

Starting Nursery

A Comprehensive Guide for Parents

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Disclaimer: This resource is provided for informational and educational purposes only. As far as possible, the contents of this resource are reflective of professional research at the time of writing. This resource is not intended to be used to replace professional training or advice. This resource refers to activities which may require supervision and an adequate risk assessment. If you require advice, you should contact a suitably qualified professional.

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What Is Nursery?

The term 'nursery' is used to cover a wide range of childcare and educational settings that children attend before they start primary school. There are a few different types of nursery:

- Day nursery – these can be owned privately or by a local authority (local authority day nurseries often have long waiting lists but can be cheaper than private nurseries). Day nurseries usually offer childcare for children between six weeks and five years old. Opening hours are often around 7 a.m. and closing around 7 p.m. They are often a good option for parents who go out to work and who may need flexible hours. They are also usually open during school holidays.
- Nursery school or preschool – again, these can be private or run by a local authority. These nurseries are often part of a larger school building, be it a primary or infant school. Children can attend nursery school from three years old and usually begin reception in a primary school the September before they turn five years old. Some nursery schools also offer provision for two-year-olds but you will need to check in your local area for more information. These nurseries are not usually open during school holidays. There is often a more 'educational' feel to nursery school. Children might wear uniform and may engage in more topic-based learning, as decided on by the teachers.

Although a local authority or academy run nursery school may be attached to or part of a bigger school (from reception to year 6), your child will not be guaranteed a place in the reception class. You will need to apply for a place in reception when your local authority opens up applications. This can differ between councils but is usually from September until January. You must apply the year before your child will start school so they will be three or four years old when you are applying for their reception place!

In this information guide, we will be focusing on children who are starting nursery – whether day nursery or nursery school – at around three years old. You do not have to send your child to nursery when they are three years old but many parents choose to as it can be a great way to introduce your child to other children and adults and help them develop in a range of areas.



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What Do Children Learn In Nursery?

In nursery, there is a requirement for staff to follow the relevant guidance for early years education. In England, this is the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Statutory Framework. This outlines the areas of learning in which nursery and reception settings need to provide activities for the children in their care.

The areas of learning are separated into prime and specific areas.

Prime areas:

Communication
and Language

Physical
Development

Personal, Social
and Emotional
Development

Specific areas:

Literacy

Mathematics

Expressive Arts
and Design

Understanding
the World

There are early learning goals that detail the skills and knowledge children should have by the end of their time in EYFS (end of reception) but nurseries and schools will approach these in different ways. Your child may learn through topics specified by the nursery or through a more child-led approach. All nurseries are aiming to provide your child with the skills, knowledge and understanding they will need to be ready for reception and beyond.

You may hear your child talking about 'areas' in nursery – construction, writing, painting, sand, etc. The areas of learning are not taught or experienced in just one physical 'area' of nursery. For example, there will be chances for children to engage in literacy while playing outside, in the construction area, through technology and in the small world area, as well as the writing and reading areas where you may expect it.

Much of teaching and learning in nursery is done through play so your child may not be able to answer the question, 'What did you learn today?' very easily! They will be encouraged to join in with experiences, games and activities, both with adults and independently, in order to help them learn.

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Some Events You May Attend In Nursery:

Stay and Play

Open Mornings or Afternoons

Sports Day

Christmas Performance

Christmas Fair

Harvest Festival

Introduction to Reception Meeting (later in the year)

Parents Evenings

Coffee Morning

Fundraisers

Summer Fair

Teddy Bears' Picnic

Book Fairs

Family Learning Days

Some nurseries may wish to take your child on local walks and visits (parks, libraries and local shops are usually popular) and may ask for volunteers to go along, too. This can be a nice extra chance to spend time with your child and see them with their friends and teachers.

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Funding for Nursery: Mini-Guide

Looking into funding a nursery for your three or four year old is important as there are different types available. This mini-guide will give you a quick overview of childcare funding options for three and four year olds.

What: All three and four year olds are entitled to **15 hours funded childcare** per week for **38 weeks** (the length of all the school terms added together). This equals **570 hours** per year.

When: Your child is eligible at the start of the term after their third birthday.

Start of terms: January, April, September

End date: When your child starts reception, even if they are still four years old.

What: Some three and four year olds are entitled to **30 hours funded childcare** per week for **38 weeks** (the length of all the school terms added together). This equals **1140 hours** per year.

When: Your child is eligible at the start of the term after their third birthday.

Start of terms: January, April, September

End date: When your child starts reception, even if they are still four years old.

Your child is eligible if you tick all these boxes:

- Parents are working at least 16 hours per week.
- Parents earn at least the national minimum wage.
- Parents do not earn more than £100,000 per year.

Both lots of funding are usually used during term time, particularly if your child attends a school nursery but there can be options to stretch the hours over the year or between settings. Talk to your nursery for advice.

