



SERIES 1 · CONNECTION, SAFETY, AND BELONGING

The Big Step

A relationship-centered approach to starting school that respects children's identities, access needs, existing knowledge, and active participation.

CONNECTED CAREGIVER

Series 1 - Connection, Safety, and Belonging | 20-22 minutes

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

Resources for Caregivers publications provide general educational and informational material informed by research, professional literature, and caregiving practice. Every child, caregiver, family, and situation is different. The ideas are intended to support awareness, reflection, learning, and informed decision-making; they are not a substitute for individualized medical, developmental, mental-health, educational, therapeutic, legal, financial, or other professional advice.

Individual needs, circumstances, and responses vary. Examples, strategies, scripts, activities, and suggested approaches describe possibilities rather than predictions. Resources for Caregivers does not promise or guarantee any particular behavioral, developmental, emotional, educational, health, safety, relationship, caregiving, or other outcome.

Caregivers decide whether and how to use these ideas based on the individual needs, abilities, circumstances, and safety of the person in their care. Seek guidance from an appropriately qualified professional when individualized evaluation, advice, or support is needed.

AT A GLANCE

Estimated reading time: 20-22 minutes

Central idea: Children arrive at school with identities, relationships, languages, interests, questions, knowledge, and ways of learning already in progress. A healthy transition is a shared responsibility: families prepare and listen, schools provide safety and access, and adults work with the child rather than treating readiness as a performance test.

In this publication, you will explore how to:

- 1 Prepare for school through practical information, predictable routines, and appropriate supports.
- 2 Pack an inclusive “invisible backpack” of strengths, identity, access, regulation, and help-seeking.
- 3 Make room for decompression and voluntary reflection after school.
- 4 Build a family-school partnership that includes the child's perspective and protects their rights.

This publication includes small actions and questions for reflection.

SCHOOL READINESS IS SHARED

A child's development matters, but readiness does not live only inside the child. The school must also be ready - with a safe and accessible environment, understandable routines, developmentally appropriate expectations, effective instruction, cultural and language respect, protection from harassment, and individualized support. In the United States, eligible students with disabilities may have rights under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504, and the Americans with Disabilities Act. Rights and procedures differ by country and setting; use official local sources or a qualified advocate for individual guidance.

Bring the Whole Child to School

Throughout this series, the child's world has expanded: self, family, nature, shared work, friendship, community, and now school.

School is not a replacement for home or a blank page on which learning begins. Children arrive carrying family relationships and stories, languages and communication forms, cultural and spiritual traditions, interests, humor, questions, and preferences. They also bring knowledge developed through play and daily life, sensory and health needs, experiences of solving problems and receiving help, memories of welcome or exclusion, and expectations about what adults and groups will be like.

Some children enter eagerly. Some feel uncertain, tired, quiet, excited, frightened, or several things at once. Some have attended care or preschool; others are entering a group setting for the first time. Some are returning to a familiar school after a break or changing schools, grades, teachers, languages, services, or routines.

There is no single correct emotional response to a transition.

Big Idea: Children and Schools Prepare for Each Other

Traditional readiness questions often focus on whether a child can follow directions, separate from a caregiver, sit still, recognize letters and numbers, or manage materials independently.

Those questions can identify useful supports, but they are incomplete. Ask whether instructions, spaces, and learning materials are accessible; whether movement, play, rest, food, toileting, communication, and sensory needs are treated developmentally; and whether the child knows where to get help. Consider whether the child's name, language, family, race, culture, religion, disability, gender expression, and identity are respected, whether educators have adequate information and support, how the school responds to harm, and whether families can understand communication and participate meaningfully.

School success is shaped by instruction, relationships, health, access, resources, safety, attendance opportunity, community conditions, and policy - not by a child's toolbox alone.

Learn What the Day Will Actually Require

Gather concrete information from the school rather than relying on memories of your own education.

