

<https://studentwellbeinghub.edu.au/parents/starting-school/>

Different occasions at school

Every child varies in their readiness for school and adapts to the school environment differently. You may find that your child becomes more comfortable with familiar routines at school over time, but they might find changes to a 'typical' school day a bit more challenging.



A typical school day can involve lots of movement, and time both indoors and outdoors.

Schools are busy places and there will be times when there may be disruptions to the usual school routine. Change can be stressful for most children, so it is important to monitor your child's responses arising from these events. Some changes may be expected (such as upcoming school events, planned release of teacher from class for planning), while other disruptions may occur with little or no warning (for example, teacher is away sick).

Building a positive partnership with your child's school from the start is an important step. By sharing your knowledge with your child's teachers and support team, you can plan and prepare together to help make changes to routine more manageable for your child.

What occasions might your child experience at school?

Think about how your child might respond to these different occasions and what could help to set them up for success. You don't need to plan for all of these at once. Just be sure to ask the school to let you know in advance when different occasions are planned so that you can work together to prepare your child.

Common events that occur at school

- School assemblies
- Themed dress-up days (such as Book Week parade)
- Sports days and carnivals

Events that may occur away from the school

- Excursions (for example, zoo, museum, plays, concerts)
- Visiting places in the local area
- Sports events (for example, inter-school sports carnivals, swimming lessons)

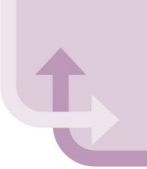
- Cultural and religious events, festivals and ceremonies
- Incursions (for example, visiting mobile farm, visiting performers)
- Special visitors to the school (such as parents' days, guest speakers)
- A new adult in the classroom (for example, relief teacher, education assistant, class helper)
- Events that involve food (such as class parties, ordering food from the canteen, cooking activities)
- Combined class timetables (for example, due to weather, special activities)
- Immunisations
- Practice fire drills
- Building works
- Specialist lessons (for example, music, physical education, art)
- Periods of remote learning
- School camps or trips

Note: Some of these occasions might be considered part of a normal school routine in some schools and may require moving to a different space in the school or involve specialist teachers or visitors.

How might your child react to a change in routine?

Each child reacts differently to changes in routine and this can also depend on how they are feeling that day. They may be feeling tired or overwhelmed by social or sensory demands. Some children find even small changes in routine can be unsettling, while for others it is larger changes that are challenging. Moving from one activity to another or leaving a task unfinished can also make some children feel unsettled. It is helpful for everyone to know what signs may indicate that your child is feeling stressed. Here are some common examples of signs of stress to look out for:

- Difficulties communicating what they are feeling
- Asking lots of questions
- Avoiding new activities
- Increased stimming
- Talking about their favourite interest more than usual
- Increased anxious behaviours, excessive worrying
- Complaining of being tired more often than usual
- Unexplained illness (for example, complaining that they are too sick to do something)
- Teachers speaking with you about observing behaviours that are out of character for the child while at school (such as covering ears, hiding, running away, shutting down, shouting, refusing to follow instructions or school rules)
- School refusal
- Unusual changes in behaviour
- Change in sleep patterns
- Refusal to move to classes or different spaces



A closer look: school assembly

In the following example, we take a closer look at the school assembly and how this different occasion might affect a child.

What happens at a school assembly?

A school assembly is usually a large meeting of students, teachers, other school staff, and often families and other members of the school community. It is a time for the school community to gather to share news and information, celebrate achievements, and discuss other matters relating to the school.

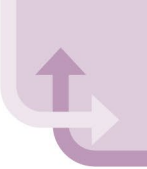


Assembly is usually a routine event at school but can feel uncomfortable for some students.

While some children might find this special event exciting and interesting, for others it can be quite overwhelming. The space can be loud, busy, smelly, bright, hot and crowded, or just seem a bit disorganised, as everyone comes in and finds a place to sit. The floor may feel gritty or cold and sitting on the floor may be uncomfortable. Someone might make an announcement over the microphone. The microphone might be too loud. Overhead lights might be buzzing. There might be noise outside. Traffic. Birds. Wind. Rain. Temperature.

Then there are the formalities that follow. There might be an Acknowledgement of Country. Then there might be a national anthem, school pledge or prayer or even a school band playing. Everyone might have to stand up then sit down again and there might be lots of shuffling and scraping sounds while everyone moves. Then there is more talking. Maybe some clapping or cheering. Announcements. Information. Awards. Guest speakers. More clapping. Sometimes everyone will be silent. And then more talking again.

The floor or chair might feel uncomfortable, and it might feel like a long time to have to sit still and be quiet. It could be difficult to focus on the assembly with so many other distractions. There might be a designated space to sit that is not close to the toilet. Other children and adults will seem like they know what to do. It might feel quite confusing and a bit too much to take in!



How to help your child participate in a school event

Families and schools can work together to make different occasions – such as a school assembly – inclusive and accommodating. Awareness and understanding of children’s individual needs will ensure they feel a sense of belonging at school during the many different activities that occur throughout the school year.

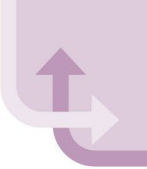
Talk with the teacher/support team about:

- details of the event, including where it will be held, how long it will be and expectations for your child at the event
- whether a family member or caregiver should attend with your child
- your child’s possible triggers (if known) and suitable calming activities, comfort or fidget toys that your child can access during the event
- how your child can ask for help or take a break, especially if they have difficulty communicating their needs
- whether your child can access a quiet area if they need it
- who your child can go to if they need adult support
- how to communicate with you if needed during the event
- visiting the location in advance, and if appropriate, with your child
- developing a plan together to support your child when they feel overwhelmed
- making a time to talk with your child’s teacher after the event to discuss what worked and what might need to change next time
- discuss options for your child to watch a live feed of the event from calm space at school.

Prepare your child

- Talk to your child about upcoming events and let them know if there is going to be a change in the usual routine. Reassure your child that most children feel a little nervous when they experience new situations at school.
- Use a daily planner at home, to explain what changes in routine are likely to happen. This could also be done visually on a calendar or in a social story.
- Have some ‘what if’ discussions with your child. For example, what they could do if something does not go to plan, or if they are put into situations with people who they don’t know?
- Practise some strategies your child might be able to use at school if they find a special occasion is overwhelming (for example, five-finger breathing, using a fidget toy).
- Roleplay together with toys or by acting to help your child understand what the new situation might be like.
- Get organised the night before to help your child feel calm on the morning before the new occasion. You could lay out the different clothes your child will wear or tell a bedtime story and make up a happy story about the event.
- Create a social story with the school to prepare your child for upcoming changes. Go to the **Help your child prepare for school** topic to find out more about social stories.

Which of these strategies might help prepare your child for different occasions at school? The [Different occasions at school checklist](#) [PDF] provides a list of useful suggestions. If there are other strategies that are helpful for your child, add them at the bottom of the list.



Fidget toys can be helpful for some children.



Equipment such as wobble seats can help children during periods where movement is restricted.

Create a plan

It can be helpful to organise and document your advice when talking with the teacher, and send the plan to the teacher in advance of the event. See, for example, this caregiver's completed [Planning for change: Families \(sample\)](#) [PDF] form for a school assembly.

Remember that different events may require different planning.

Use the [Planning for change: Families](#) [PDF] form to record your advice.