All eligible children can access 30 hours government-funded childcare from the term after they turn 9 months old until they start school. For more information on childcare funding for children under three, please head to our [Early Years Funding for Childcare: Guide for Parents](#).

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Things to Consider When Choosing a Nursery

What hours do I need or want childcare between?

Does the nursery I like offer these hours?

Can my child attend different settings (for example, nursery school in the morning and a day nursery in the afternoon)?

What does my child like doing?

What does my child need some support with?

In a perfect world, what would I like my child to have the chance to do at nursery? Forest school, lots of arts and crafts, lots of physical activity...

Are there nurseries around here that offer this?

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Things to Consider When Choosing a Nursery

Can I visit the nursery beforehand?

How does it feel?
Do I feel welcome?

Does the nursery have some of the things I would like for my child?

Do I think my child will feel comfortable here?

What is the introductory process like?

What sort of transition will be best for my child?

If my child is eligible for government funding, how many hours is this for?

Do I need to pay any extras for lunches and such?

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Things to Consider When Choosing a Nursery

Is the journey to nursery doable?

How will I get to nursery most of the time?

What are drop off and pick up times? Are these flexible? (Some nursery schools may offer a flexible window for start and finish times, around 15 minutes.)

Do I want my child to attend a nursery near home or near my work? (You may be a bit tied with this one depending on where you live and the nurseries waiting lists but it can be worth looking into if you are concerned about being able to get to your child in case of emergencies.)

Will there be other people taking and picking my child up? How does this work for them?

What do other people say about the nursery?

What does Ofsted say? A bit of a warning with this one - people's views are just that - their own, personal views. They are not necessarily a true reflection of the nursery. It can be useful to hear what others think but you may need to be prepared for conflicting advice!

This might seem like a lot but don't worry. Try to take it one step at a time. Often, you will get a gut feeling about a place - this can be the best thing to listen to!

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Be Prepared

Below are some things you can do both ahead of time and day-to-day that should help you feel more prepared for when your little one starts nursery.

Visits and Applying

Many nurseries are happy for you to have a look around, although it is best to check with a phone call to the place you are considering. Once you have found the one, you can apply for a place – ask at the school for a form or have a look on their website. If you want your child to start nursery at three years old, you should be applying when they are around two years old or even beforehand! Bear in mind that your child might not be able to start as soon as they are three; some nurseries can only offer places from the following September if they are oversubscribed. Check with your nursery.

Are you applying for 30 hours of government funding? Remember, this should be done so that your child can access this from the term after they turn three. Terms start in September, January and April. If you don't apply in time, your child might still get the 30 hours free childcare but not until the following term (for example, if you apply in April, your child won't be eligible for 30 hours until September, even if they turned three in March). Regardless, all three and four year olds are eligible for 15 hours free childcare in England.

Extras

Your child will likely be outside a lot at nursery – it is very good for them and most nurseries try to encourage being outdoors in all weathers. It can be good to find out if you need to provide wellies that live at nursery as many do suggest this. Having a good coat (possibly a couple of different types if you can) is essential, as are hats for different weathers.

What to Wear?

Does the nursery your child will attend have a uniform? Is it a strict uniform policy? You should be able to find out this information from the nursery.

Bear in mind that, whatever your child wears, they are likely to get messy at nursery! If wearing their own clothes, maybe try to designate some clothes as 'nursery clothes' - ones that you won't really mind having some pen stains on. If they need a uniform, do they need the school logo on everything? Can you maybe get one (because it is nice to see them all smart) and then get some plain jumpers in the school colours, too?

Uniforms sell out quickly! Have a look at our [Budgeting/Second Hand Advice](#) poster for more tips on getting uniform sorted. Not many nurseries do PE as a separate subject but you can double-check if you will need a PE kit, too.

Become a Label King or Queen

While we can't guarantee your child won't lose something whilst at nursery, or at the very least come home with someone else's clothing, we can say that labelling makes everyone's lives much easier in the long run. You can invest in stamps, stitch on labels, iron on labels or just grab a good old felt-tip pen – but do label everything, including bags and hats, with your child's name or initials. You (and the teachers) will be pleased you did!

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Be Prepared

Do a Practice Run

How will you get your child to nursery in the morning? How will you get there to pick them up? It can be helpful to have a practice run of your journey to nursery with your child in tow. Incorporate how long it takes them to get their shoes on or to get buckled into the car and such, then work backwards from the drop off time to work out when you need to leave – and maybe add an extra five minutes, just in case.

Get a Calendar

Get a calendar or diary or use your phone to keep track of everything! You may be invited to new starter meetings, visits with your child, transition days, stay and plays, family fun afternoons – you will be grateful for the help a calendar can give you.

Buy More Snacks

This might go against your usual shopping plan but your child will probably need a little post-nursery boost. Bananas, malt loaf, cheese and apples are all great options that will help keep hunger at bay and are good for your child, too. Avoid snacks which are high in sugar as these can cause people's moods to crash after the initial energy surge.