Ask about:

- daily schedule, arrival, dismissal, and authorized pickup;
- transportation and bus procedures;
- attendance and absence reporting;
- meals, snacks, water, allergies, and feeding support;
- medication, nursing, health, toileting, and emergency procedures;
- clothing, weather, outdoor time, and spare items;
- school supplies and whether assistance is available;

- devices, media, photography, and communication platforms;
- home-language interpretation and translation;
- classroom communication and family conferences;
- quiet spaces, movement, sensory tools, and regulation support;
- special education, disability, counseling, speech-language, occupational therapy, and other services;
- anti-bullying, nondiscrimination, discipline, restraint, and seclusion policies; and
- how a child or family reports a concern.

Visit or preview the setting if possible. A photograph, map, short video, social narrative, sample schedule, meeting with staff, playground visit, or practice route may make the unknown more concrete.

Share information the school needs to provide safe, effective support. Protect unrelated private details. Ask how records will be used, stored, and shared.

Plan for Health, Disability, and Access

Do not wait for a crisis to explain a serious allergy, seizure plan, diabetes care, medication, elopement risk, communication access, mobility need, or mental-health concern. Confirm responsibilities in writing with the appropriate school contact.

If the child may need disability-related evaluation, special education, related services, aids, or modifications, learn the local process early. In the United States, IDEA makes special education and related services available to eligible children with disabilities, and Section 504 prohibits disability discrimination in schools receiving federal financial assistance. Eligibility, evaluation, plans, and procedural safeguards have specific rules; a casual promise of help is not a substitute for the required process.

Useful questions include:

- What support is already documented?
- Who is responsible for each part of the plan?
- How will substitutes, transportation staff, and activity leaders receive necessary information?
- What data or observations will show whether support is working?
- How can the child communicate that something is not working?
- When will the team review the plan?

Accommodations do not give a child an unfair advantage. They aim to provide meaningful access.

Build a Morning Routine That Serves the Family

A predictable routine may reduce decisions and help people remember essential items. It should support the child, not become another assessment.

A visual, written, spoken, object-based, or device-based checklist might include:

- wake, toilet, wash, or dress steps as appropriate;

- breakfast and medication;
- weather-appropriate clothing;
- communication or mobility equipment;
- lunch, snack, water, and allergy supplies;
- folders, library books, or school materials;
- comfort, sensory, or regulation supports; and
- the departure and transportation plan.

Assign responsibility realistically. Independence is not the same as readiness. Adults may continue preparing food, checking medication, managing transportation, fastening clothing, or packing equipment. A child can participate without carrying responsibility beyond their development or access.

When mornings are difficult, investigate sleep, hunger, pain, illness, anxiety, sensory load, medication effects, executive-function demands, family stress, transportation, and school concerns before labeling the child uncooperative.

Pack an Inclusive Relationship Toolbox

Playful metaphors may name listening ears, noticing eyes, helping hands, a calm body, kind words, and a wondering mind. Keep them if the child likes them while translating them into accessible choices:

- **Receive:** Attend to information through speech, signs, text, pictures, demonstration, touch cues, or a device.
- **Communicate:** Ask a question, share an idea, express a need, or say no.
- **Notice and check:** Observe context without assuming what another person feels or intends.
- **Regulate with support:** Move, rest, eat, use a sensory aid, co-regulate, take medication, or seek a quieter space as appropriate.
- **Ask for help:** Contact a teacher, aide, counselor, nurse, driver, caregiver, or another identified adult.
- **Collaborate:** Share information and work with others without surrendering every preference.
- **Protect a boundary:** Decline touch, teasing, unsafe play, unwanted disclosure, or participation.
- **Repair:** Attend to impact and take a meaningful action after harm.
- **Wonder:** Remain open to a question, explanation, or new approach.

A child does not have to look calm, make eye contact, speak aloud, sit still, work independently, help classmates, or hide distress to belong in a classroom.

Learn Together Through Play

Family games such as *Simon Says*, *Follow the Leader*, *Red Light, Green Light*, and *Freeze Dance* can offer playful experiences with attention, anticipation, stopping and starting, movement, imitation, turn-taking, and changing cues.

