Starting school should be an enjoyable and positive experience, giving children the opportunity to make new friends and experience new things.

In Australia, most children start school at the age of five years. As starting school represents a major change in children’s lives, they need to become familiar with the school environment. This means learning new rules, adjusting to a new routine and meeting new people. For many children it may also be their first time away from their parents or carers.

While starting school has the potential to be quite scary for children, there are many simple things you can do to make the transition easier. A few simple strategies can turn this potentially daunting experience into a time of joy, exploration and learning.

Age is almost universally used to decide when children are ready to start school, but researchers have also identified important skills that help children to be ‘school ready’.

For example, two of the most important skills for children to learn before starting school are the ability to make friends and communicate with teachers and peers.

HELPING YOUR CHILD TO BE READY FOR SCHOOL
Below are some strategies that can help prepare your child for school. The tips have been grouped into four categories, however, many of the activities help develop skills in more than one area.

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE
• Ensure your child has regular contact with other children before starting school. This helps them learn how to make friends.

• Introduce games:
  - that involve taking turns, such as playing on a swing or jumping on a trampoline
  - where they have to share or play cooperatively to attain a joint or an individual goal, such as sharing coloured pencils or building a sandcastle
  - of chance, where children can learn to lose gracefully, such as board games like snakes and ladders.

• Encourage your child to come up with a fair solution if conflict arises. Sit down with them and help them sort through the conflict.

• Make them aware of rules and the reasons for having them. For example, when holding your child’s hand to cross at pedestrian lights, talk about why you cross only when the ‘green person’ walks.

• Use positive labels to help build your child’s self-esteem such as ‘helpful’, ‘kind’, ‘responsible’, ‘grown up’ and avoid using negative ones. Refer to negative behaviour in terms of the event. For example saying “that wasn’t a very sensible thing to do,” labels the act rather than the personality.

• If your child sees you being kind and helpful to your family and friends, they will learn from your behaviour. If you are often angry and solve conflict by shouting or being aggressive, they are likely to imitate this way of responding.

• Recognise your child when they do something well. Behaviour is more likely to change with praise, rather than punishment.

During the first few weeks, in particular, it’s important that you ask questions about your child’s day to encourage them to talk about school at home.

Children who have been to preschool or child care often find the transition to school easier.
Language
• Talk to your child, ask them questions and listen to what they have to say.
• Help them learn to follow simple instructions. Ask them to do things that will help you as well, such as getting food out of the fridge. Make sure you thank them so that they feel appreciated.
• Read to your child. Children are better readers when they have been read to often.

Physical and motor development
• Make sure your child is well rested and has a balanced diet.
• Play games together, such as kicking a ball, obstacle courses, skipping and hopping games.
• Limit TV viewing.
• Involve your child in a sport they enjoy, for example a kinder gym, little athletics club, soccer or a ballet class.

General knowledge and skills
• Teach your child to dress themselves, tie shoe laces, use velcro or buckles.
• Make sure they can go to the toilet by themselves.
• Teach them to write their name.
• Visit museums, galleries, the beach, the park, go for walks and see friends.

BECOME INVOLVED IN THE SCHOOL
By becoming involved in the school, you can help to bridge the gap between home and school. You can do this by:
• going to any school meetings and talking to other parents

Children are more likely to cope successfully with the transition to school if they’ve had positive experiences away from their home and familiar adults.

SAFE SCHOOL TRAVEL
Some safety tips for when you drop off and pick up your child from school include:
• you should hold your child’s hand when you are walking on the footpath or in a carpark (until they are at least eight) and when crossing the road (until they are at least ten)
• always drop off and pick up your children on the school side of the road
• never call your child across the road
• use a pedestrian crossing where possible
• make sure children use the footpath-side door when getting into and out of the car.

For more information visit the RTA website at www.rta.nsw.gov.au