Find Your Groove

It may take time but you will get there! Trialling routines and habits that you think will be useful in the long-run can really pay off. Do you find it easier to get your child's clothes out on an evening, ready for the next day? Or are you an early bird and like to sort it in the morning? If your child has a reading or sharing book, can you read it at bedtime or will it be better to sneak five minutes in when they come home from nursery? See what works for your family and try to stick to it most of the time – no one is perfect and we don't need to be.



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Getting Your Child Ready for Nursery

Encourage some teamwork and problem-solving if you can.

Play some games that start to help your child recognise their name when it is written down – this will help them if they have pegs or trays at nursery.

Weave counting and singing throughout your day – this can have a great impact on your child's learning.

Some nurseries have videos or photos on their website of their setting or of children playing there – look at these together and chat about it.

Develop routines that encourage healthy habits (enough sleep for example) as well as give your child consistency.

As long as it's safe, don't redo things for them – your child is so happy they managed to put their jumper on by themselves, it doesn't really matter if it's the wrong way round right now!

Expect more, but not too much. Your child can probably tidy away more than they let on, but don't try to get them doing complex mathematics just yet.

Point out children in the nursery's uniform or who you can see going to nursery if you're out and about.

Keep things light and often – drip-feeding information and developing a sense that nursery is just a part of everyday life rather than something huge to be worried about.

Show your child where their nursery is – wave and say hello as you go past!

Wonder aloud what toys and games they might play with at nursery and offer some suggestions based on your own experience.

Help your child develop some more independence.

Give your child simple, safe tasks to do such as putting plates out for dinner.

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The First Day: What To Expect

Firstly, stay calm – being over-excited or over-anxious could rub off on your child and that might not make for an easy first day!

The night before (actually, for at least a few days before), make sure everyone is in bed at a reasonable hour and getting a good amount of sleep. Having a consistent bedtime routine is great for this. In the morning, have a time you would like everyone to be up by that will allow you all to do what needs to be done. Try not to rush! It is new for all of you and you might feel under pressure. That is normal. Try to breathe and take things steady.

Remember your practice run and set off to nursery in plenty of time. Your child might skip along happily or they might be reluctant. You can't predict this really so try to go with the flow and maybe play some games as you go along to keep your child occupied.

Once drop off time comes, give your child a big cuddle and smile. Even if they are clinging to you like a koala, keep that smile on and try to gently hand them over to a member of staff. Wave and say something light - 'Have fun, see you later!' Don't sneak away as this can cause children to panic but don't hang around either – your child is less likely to calm down if you are there. Your child's teacher or keyworker will have some great tricks up their sleeve for calming, comforting and distracting. And, once you are clear of the nursery doors, expect to have a bit of a cry yourself – it's perfectly fine if you do!

During the day, your child will probably play in their nursery room or outside – playing is their main job in nursery so this is a good start. They might have a snack and milk, probably a bit of singing and listening to a story. The staff will spend lots of time getting to know them, encouraging them to play and to join in with certain routines, such as tidying up. However, your child might not explain any of this when you excitedly ask them what they've been up to! Again, this is very common and do not worry if this happens. You might get an update during the day if your school uses messaging apps and the like, perhaps just to let you know that your child has settled, but not necessarily.

Be prepared with your post-nursery snacks when it's time to pick up. Over the first few days, you may notice your child's appetite increases and they are more tired and grumpy than usual. They are very busy processing lots of things at the moment so this is a common side effect. In addition, it might be helpful to expect some changes in temperament or behaviour – sometimes children can start to push the boundaries more at home after a change in routine. Stay consistent and calm and try to remember that they test you because you are their safe place.

Finally, you might feel like you have had a bit of an emotional rollercoaster of a day so maybe get yourself a treat to enjoy at the end of the day – you deserve it!



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Questions You Shouldn't be Scared to Ask (And ones you might not have thought of!)

How many staff will be working with my child?

How does the day look?

What do I do if my child needs medication?

What does my child need to bring?

(If you are paying for your nursery) What is included in the fees?

What phonics scheme do you use? (In nursery, children should be working on Phase 1 phonics but it is useful to know the scheme to see if you can mirror things at home, such as any mantras for letter formation when they come to that.)

Do you offer funded places?

Is there an option for flexible hours?

Do you work with any other childcare settings?

How do you record children's learning?

How do you share children's progress with parents?

How often do the children go outside?

Do you follow any other schemes, for maths or topic planning, for example?

Do children get homework?

What happens if my child has an accident (toileting or hurting themselves)?

Can my child bring a comfort toy?

Can children bring something to share with their friends on their birthday? (Not all nurseries allow this so it's best to check before you buy 30 bags of sweets!)

Do you use passwords or the like if someone else is picking my child up?

Who will be my child's keyworker?

What is the role of keyworkers in your setting?

By no means do you need to ask all of these questions, especially not in one go! But if you are curious about any of them, your nursery should be happy to help you learn more.