They are optional games, not readiness tests or treatments. Adjust them so everyone can participate:

- use visual, auditory, tactile, or movement signals;

- replace elimination with continued play;
- allow seated, signed, device-based, or partner responses;
- let children lead;
- slow the pace or reduce competing input;
- offer observation as a valid role; and
- stop when the game is no longer enjoyable.

Do not frame compliance with a trick instruction as a measure of listening, impulse control, or school potential. The value is shared play, flexible participation, and noticing what supports help.

What Adults Learn Too

Adults often prepare for school by checking what the child can do. A fuller preparation asks what the adults and setting will do too.

The child brings real strengths. The family brings knowledge of the child. Educators bring knowledge of teaching and the group. None has the complete picture alone.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Ask one school-readiness question about the environment:

“What will help this child communicate, participate, feel safe, and recover during the school day?”

Identify who can provide one needed support.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Am I preparing the child for school while also asking whether the school is ready for the child?
- Does the morning routine reduce load or create more pressure?
- Are health, disability, language, transportation, and safety plans clear in writing?
- Does the toolbox include boundaries and help-seeking as well as cooperation?
- Which parts of the child's whole self should be welcomed rather than changed?

Help the School Day Come Home Safely

Begin with Reconnection, Not Questions

After school, children may be hungry, thirsty, physically tired, socially saturated, restless, quiet, dysregulated, relieved, or eager to talk. Some have spent the day managing noise, transitions, language demands, pain, masking, uncertainty, or intense concentration.

Start with practical care:

- a warm greeting in the form the child prefers;
- food, water, medication, or bathroom access;
- movement or stillness;
- lower sensory input;
- closeness or space; and
- time without demands.

“How was school?” may produce little because it is broad, immediate, or difficult to answer. That does not mean the child is withholding or that the day was uneventful.

Invite Reflection Without Requiring a Report

When the child seems available, offer one question:

- What do you want me to know about today?
- Did anything feel interesting, funny, hard, unfair, or confusing?
- What helped you?
- Was there a time you wanted more help?
- Is there anything you want to remember for tomorrow?
- Do you want me to listen, help, contact someone, or leave it for now?

The child may answer through speech, signs, drawing, play, text, a device, gesture, or behavior. They may say “nothing,” “I don’t know,” or “not now.” Accept the limit unless immediate safety requires follow-up.

Avoid running through a question list, demanding eye contact, correcting the child’s version in the moment, or making them responsible for reassuring the adult.

Ask What Was Needed - not Only Which Tool Was Missing

A memorable shift replaces “What rule was broken?” with “What tool was missing?” Curiosity is more useful than shame, but the second question can still locate the entire problem inside the child.

Ask more broadly:

“What happened, what was needed, and who was responsible?”

Possibilities include:

- clearer information or instruction;
- more time or practice;
- food, rest, movement, or co-regulation;
- a communication aid or disability accommodation;
- a predictable transition;
- protection from bullying, harassment, discrimination, or aggression;

- an adult who noticed and intervened;
- a change to the environment or workload;
- repair by the child;
- repair by a peer or adult; or
- a skill or strategy to practice later.

Sometimes a child made a harmful choice and needs to take responsibility. Sometimes a rule was unclear, inaccessible, inconsistently enforced, biased, or unrelated to safety and learning. Sometimes the child used every available skill and the environment still failed them.

Do not turn bullying, abuse, discrimination, ignored disability needs, or adult misconduct into a growth exercise for the child. Listen, protect, document, and use the appropriate reporting or complaint process.

Respond to a Difficult Disclosure

If the child reports harm or a serious concern:

- 1 Stay as calm as possible.
- 2 Thank them for telling you.
- 3 State clearly that harm is not their fault when appropriate.
- 4 Ask only enough open questions to understand immediate safety and next steps.
- 5 Record the child's words and relevant dates without coaching a story.
- 6 Preserve messages, notices, photographs, or records lawfully.
- 7 Contact the appropriate school person or emergency/protective authority based on urgency.
- 8 Tell the child what you will do and what may happen next, within what you know.

