

BRITAIN'S NO.1 PARENTING AUTHOR

# The Contented Baby Goes to School



Help your  
child to  
make a  
**calm and  
confident  
start**

# Gina Ford



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## About the Book

**Help your child to make a calm and confident start at school with the UK's no.1 parenting author**

Your child's first days at nursery, preschool and school are exciting times, but they can be very daunting. In this practical book, Gina Ford calms any worries you may have to ensure you and your child feel fully prepared to take this all-important new step. Find out how to:

- Encourage your child's independence and confidence
- Adjust to new routines and environments
- Improve your child's mental, social and self-care skills
- Address specific concerns such as allergies, shyness, dyslexia and ADHD

*The Contented Baby Goes to School* is your essential guide to giving your child the very best start at school.

## About the Author

**Gina Ford** is Britain's bestselling childcare author and has written over twenty parenting books, including her bestselling *The Contented Little Baby Book*.

# The Contented Baby Goes to School

Help your child to make a  
**calm and confident start**

Gina Ford

**Vermilion**  
LONDON

*To all the parents who have supported me over the years.*

# Introduction

Your child's first day at nursery or school is a milestone for the entire family. This should be an exciting time for you and your child, but it can be a daunting experience, overshadowed by worries and concerns. It is only natural to feel some anxiety if this is the first time you will be leaving your child in someone else's care all day, but it can feel just as significant an event for parents who have been using a day nursery since their child was a baby - and your child may have fears of his own, too. There are quite likely to be some teething problems and it can take a while to get used to this major change in your lives, but feeling confident that you've made the right choices along the way, and knowing that you're as prepared as you can be, will make all the difference to both you and your child.

Your child may be entering a new phase of his life, but he still needs you now as much as - if not more than - before. My aim in this book is to ensure your 'Contented Baby' becomes a 'Contented Child' and that you as a parent stay contented, too! The same principles still apply: making sure your child's practical and emotional needs are met; being organised to make the day more enjoyable and stress-free; and, perhaps most importantly, giving your child a routine either side of the school day that will make him feel secure and cared for.

The right kind of nursery or pre-school education can be very beneficial to a child, helping to develop his social and educational skills. It offers a great start before more formal education begins, and enjoyable play-based learning can

help establish your child's thirst for knowledge. At this stage, basic numeracy and literacy skills can be established in a low-key way through play, which aims to set children up for a good start once they begin formal education.

Of course, the educational skills children will learn are essential, but it is also the social skills needed for later success that begin to be established during this nursery/pre-school phase. Your child will take the first steps towards a degree of independence, and will start to build friendships with peers. Early-years education aims to prepare a child to be able to learn and develop: laying the ground rules for good behaviour; teaching children how to share with one another; setting boundaries and helping them understand the importance of following instructions. The principles of this stage of education include recognising the individuality of each child, helping them to foster relationships based on respect, providing the right environment to support their learning, and helping them to develop at the rate that is right for them. What is perhaps most important is that this kind of early learning can be a positive and enjoyable experience for young children, where they will have fun as they learn the skills they will need for the formal education that will follow.

Although you may be well aware that nursery, pre-school or reception is going to be good for your child, it's only natural to feel some concerns about this big step in your lives. It can be particularly difficult if it is your first, or only, child and you have never left him in the care of others before, but it's not just first-time parents who find this an emotional time - having been through this stage with older children doesn't necessarily make it less challenging this time round. The children themselves may have an unsettled period due to the big change in their daily routine, and this can be hard to deal with as a parent. Children do sometimes cry when they are left at nursery or pre-school, and it may feel heartbreaking to leave your child if he

seems upset and doesn't want you to go. Understanding that this is usually a short-lived phase, and taking steps to ensure that you have done all you can to minimise any distress, will help you both to cope.

When you are leaving your toddler at nursery for the first time you will inevitably worry about how he will cope without one-to-one attention, and whether he has the necessary social skills to deal with such a large chunk of time away from you. Will your child remember to ask when he needs the potty? Will he feel lonely in a strange environment? How will he cope with all the other children? Will he remember to share without you there to remind him, and will he make friends? You may wonder how the nursery day will fit around your child's existing routines and whether any disruption to this will have an impact on how settled he is at home.

Starting in the reception class at 'big school' is a really exciting time, and marks the start of a whole new phase for both you and your child. Choosing the right school for your child and making sure that he is prepared can make the transition run more smoothly, but you may still have a host of practical concerns about how he will manage: Will he be frightened in the rough and tumble of the playground with so many older children? Will he be able to sit still and listen? Will he be able to do up his shoes or get changed into his PE kit without help? Will he remember to put on his coat at playtime? What happens if he doesn't like what he's given for lunch?

