

Starting School: A Parent's Guide to Questions to Ask When Visiting Schools

Visiting schools is an important step in choosing the right place for your child. Parents in our survey shared what worked well—and what they wish they had known earlier. Use these questions to help you feel confident and informed.

1. Transition into Reception

Many parents highlighted that the *start of school and transition arrangements* were key challenges.

Ask:

- How is the transition into Reception organised?
- Do children start full-time straight away or is there a phased/staggered start?
- Can there be flexibility depending on my child's needs or previous childcare experience?
- How long does the transition period last?
- Are there home visits or settling-in sessions before starting?
- How do you support children who find separation or change difficult?

👉 Parents reported that **long or unclear phased starts caused confusion and stress**, especially for children used to full-time childcare and for working parents.

2. Daily Routine and Expectations

Understanding the school day helps prepare both you and your child.

Ask:

- What does a typical day in Reception look like?
- How are learning and play balanced?
- How long are children expected to sit and focus?
- What happens at lunchtime—how do you support children with eating?
- What are playtimes like, especially for children who may find noise overwhelming?

👉 Parents noted challenges with **tiredness, long days, noise, and sitting for extended periods.**

3. Supporting Children's Emotional Wellbeing

Starting school can be overwhelming.

Ask:

- How do you support children who are anxious or upset at drop-off?
- Are there quiet or calm spaces for children who feel overwhelmed?
- Do children have a key adult they can go to?
- How do you help children build friendships?

👉 Parents highlighted difficulties with:

- Leaving parents
 - Making friends
 - Busy environments
 - Lack of quiet spaces
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4. Communication with Parents

Clear, accessible communication was a major theme.

Ask:

- How will you communicate with parents (apps, email, meetings)?
- How often will I receive updates about my child's progress and wellbeing?
- Will I see photos or examples of what my child is doing?
- How are key messages shared (e.g. PE days, events)?
- Is communication streamlined or across multiple platforms?

Parents wanted:

- **More regular updates in the early weeks**
 - **Clearer, simpler communication systems**
 - **Earlier information about routines and expectations**
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5. Practical Information

Small practical details can make a big difference.

Ask:

- How do drop-off and pick-up work?
- Where do children go if they need help (e.g. toilets)?
- How are school meals organised?
- What wraparound care is available (breakfast club/after school)?
- What do I need to know about uniform, equipment, and apps?

Parents reported:

- Confusion about **toilets, pick-up arrangements, and systems like payments**
 - The importance of **clear early guidance**
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6. Building Independence

Reception places expectations on children's independence.

Ask:

- What level of independence do children need when they start?
- How do you support children with dressing, toileting, and self-care?
- How can we best prepare our child at home?

👉 Parents emphasised skills such as:

- Dressing independently
 - Managing toileting
 - Speaking to adults
 - Basic routines
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7. Support for Additional Needs (SEND)

Some parents felt this area needed clearer support.

Ask:

- How do you support children with additional needs?
- Can we meet to discuss my child's specific needs before they start?
- How do you work with previous settings or professionals?
- What support is available for children who struggle with behaviour or sensory needs?

👉 Parents valued:

- **1:1 conversations before starting**
 - **Clear support pathways**
 - **Understanding of children's individual needs**
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8. Links with Nurseries and Pre-Schools

A smooth transition from early years settings is vital.

Ask:

- How do you work with nurseries or pre-schools?
- Do you receive transition information about my child?
- How do you build on what children already know?

👉 Some parents felt better collaboration would:

- Improve continuity
 - Support learning readiness
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9. Opportunities to Get Involved Before Starting

Familiarity builds confidence.

Ask:

- Are there stay-and-play sessions or visits before September?
- Can my child visit the classroom and meet staff?
- Are there opportunities to meet other families?

👉 Parents suggested:

- More opportunities to **visit school before starting**
 - Earlier chances to **build familiarity and confidence**
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10. Final Key Question

One of the most important things parents said:

Ask clearly and openly:

- “If my child finds starting school difficult, what will you do?”
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Top Tips from Other Parents

Alongside your visit, parents recommend:

- Visit the school with your child—even just walking past
 - Talk positively about school
 - Build independence at home
 - Keep communication open with staff
 - Be prepared—it's an emotional transition for everyone
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Summary

Parents told us that the most important things to look for are:

- Clear and flexible transition arrangements
- Strong communication
- Emotional support for children
- Practical clarity for families

Choosing a school is not just about results—it's about how your child will **feel, settle, and thrive.**