Do not promise secrecy you cannot keep. Do not pressure the child to confront, mediate with, apologize to, or forgive the person who harmed them.

For routine problems, a brief teacher message may be enough. For repeated, serious, discriminatory, disability-related, or safety concerns, use written communication, request the relevant policy or meeting, and keep organized records. Seek a qualified local advocate or professional when needed.

Build a Team That Includes the Child

Families and educators see different parts of the child's life. Teachers observe the child in a group and know the instructional setting. Families know the child's history, communication, culture, health, regulation patterns, and life beyond school. The child has direct experience that adults cannot replace.

Useful partnership practices include:

- begin with strengths and the child's own priorities;
- use interpreters and translated information when needed;
- share specific observations rather than labels;

- agree on the problem before selecting a solution;
- name who will do what and by when;
- distinguish informal strategies from formal plans and legal duties;
- check whether the support works across settings;
- protect privacy and limit unnecessary disclosure; and
- schedule a review rather than assuming the first plan will work.

Partnership does not require families to agree with every school decision, teachers to accept every proposed solution, or children to participate in an adult meeting that feels unsafe. Respectful disagreement, advocacy, mediation, complaint procedures, and procedural safeguards are also parts of educational relationships.

Notice the Helpers Without Requiring the Child to Be One

Children may find support from teachers, aides, librarians, custodians, cafeteria staff, nurses, counselors, therapists, office staff, drivers, crossing guards, coaches, volunteers, and peers.

Help the child identify specific safe adults:

- Who can help if you are hurt or sick?
- Who can help if instructions are confusing?
- Who can help on the bus or playground?
- How do you reach the office or caregiver?
- What can you do if the first adult does not help?

Children may also enjoy contributing - returning materials, welcoming a classmate, sharing an idea, or helping with a group task. Helping should be voluntary, age-appropriate, and supervised. A child does not earn belonging by serving classmates or staff, and should not be assigned caregiving, translation, behavior management, or emotional labor that belongs to adults.

Offer Feedback Without Grading the Day

Specific feedback can make useful actions visible:

- “You told the teacher the directions were still unclear.”
- “You used your break card before the room became overwhelming.”
- “You returned the marker and checked what repair was needed.”
- “You showed me the message that worried you.”
- “You and your partner used both ideas in the model.”

Also notice support:

- “The visual schedule made that transition easier.”
- “Your teacher moved the group so your device had enough space.”
- “Eating before homework helped your attention return.”

This reminds everyone that growth is relational and environmental, not merely a child trait.

What Adults Learn Too

Adults often want to solve the school problem quickly. A more durable response begins by identifying what kind of problem it is.

Is the child asking to be heard, comforted, coached, protected, accommodated, taught, or left alone for a while? Is the school asking for collaboration, or expecting the child to carry a system problem?

Presence matters. So do accurate information, timely action, and accountability.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

After school, offer care before conversation. Later ask:

“Do you want to tell me anything, have help with anything, or just be done with school for now?”

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Does the child have enough recovery time before questions or homework?
- Am I treating reflection as an invitation rather than a daily report requirement?
- Did the difficulty involve a skill, support, barrier, harm, unclear expectation, or several at once?
- Is the child's perspective represented in family-school decisions?
- Do I know the next step if an ordinary conversation does not resolve a concern?

Pack the Invisible Backpack

Family Activity: Two Backpacks

Before the school week begins, invite the child to imagine, draw, list, sign, or assemble two backpacks.

The visible backpack

Include what the child actually needs:

- food and water;
- folders, books, and supplies;
- weather gear or extra clothes;
- medication or health supplies according to school procedures;
- mobility, communication, hearing, vision, or sensory equipment;
- a comfort item if permitted; and
- transportation or pickup information.

The adult remains responsible for checking high-stakes items. The activity should not shift medication, allergy, equipment, or transportation safety onto the child.

