

By Barbara Holden

Starting Kindergarten can be an emotional time for the entire family. Parents' eyes filled with tears, beaming at how big and exciting this Kindergarten milestone is -- meanwhile, that little Kindergartener of yours is a nervous wreck.

The Academy of Pediatrics says that anxiety about school is a normal reaction for young children. Since it's the parent's job to lessen the stress and taking away as much of "the unknown" as possible, the AAP offers up these tips for making the first day easier:

Remind your child that she is not the only student who is a bit uneasy about the first day of school. Teachers know that students are anxious and will make an extra effort to make sure everyone feels as comfortable as possible.

Point out the positive aspects of starting Kindergarten: It will be fun. She'll meet new friends and will return home after the first day with high spirits because she had a good time.

It's always best for moms and dads accompany their child on the first day of school, but for many parents, getting off of work for the first day is quite a challenge. If you know you can't be there, arrange for a family member, close friend or someone your child knows and trusts to share that first day with them.

Here's a very important item you won't find on the back-to-school checklist -- stay positive. Stay away from words like "scary" or "alone" and focus on how much fun school will be and how well your child will do.

And of course, the first day of school is a great time to let your little one help pick out her "big girl" clothes and shoes. If your child is required to wear a uniform, let her know how grown up it is to be wearing a school uniform.

When you are at home, be sure to maintain stability through morning and evening routines such as packing backpacks in the evening and going to bed at a regular time. Sleep routines mean making sure your child both gets to bed on time and is awakened early enough so she's not sleepy when she gets to school.

Equally as important is eating regular, nutrient-packed meals and snacks at home. Stock up on healthy foods like chicken, grains, low-fat milk, fruit and vegetables. (Steer clear of junk foods, sugary drinks and sodas.)

Once you've created your healthy meal, role play and practice getting your food from the cafeteria and choosing a seat at the table. When you are through, practice taking your empty containers to the correct place and discarding leftover scraps.

It's also recommended that you prep your Kindergartener with basic self-facts including full name, address and telephone number, and the name and place where you work.

There are many great books to help get children excited about the first few days of Kindergarten. Here are a few of my favorites:

Lookout Kindergarten, Here I Come! by Nancy Carlson. The last book pre-schoolers receive as a part of the Imagination Library program, this book follows a mouse named Henry as he prepares for his first day of Kindergarten.

The Night Before Kindergarten, by Natasha Wing. A new take on the classic Christmas poem: *'Twas the night before kindergarten, and as they prepared, kids were excited, and a little bit scared.*

The Berenstain Bears Go to School, by Stan and Jan Berenstain. Help ease the first day jitters with beloved Berenstain Bears!

As you send your little one off to school, be sure to set her up for success. Your positive attitude and a little advanced planning will make all the difference.

Barbara Holden is a director at the Urban Child Institute, a Greater Memphis organization dedicated to promoting early childhood development. The Commercial Appeal is a partner with the Urban Child Institute in this effort to help parents and other caregivers learn skills that nurture and educate the minds of infants and children. For more information, go to theurbanchildinstitute.org or dial 211 for the Public Library and Information Center.