All parents experience some concerns when they leave their children for the first time, and this can be particularly difficult if you feel your child isn't quite ready for school. Summer-born children can be almost a year younger than some others in their class, and you may feel your child is not sufficiently mature to deal with the structure or length of the school day. Some children are more physically active than others, and if you have a lively child who needs to be

outside and running about, the prospect of sitting down for longer periods of time may be challenging. Remember that teachers are used to handling this and that during the early years there is a fairly gentle transition to formal learning – it is recognised that play-based education can be far more effective for younger children.

I hope that this book will help calm any fears you have by offering practical solutions to ensure that you and your child are prepared for starting nursery or school. By including advice on how to minimise problems such as separation anxiety and regressive behaviour, giving tips on preparing your child for new routines and a different environment, and providing vital information to help you to equip your child with the skills he will need, I hope that this book will address any issues that may arise.

Starting school or nursery is a great adventure for you and your child. It is the start of a new stage in your lives and will be a big change for your whole family. I hope this book will ensure that the transition is a time of excitement and enjoyment rather than of worry and anxiety, and that your babies, toddlers and young children will remain as contented as ever throughout their early days at nursery, pre-school or school.

## **A note about types of care**

- Day nurseries provide all-day childcare all year round from early age to school age. There are usually different rooms within the nursery, such as a baby room, toddler room and pre-school room. A child can join a day nursery at any time and most nurseries offer full-time or part-time hours.
- Private nursery schools are privately owned and usually take children from ages 2-5. Some follow the school term times, while others are open all year round.
- Nurseries attached to schools are known as maintained nurseries. They offer part-time, local education authority-funded care, following the school term, for children aged 3-5.

- Pre-schools take children from ages 3-5, offering part-time care, usually mornings or afternoons, and follow school term times and holidays.
- Reception class is the first year of primary school, for children aged 4-5.

# 1

## Before Starting Nursery or Pre-school

When you begin to think about a nursery or pre-school for your toddler or older child, you will find a wide range of options available. You may want to start by spending some time considering what would work for you and for your child before making a decision. You may prefer a day nursery, which has the advantage of longer opening hours and can be the easiest option for working parents, or you may want to consider a playgroup, a state-run nursery school or a private nursery as an alternative option, depending on your family's needs and what you think would best suit your child.

As a child grows older, you will not only be thinking in terms of the most suitable form of childcare, but will also be focusing on the type of pre-school education on offer. You will want to consider what might be best for your child as an individual and what might benefit him most. Spending time at nursery or pre-school is generally useful for any child and many mothers who have opted to stay at home will still choose to send their child to nursery or a playgroup before he starts school in order to reap the benefits of pre-school education. Nurseries or pre-schools may only offer the option of a few relatively short sessions a week, but the regular pattern of spending some time in a pre-school setting can still have a positive effect. If your

child has been with one main carer until this point, adjusting to being apart from that carer and taking the first steps towards independence can make the transition to school far easier. The social aspect of pre-school or nursery is equally important, as learning to get on with peers and just spending time in a group of other children can be a useful preparation for primary school, and children will be able to benefit from the range of different activities and learning opportunities on offer.

## **The Advantages of Nursery or Pre-school**

Parents often feel quite anxious about sending a young child to a nursery or pre-school if he has always been looked after by one person, whether a parent or a carer. It is important to keep in mind that as a parent you may feel more anxious about this than your child does, and you should be careful not to project your own concerns on to your child. It can take a child a while to adjust to being in a completely different environment and to spending time with a group of others of the same age, but most children settle fairly quickly and there are some very clear advantages for children in attending a nursery or pre-school, even just for a few sessions a week.

- **Activities:** Nurseries and pre-schools offer a range of play-based learning opportunities for your child that you are unlikely to be able to offer at home. When you are looking after your child at home, your own daily activities and household chores will have to feature in your child's daily routine. At nursery, the entire session is focused on the children and their needs. Nurseries and pre-schools can often offer a huge variety of different activities to stimulate the children, such as painting, drawing, singing, music, outdoor play, imaginative play and dance. There will be a much wider range of toys and equipment than you can provide at home, and children can enjoy exploring these new play opportunities in the company of others of their own age.

When children first begin to play it is usually a solitary activity, where they are lost in their own world. As they grow older, they may begin to engage in parallel play, where they are playing next to rather than with another child

but still keeping an eye on one another's activities. It is often around the time that they start nursery that they begin to play together more actively in co-operative play.

There is a wide range of different types of play that your child will be encouraged to enjoy at nursery, each of which will help develop different skills. At this age, children learn through play and a variety of play experiences will provide a rich and enjoyable learning experience. Creative play may involve using play-dough, paint or junk modelling. Physical activities will help develop gross and fine motor skills (actions that involve the movement of big and small muscles, respectively) and hand-eye co-ordination. Games with rules will help children to learn about taking turns and sharing. Language development is boosted by rhymes, songs, sounds and words, while imaginative play also helps to extend language and can develop your child's thinking and communication skills.