The invisible backpack

Choose a few things the child wants remembered:

- family love and trusted relationships;
- name, pronouns, language, culture, faith, and identity;
- curiosity and existing knowledge;
- humor, creativity, movement, and play;
- ways to communicate;
- ways to regulate and recover;
- permission to ask for help;
- boundaries and the right to report harm;
- cooperation and problem-solving;
- accommodations and adult responsibilities;
- a question or hope for the week; and
- reassurance that one day does not define them.

Ask:

- What do you want to carry?
- What do you want an adult to help carry?
- Is there something the classroom needs to provide?
- What can stay home this week?

At the end of the week, revisiting is optional. Avoid turning the backpack into a behavior chart or demanding proof that each “tool” was used.

Big Words, Clear Meanings

Self-regulation

Self-regulation involves noticing and managing attention, emotion, energy, behavior, and bodily needs in relation to a goal or situation.

It develops through maturation, practice, relationships, health, and environment. Children often rely on **co-regulation**: an adult helps provide safety, rhythm, language, comfort, structure, or practical support. Regulation can include movement, expression, rest, sensory tools, medication, food, communication, or changing the task - not only becoming quiet and still.

Cooperation

Cooperation means coordinating with other people toward a shared purpose. It may involve listening, contributing an idea, dividing roles, asking questions, negotiating, or helping.

Cooperation is not automatic obedience. A child can cooperate while disagreeing, requesting an accommodation, identifying an unsafe direction, choosing not to disclose private information, or asking an adult to reconsider a plan.

Storybook Connection

Chrysanthemum by Kevin Henkes follows a child whose classmates mock her name and whose confidence changes as adults and peers respond.

Use the story to discuss more than individual courage. Ask what harm the teasing caused, which adults knew or should have known, and what an adult could have done earlier. Consider why *Chrysanthemum* should not have to persuade classmates to respect her name, what meaningful repair requires from the children who participated, and how a classroom can learn and pronounce people's names respectfully from the beginning.

Do not frame peer harassment as a useful challenge that the targeted child needed for growth. Belonging depends on adults creating and enforcing a safe, respectful environment - not on a child's ability to endure ridicule.

What We Hope You Will Discover

Children do not begin school as empty notebooks. They arrive with knowledge and learning from family, play, community, language, tradition, observation, mistakes, questions, care, and survival.

School can build on those strengths. It can also introduce new knowledge, relationships, tools, and possibilities. The strongest transition respects continuity while making room for change.

The child should not have to leave essential parts of themselves at the classroom door to be considered ready.

The Connected Caregiver Principle

Consider this principle:

Every New Challenge Is an Opportunity to Grow Another Tool

Some manageable challenges can create practice. Others reveal that a child needs instruction, co-regulation, accommodation, protection, rest, healthcare, a different environment, or an adult to fulfill a responsibility.

Not every challenge is beneficial. Harm does not become acceptable because someone might grow from it. A child may learn from an experience and still deserve prevention, repair, and accountability.

A fuller principle is:

Every New Situation Can Help Us Discover What Strength, Support, Access, or Change Is Needed

Sometimes the child develops a strategy. Sometimes an adult teaches. Sometimes the family and school revise a plan. Sometimes a barrier must be removed. Sometimes the right response is recovery rather than growth.

Try This for Two Weeks

Choose one question before school and one after, but do not require both every day.

Before school:

- What support do you want today?
- Is there anything you want me or the teacher to know?
- What are you curious about?
- Would you rather have a quiet morning?

After school:

- What helped today?
- Was anything hard, unfair, or confusing?
- Do you need listening, action, information, food, rest, movement, or space?
- Is there anything an adult should change tomorrow?

Track patterns in the setting, not only in the child. If the same transition, class, peer interaction, sensory condition, instruction, or time of day repeatedly creates difficulty, investigate the pattern with the child and school.

ONE SMALL CHANGE

Add one card to the invisible backpack:

“Adults carry responsibilities too.”

