using juice boxes and sandwich containers. Encourage child to ask for help if they have difficulty opening containers.

4. **Set up a routine:**
   1. Decide on an outfit for school and put it out in the evening before bedtime
   2. Decide on bedtime and start your child going to bed at that time
   3. Pack lunches the night before
4. Create a morning routine that allows plenty of time for dressing and eating breakfast.

5. Work with the Teacher:
   1. Arrange to meet the teacher before school starts or very soon after.
   2. Share information about your child and their needs.
   3. Discuss any safety or health concerns and identify who needs to know. For example, does the bus driver need to know that your child has seizures?
   4. Ask the teacher what you can do to help your child settle into school.
   5. Work together to identify problems and possible solutions.

6. Recognize your feelings about having your child start school:
   1. It is OK to feel sad or anxious for your child.
   2. Share your feelings with another family member or parents.
   3. Talk about how you feel and what you are worried about.
   4. Find out if there is a parent group you can join or an on-line forum where you can share your feelings and get support.

Starting school is stressful for you and your child. Take it one day at a time and celebrate every success, like riding to school on the bus, coming home the first day and getting into routine. If you have concerns about your child’s school experience talk to the teacher and other school staff.
For more strategies on smooth transitions check the School Entry Action Plan.