

Media Release
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Starting School Need Not Be Scary, Say Counsellors

This September, thousands of children across the country will take their first steps into the world of education and start primary school. For some children, this can be a scary experience but it need not be so daunting, says the **Irish Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (IACP)**.

The IACP has some practical advice for anxious parents who are hoping to make the transition as easy as possible for their children.

"The unknown is scary for us all, particularly children, but you've got to remember that schools are very knowledgeable about helping new arrivals to settle in," says Shane Kelly, Professional Services Manager with the IACP.

Additionally, there are several things that parents can do beforehand to help, including making the situation familiar for their child by visiting the school beforehand with them and by talking to teachers and the principal. This will also help your child to get used to their new surroundings and layout of school facilities, including toilets, lunch area and the playground.

"Parents should also talk as much as possible about starting school with their child and make fun events around the build up to the occasion. So make a big day of getting their new school uniform and their books, making it exciting and positive for them," Mr Kelly advised.

Meeting parents with other children who are starting can also be helpful. This gives the opportunity to set play dates for the children before they start school.

If your child has even one friendly face on their first day, it will be a big help to settle in. Schools may be able to help parents contact other parents who are in the same situation. Parents should also make sure a good eating and sleeping routine is established in the weeks before starting school, the IACP advises.

According to Mr Kelly, there are some things that parents can teach children ahead of their first day to help them to settle in and to feel comfortable. *"Encourage your child to ask questions, like 'what do I do if I need to go to the toilet?' or 'what do I do if I need a drink?' will help them ease any worries they may have about these things. It also shows the teacher will be helpful to them,"* Mr Kelly says.

Parents should advise their child to be friendly and helpful to all their classmates and suggest to them to ask others to play with them. Joining after school clubs may also help this.

Communication with your child is also essential says Mr Kelly. *"Talk to your child every day about their experiences, ask them what they did, what their favourite part of their day was and be excited about their stories."*

"However, don't dismiss their fears. You must address them and talk through them. The more they talk, the easier it will get for them and you will get a better sense of how they are coping. You should also keep an eye for changes in children's behaviour such as not sleeping, not eating, being irritable, quiet or angry as it

may indicate they need more help to cope with the new environment. If there is a specific issue, then have a quiet word with the teacher,” he added.

Finally, he has one last tip for the parents; “*Most children adjust quickly with no problems so try not to be too anxious yourself.*”

Key IACP tips for starting school

- Help familiarise your child with their new school before they start
- Set up play dates for your child with new classmates before school starts
- Make fun days of buying books and a new uniform
- Establish a good sleeping and eating routine in the weeks beforehand
- Encourage your child to ask their teacher plenty of questions
- Get to know the teachers in the school
- Encourage your child to help other classmates and ask them to play
- Talk to your child about every aspect of their day and be excited for their experiences
- Monitor changes in their behaviour
- Talk to your child about any fears they may have
- Speak to a teacher if issues arise

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About the IACP:

Established in 1981, the IACP identifies, develops and maintains professional standards of excellence in counselling and psychotherapy through education, training and accreditation. In promoting best practice and the professional development of its members, IACP holds at its core the protection of the public. Representing both the interests of clients and practitioners (over 3,500 nationwide), IACP provides a telephone referral helpline, an information service; and an online counsellor / psychotherapist / supervisor directory. IACP is a registered Charity (CHY 6615).

More information is available from the IACP’s website www.iACP.ie