Name one responsibility held by the family, one held by the school, and one choice that belongs to the child.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

- Does the invisible backpack hold identity, access, and support - not only expected behavior?
- Am I defining regulation in a way that allows movement, communication, co-regulation, and rest?
- Can cooperation include disagreement and self-advocacy?
- When a pattern repeats, do we keep coaching the child or also change the environment?
- Does the child know that school difficulty cannot take away their worth or belonging?

WHERE THESE IDEAS FIT

Creating Predictable Days That Support Emotional Safety offers tools for routines, transitions, and reconnection. *Expanding the Circle* explores supported peer participation, while *Public Spaces* develops rights, access, and responsibility in shared settings. *Growing Through Recovery* considers the supports children and caregivers may need after setbacks or disruption. Read together, this package provides broader context and helps caregivers choose where to explore a particular idea more deeply.

Key Takeaway

Children carry home into the classroom through language, identity, relationships, knowledge, questions, routines, and ways of learning. Those strengths matter. So do the conditions they enter.

A healthy transition asks families to prepare and share relevant knowledge, schools to provide instruction, access, safety, and respectful partnership, and adults to listen to the child whose experience connects both worlds.

The goal is not a child who can manage every school demand alone. It is a child who can keep learning within an environment where help is available, rights are respected, barriers are addressed, and belonging does not depend on performance.

Learn · Connect · Grow

LEARN

What is one idea from this publication that you want to remember?

CONNECT

What did this publication help you notice or reconsider about the person in your care, your relationship, or your circumstances?

GROW

What is one small, safe, manageable action you may try, practice, or pay attention to next?

Research Foundations and Further Reading

- 1 Office of Head Start. [Transition to Kindergarten](#) and [Educator Practices to Support Successful Transitions to Kindergarten](#). These resources frame transition through child-school, family-school, program-school, and community-school connections, including home-language communication, information sharing, and individualized support.

- 2 U.S. Department of Education. [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act](#) and [Section 504](#). Official starting points for U.S. special-education services, disability nondiscrimination, and procedural information.
- 3 Cipriano, C., Strambler, M. J., Naples, L. H., et al. (2023). [The state of evidence for social and emotional learning: A contemporary meta-analysis of universal school-based SEL interventions](#). *Child Development*, 94(5), 1181-1204. Across a large and diverse evidence base, programs were associated with improvements across several outcomes, while content, context, implementation, and results varied substantially.
- 4 Verhagen, C., Boekhorst, M. G. B. M., Kupper, N., van Bakel, H., & Duijndam, S. (2025). [Coregulation between parents and elementary school-aged children in response to challenge and in association with child outcomes: A systematic review](#). *Developmental Psychology*. The review links flexible, mutually responsive co-regulation with child outcomes while emphasizing inconsistent terminology and important contextual differences.
- 5 Jones, D. E., Greenberg, M., & Crowley, M. (2015). [Early social-emotional functioning and public health: The relationship between kindergarten social competence and future wellness](#). *American Journal of Public Health*, 105(11), 2283-2290. Teacher ratings in kindergarten predicted several later outcomes after statistical controls; this observational association does not show that early social competence alone caused those outcomes.
- 6 Denham, S. A. (2006). [Social-emotional competence as support for school readiness: What is it and how do we assess it?](#). *Early Education and Development*, 17(1), 57-89. An influential discussion of emotional expression, regulation, knowledge, social problem-solving, behavior, and the complexities of assessing readiness.

A FINAL REMINDER

Choose and adapt any idea, reflection prompt, activity, or suggested response based on the individual needs, abilities, circumstances, and safety of the person in your care. Seek guidance from an appropriately qualified professional when a situation calls for individualized support. If anyone may be in immediate danger, contact the appropriate local emergency or crisis service.

© 2026 Resources for Caregivers. This publication is provided free of charge for personal, family, classroom, and nonprofit educational use. You may download, print, and share complete, unmodified copies with the Resources for Caregivers name, copyright notice, safety information, and source links intact. Please do not sell, alter, remove attribution or safety information, repost as a separate download, translate, or incorporate this publication into a commercial product without written permission.