



Keeping 'em cool

There are easy ways to help your kids navigate the new school year, writes **Polly Simons**

Heading back for the new school year after a long break can be hard enough. But add in an important transition — the first day of kindergarten, going to high school or starting at a new school — and the stress and anxiety is suddenly amplified.

"It's normal for children to feel anxious during this time," says educational psychologist Dr Fiona Martin of Sydney Child Psychology Centre.

"Kids need time to adjust. Talk with them about their worries and reassure them that everyone feels nervous in the beginning."

First day at kindergarten

Anxiety is contagious, so parents controlling their own nervousness is the first step in reducing first day jitters.

"Some parents can be nervous about what it represents: they may have had negative experiences at school, and this feeling can be passed on," says Dr Martin.

She says: 1. Familiarity is everything. Take your child around the school before their first day and show them where the classroom, toilet and playground are. Tell them about the sorts of things they will be doing each day, and how lunch and recess work.

2. Be practical. Before their first day, let children familiarise themselves with their uniform and practice putting it on a few times. Ensure your child has everything they need ahead of time, and that they can open their own lunch box.

3. Make a date. Organise play-mates with children attending the same school so they know someone on their first day.

4. Leave on a positive note. Try not to prolong the first school drop-off. Give them time to cry, but then tell them to have a lovely day and you'll be back to pick them up later.

First day at high school

Starting high school can be fraught with

difficulties, from new classes to concerns about homework and friendship groups. This is particularly so if children move from a small primary school to a large high school, so a bit of reassurance helps. "Tell them that there are others in the same boat and they're not alone," Dr Martin says.

She also says: 1. Attend orientation day. "The more time your child spends at the school before starting, the more comfortable they will be on their first day."

2. Know the timetable. "Learn the routines and activities of a typical day," says Dr Martin. Knowing what to expect reduces stress.

3. Be positive. High school is a great chance for students to make new friends, try new activities and take charge of their own learning. "Positive talk leads to feeling positive about the new school," Dr Martin says.

4. Get organised. Be ready to go and be on time. Time management skills are important from the start.

First day at a new school

Whether it's due to family circumstances or a negative experience such as bullying, being the new kid is pretty much always a daunting experience.

"Coping with change is important and develops resilience," says Dr Martin. For older children, it can be helpful to discuss the reason behind the change and to identify the positives: "Remember to listen to their perspective and value their views and opinions."

She says: 1. Take a sneak peek. Children will feel much more confident if they know their way around. If there isn't an orientation day or they are joining the school halfway through the year, organise a tour before their first day.

2. Get involved. What are they interested in? Whether it's sports, art or chess clubs, being involved in activities can help children feel more at home. Bonus: these groups are smaller, making it easier to make friends.

3. Know people. Keeping in touch with old friends can help give them a sense of continuity at an unsettling time.

4. Don't panic. It can take six to eight weeks for a child to settle into a new school. If you start to notice changes such as withdrawal, lack of sleep, changes in eating patterns or irritability, they might not be coping.



adventures in parenting



NEIL KEENE DAD OF ONE

Print me a T-shirt, make me a badge: I Survived Japan. I should add a note at the bottom of the garment: (with a three-year-old son in tow).

Our recent overseas trip to the Land of the Rising Sun was a long way removed from previous prechild travelling adventures. Gone were the days where we booked a flight and left much of the rest of the trip to chance and fate and wandering interests. And it was

a different kind of apprehension as we boarded the plane, thinking less about the exciting times ahead and more about the nine-hour flight and how or whether we would survive.

We'd spent weeks planning exactly what we would take on the plane — enough clothes, games, food, movies and other distractions to keep a whole preschool class going for weeks. But fear of the unknown remained. Would the cabin pressure turn our boy into a screaming mess? Would he simply fall asleep and give us some rest for the flight? Would

an aeroplane toilet be big enough to get him changed in case of an accident?

The answers, in short, are "no", "no" and "keep dreaming, idiot". I have no idea how a fully grown human being enters the Mile High Club inside one of those cubicles — I could barely pull my son's top off to get him changed without putting an elbow through the mirror.

You learn quickly upon arrival that supposedly family-friendly tourist attractions aren't necessarily a hit. Take our trip to Ueno Zoo, in the heart of Tokyo. The zoo's collection of

exotic animals was impressive. We thought our little man would love to see so many new creatures. In truth, the highlight for him was probably the giant pink soft serve cone we bought before going through the front gate, and a 30-second monorail ride to get from one side of the zoo to the other. Most of the rest of the time was spent looking at rocks, jumping in puddles and gazing at a brochure with photos of the animals, rather than the animals themselves.

Tokyo Legoland was swiftly navigated, past the enormous

and elaborate dioramas, simply to get to the indoor playground almost identical to the one a couple of minutes down the road in Australia.

I guess that's just how it is with kids. But then there was Disneyland.

I'd never really understood the whole magic-of-Disney thing, but as we walked through the turnstiles, faux-castle rising before us, James was completely awe-struck. Moments like that are worth all the compromises of travelling with kids ... apart from maybe the aeroplane toilet stops.