

# welcome TO kindergarten!

Reading, writing, and arithmetic? Please! Here, 6 lessons *you* need to learn before sending your kiddo off to school



BY HOLLY PEVZNER PHOTOGRAPHS BY KINZIE + RIEHM

**There are certain things you can count on** when you have a soon-to-be kindergartner. You'll spend way too much time buying the perfect backpack and lunch box. You will take the obligatory (and treasured) "first day of school" photo and post it on Facebook. You'll get misty-eyed at drop-off. After that? Anything can happen. You'll be faced with those head-scratchers (which may or may not be lice) that seemingly come out of nowhere. Except this year, for you, they won't. We asked parents and teachers to share the most common challenges so you can take the next few weeks to prepare for them. (You're welcome!)

## POTTY WOES

For the first four weeks at pick-up, 5-year-old Olivia Haines of Westerville, OH, would rush past her mom, Jennifer, to get to the bathroom. "Olivia insisted that she didn't have to go during school, yet clearly something was up," Haines recalls.

Potty problems aren't unusual, even for kids like Olivia who peed and pooped in preschool just fine, says pediatric urologist Steve Hodges, M.D., author of *It's No Accident*. "There are fewer scheduled potty breaks in kindergarten.

No one is helping your child wipe. The bathrooms may not be very private. As a result, kids begin holding too much and have accidents," he says. Not to mention such other issues as constipation, urinary tract infections, and bed-wetting.

To help stave off problems, include a bathroom stop during your school tour so your child gets a firsthand peek. And do potty rehearsals. "Encourage your child to go to the bathroom solo with the door closed—first at home, then in public places—and to practice telling adults she has to go," says pediatrician Jack Maypole, M.D., an educational advisory board member for The Goddard School, an early-childhood education franchise. "This builds confidence and skills."

Haines got to the bottom of Olivia's bathroom fears when her daughter confided that it hurt to wipe with the school's TP. She sent toilet paper to school along with a note explaining the situation. "It worked!" Haines says.

## HALF-EATEN LUNCHES

"Cafeterias are super loud," says Tatum Omari, a kindergarten teacher in Berkeley, CA. "Kindergartners aren't used to that level of noise and excitement. It can overload a child's





senses and ability to focus on the task at hand.”

Time restraints don’t help, either. The average lunch period is a mere 31 minutes, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. While that may seem like plenty of time, it’s not for a kid struggling to open tricky items like milk cartons and navigating unfamiliar lunch lines. “Also, after working all morning, the kids finally have a chance to be silly with classmates. They forget to eat,” says Omari.

“My daughter could win the prize for the World’s Slowest Eater, but even I was surprised by how little she was able to get down,” says Mona Shand of Brighton, MI. To help her child eat more, Shand packed crackers, cheese, trail mix, and sliced fruit. “Having bite-size foods made it easier to nibble as she socialized,” Shand explains.

Besides packing snacks (go to page 92 for some great ones!), play “cafeteria” at home, complete with trays and milk cartons, to practice. If she struggles with an item, leave it out till she can open it on her own.

## NEVER-ENDING GERMS AND ILLNESS

“After just four days of kindergarten, Wyatt came down with his first cold. Then he was sick, to some degree, almost throughout the school year,” says Cristi Gambacourt of Brantford, Ontario, Canada.

Like more than a third

of 5-year-olds, Wyatt was especially vulnerable because he’d never been in group care. “These children enter kindergarten with less exposure to the latest cold or stomach bug than kids who were in preschool or daycare,” says Dr. Maypole.

Regardless of your child’s past schooling, kindergartners are notorious germ swappers. But you can prevent the next illness—or at least lessen its impact. First, teach your 5-year-old how to cough or sneeze into the inside of his elbow (call it the Vampire Cough—kids like that) or a tissue (send along mini-packs). Next, drill him in handwashing—and remind him to do it before eating and after using the bathroom or sneezing.

While soap and warm water are the best defense against germs, a squirt of hand sanitizer works, too, as long as it contains 60 percent alcohol. Pack a small bottle or wipes in your kid’s backpack or bring some with you to use ASAP at pick-up.

## FATIGUE-FUELED MELTDOWNS

“I wasn’t expecting my second child to be so worn out. But she’s shier than my eldest, so she found being ‘on’ all day really taxing,” says Shand. So taxing, in fact, that by Friday she’d fall asleep on the bus ride home.