- **Curriculum:** There will be a planned curriculum to ensure that the activities on offer provide suitable learning opportunities for the children. Play-based learning allows the children to enjoy what they are doing without feeling any sense of pressure. It can help them learn some of the basic skills that they will need for the future in a relaxed environment and will help prepare them for the foundation stage at school. At this stage of early learning, the curriculum may include communication and language, physical development, literacy, numeracy, understanding of the world, expressive arts and design, and personal, social and emotional development. This may sound very formal, but for children at nursery and pre-school these are taught through play and in a low-key, enjoyable way.
- **Social skills:** It is often noted that young children seem to learn social skills more quickly in nursery, as they spend time playing and learning in a group. This can be one of the real benefits of early nursery education as it will help your child to understand the importance of sharing, taking turns and thinking about other people. Children of this age tend not to develop strong friendships, but they will start to play with one another and to have fun together. Spending time with other children will help your child appreciate how to get on with others of his own age more easily, and having well-developed social skills at a relatively early age can be a huge bonus.
- **Confidence:** Parents often find that their children grow in confidence once they start at nursery. Children develop a degree of independence at a nursery or pre-school as they have to learn to perform some simple tasks themselves, whereas at home it is all too easy to end up doing everything for them because it is quicker and easier. Even very shy children can begin to emerge from their shells if they are in a supportive environment. Of course, there may be an initial settling-in period when a child seems unhappy at being separated from a parent or carer and distressed when he is first left, but most get over this fairly quickly and mixing with a number of other children and adults during the day can help build a lasting confidence.

- **Language and communication skills:** At nursery or pre-school, staff will focus on children's communication skills, which helps to develop their language and the way they interact with others around them. Listening to stories regularly, joining in with group discussions on a specific topic, singing songs and rhymes and learning to pay attention when others are speaking are key elements of this early learning. Many children begin to learn about the letters of the alphabet at nursery or pre-school, helping them to see how written words are formed and the importance they have. They may start some work on sounds, talking about words which begin with specific letters of the alphabet. At nursery and pre-school children are not taught by sitting in rows at desks, but will absorb their learning through games and play. Children learn quickly at this age, especially if they are in a stimulating environment, and it is a time of rapid development for a child's language and communication skills.
- **Safety and security:** Nurseries and pre-schools offer a secure and safe environment. They are registered and inspected and have to meet certain requirements, such as having the right ratio of staff to children and ensuring that criminal records checks have been carried out on those working with the children. You can ask a nursery or pre-school about their inspection reports and ask to see these when you are making a decision about where to send your child. Parents sometimes feel more comfortable knowing that their child is being cared for by a group of people in a nursery setting than they would leaving them in the care of just one person.
- **Establishing a network:** It is not only children who start to make friends through nursery or pre-school. Parents will also have the opportunity to get to know other adults who have children of the same age. If you've been at home with your child, you have probably established some networks with other mothers already, but for working parents this can sometimes be quite difficult. Meeting other parents at nursery can give you the opportunity to make friends with people in your local area. This means your child can benefit from having playdates and you may find it beneficial to be able to share experiences with other parents, too.
- **Easing the transition to school:** One of the major benefits of attending nursery or pre-school is that it makes the transition to primary school much easier for children. Starting primary school is a major landmark in your child's life and the transition to school is likely to run more smoothly if your child is used to spending time with others of the same age in a pre-school setting. Having already gained a sense of independence and having started to develop social skills will give your child some clear advantages when it comes to starting school. What's more, you may find that some of the children your child meets at nursery or pre-school will be going on to the same primary school - knowing some familiar faces on the first day can also be a huge bonus.

## **What is the Best Age to Start?**

Parents often worry about when would be the best time for a child to start nursery or pre-school, and with so many different options available it is not surprising that this can be a bit of a dilemma. Of course, in reality the best time to start nursery will vary from one child to another and will also be dependent on your own needs. If you need full-time childcare for a baby and come to the conclusion that nursery would be the best option, then your child may start in a day nursery at just three or four months old, although most mothers wait until at least six months old, and continue to be in full-time nursery care until he starts school. If you are a full-time parent, you may feel your child would enjoy joining a playgroup or you may choose to wait until he is old enough to join a state nursery at three, or you may feel he isn't ready to be in a group setting until shortly before he would be old enough to start in the reception class at primary school.

Generally, children do benefit from spending time with others of the same age and from the independence that a nursery or playgroup can give them before they start primary school. We know that it can make the transition to school easier if children have had some experience of being away from parents or carers and of looking after themselves in a group of others, but there is no one right answer about exactly how much nursery care is best or at what age a child should start. Don't forget that each child is an individual, and what suits one may not be best for another. When you're making these decisions, you need to be guided by what you think would be best for your child and for your family.

State nursery education is usually only provided for children who have reached the age of three, and parents sometimes assume that this means they will be guaranteed