Theresa Walsh, a kindergarten teacher in Bensalem, PA, isn’t surprised. Even if your child went to an all-day

## It’s hard, but giving kids and teachers space at drop-off helps them come together as a class.

pre-K, the lessons were likely short and play-based and there was naptime. In kindergarten, there’s less play, no napping, more directions to follow, and more work expected, including reading and math. “It’s draining for kids,” says Walsh.

Kindergarten exhaustion can manifest itself as meltdowns, which is what happened to Henry Brackenbury of Wellesley Hills, MA. “I’d be excited to see Henry at pick-up, but a couple of times he pushed one of his younger siblings or said something mean that spoiled the mood,” recalls his mom, Eileen.

“Try not to take it personally or assume your child hates school,” notes Lily Jones, a former kindergarten and first-grade teacher in El Cerrito, CA. “Most likely your child has held it together all day at school and just needs to collapse at home.” While you should for sure let your kid know that lashing out isn’t tolerated, be empathetic. Try something like, “I bet you are exhausted after a long day, but you can’t hurt people’s feelings because you’re tired. Let’s keep our cool till we can relax at home.”

Once home, give your child a healthy snack and some downtime to help her reset. Keep a regular bedtime, too. Five-year-olds need 11 to 13 hours of shut-eye a night, so if your kid isn’t snoozing enough, she may act out more.

Come January, this fatigue may be history. “The bumpy transition is usually over by winter break and most kids are better adjusted,” says Jones.

## THE FIDGETS

“Most kindergartners get antsy after sitting for about six minutes or so,” notes Walsh. Can’t relate? Try sitting in a calculus class and see how long it takes for you to lose focus.

The sharp decline in daily physical activity just adds to kids’ squirminess. Up to 40 percent of U.S. school districts have reduced or eliminated recess in order to free up more time for academics, one study found. But that’s shortsighted. “The cognitive and social development that happens on the playground helps kids connect and collaborate with others, make decisions, and solve problems. These are all skills needed in the classroom, too,” says Tim Lightman, Ed.D., the director of the lower school at the Shipley School in Bryn Mawr, PA.

In short, being able to run around would help kindergartners fidget less and focus more. While some teachers incorporate wiggle breaks in the



Meet Mrs. Boucher's class at Hawthorne Elementary, in Hawthorne, NY.

classroom, if your child's doesn't, teach him a few quiet moves. "Kids can twiddle their thumbs or do mini push-ups during rug time by putting their hands on the ground and lifting their body up," suggests Jones.

It also helps to start—and finish—your child's school day with some exercise, notes Dr. Lightman, citing studies that found that before-school physical activity helps reduce in-class

inattentiveness and moodiness and improve academic performance. "Bring your kid a little early to use the playground or do some jumping jacks in the kitchen before the bus arrives," he suggests. After school, build in some unstructured downtime that includes a lot of free play and running around.

### FEELING OUT OF THE LOOP

"When my child was in preschool, I felt like I knew just about everyone in the school. But in kindergarten,

I initially felt disconnected," says Kate White of Charlotte, NC. "The drop-offs were so hectic, yet if I lingered, I felt I was interrupting the routine."

Yes, it's tough on you, but kindergarten pros say it's important to give kids and teachers space at the beginning of the year. "I need time to get to know my students. I want them to come together as a community and explore who they are as learners and as members of the

classroom," explains Omari. Plus, teachers want their pupils to be able to unbutton their jackets and put away their lunch bags without a parent's help.

Timing and location also put a big chink in the quest for connection. You might have handed off your child directly to the teacher in pre-K or daycare, but chances are you'll now be saying good-byes at the bus stop or school entrance. That means you'll have to rely on updates from your tired and tight-lipped 5-year-old.

"Because Henry said he couldn't remember what happened during the day, I counted upon the daily emails his teacher sent," says Brackenbury. "They helped me focus my questions to him." She also stopped grilling her son right after school and instead waited to find out about his day until after storytime or during dinner, when he was more relaxed.

If your child's teacher doesn't send regular correspondence, post the classroom schedule in the kitchen and tailor your questions around specific activities ("What letter did you learn to write today?"). Or ask about your child's most and least favorite parts of the day, Omari suggests. "Those questions help a kid focus in on what she's grateful for and what's going well, and things she'd like to improve. Share *your* highs and lows, too. If you want kids to talk to you about their day, it's great to show them how to do it!" ■