

S M O O T H B E G I N N I N G S

20 First Day Nursery Activities to Help Children Settle In

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Why the First Day Matters..



The first day in nursery is a **Powerful Transition**.

Sometimes this entails **big feelings, fresh routines,** and the potential for **new relationships**. Whether children are toddling into group care for the first time or returning after a break, your **welcome** sets the **tone for the year**. The **activities** you plan can **soothe nerves, inspire curiosity,** and create the **emotional safety** children need.

Why the First Day Matters

Early childhood is a time of rapid brain development, and transitions like the first day of nursery are deeply felt.

Research shows that secure attachments and predictable environments support emotional regulation, while sudden changes without support can lead to stress responses like crying, withdrawal, or even aggression.

When children are greeted with warmth and offered developmentally appropriate activities, they're more likely to feel safe, confident, and connected.





Preparing for a Smooth First Day..

Preparing for a Smooth First Day

- ✓ Avoid overstimulation. Use soft lighting, simple displays, and cozy corners.
- ✓ Even your hello and goodbye rituals offer predictability.
- ✓ A welcome call or short visit helps children recognize a familiar face.



Activities...

Activity 1 – Name Discovery Hunt

Why it works:

Recognizing their name is a milestone and seeing it in their new space helps children feel like they belong.

How to do it:

- ✓ Write children's names on coat pegs, cubbies, placemats, or blocks. Invite them to "find their name" as they explore.

Variation:

Use name cards with photo cues for toddlers or invite preschoolers to decorate their own and place them in sensory bins to locate.



Activity 2 – Soft Start Sensory Stations

Why it works:

Sensory play regulates the nervous system and provides a low-pressure invitation to explore. There's no right or wrong way to engage, making it ideal for settling in.

Ideas:

- ✓ Set up trays with dry pasta, kinetic sand, or water beads. Offer scoops, cups, and textures.

Tip:

Avoid sticky or messy materials at first. Start with familiar, manageable textures.



Activity 3 – Family Photo Comfort Wall

Why it works:

Familiar faces offer security and recreate the home setting. A visible reminder of home eases separation and fosters belonging.

How to do it:

- ✓ Ask parents to email or bring a photo. Mount them at eye level with the child's name, or let children choose where to display them.

Extension:

Add a quiet "photo corner" with family books or a cuddle toy.



Activity 4 – Feelings Faces Matching Game

Why it works:

Helps children name and understand emotions, key for navigating transition periods.

Activity:

- ✓ Use mirrors, photo cards, or illustrations. Invite children to make a face, then find the matching emotion card.

Classroom Tip:

Display the cards in the calm corner and revisit them as a group.

Educator Tip:

Model emotional language: "I feel a little nervous too when I start something new, it's okay to feel that way."



Activity 5 – Hello Circle with Names and Movements

Why it works:

Predictable songs and simple rituals help create a sense of belonging.

Song Idea:

✓ Use melodies like “Frère Jacques” and insert each child’s name.

Movement:

Invite a small wave, clap, or wiggle. It’s okay if some children choose to observe at first.



Activity 6 – Exploration Walk

Why it works:

Touring the space builds curiosity and ownership, especially for first-timers.

What to include:

- ✓ Toilets, cubbies, role-play area, book nook, garden. Let children lead.

Variation:

Hide a class mascot (teddy or puppet) in each area to discover.

Tip: Take children in small groups, too many transitions too quickly can trigger big feelings.



Activity 7 – ‘All About Me’ Floor Mats

Why it works:

This activity nurtures self-awareness and sparks meaningful connections. When educators show genuine interest in each child's preferences, it fosters trust and strengthens the caregiver-child bond. Use information gathered from family meetings or "All About Me" forms to personalize interactions and create a sense of belonging from day one.

Creative twist:

Set out collage materials and invite children to freely create their own mat. Narrate their process: "You chose the blue feather, it's so soft!"

Preschoolers:

- ✓ Offer simple prompts like "I like..." or "My favorite toy is..." alongside visual choices. Children can circle or place stickers on the images that reflect their interests.

Younger children:

- ✓ Share "All About Me" forms with families before their child's start date. These help you get to know each child's routine, comfort items, and personality.

"All About Me" Form



[Click here or the banner above to have access to our downloadable guides & printables!](#)

Activity 8 – Cuddle Basket

Why it works:

Transitional objects from home offer emotional comfort and continuity. These items can ease separation anxiety and help children regulate emotions.

How to do it:

- ✓ Ask families to send a soft, safe comfort item.
Let children use it throughout the day.

Gradual transitions:

Over time, gently encourage children to leave their item in their cubby for part of the day, gradually reducing dependency.

Bonus Tip: Keep a small basket of extra cuddle items on hand. If families prefer not to send a valuable object, suggest sharing a photo of it instead.

Conversation Tip: Use these objects for connection: “What’s your teddy’s name?”



Activity 9 – Role Play: Saying Goodbye

Why it works:

Dramatic play lets children process big emotions and build resilience. Acting out familiar routines helps them internalize safety and routine.

Setup:

- ✓ Create a drop-off-themed role-play corner with dolls, soft bags, blankets, and door props.

Enhance:

Include donated costume items or empty perfume bottles to offer sensory familiarity.

Language Tip: Narrate play gently: “Dolly was sad when Mama left, but she felt better after cuddling her blanket. And Mama came back, just like always.”



Activity 10 – Visual Schedule Wall

Why it works:

A visual schedule builds predictability and supports independence. It's especially helpful for visual learners, neurodivergent children, and those with emerging receptive language.

How to create it:

- ✓ Use real-life photos of your daily routine—breakfast, play, circle time, etc. Place them at child level.

Tip: Laminate photos and introduce the schedule in circle time. Refer to it consistently: "We had snack, now it's time to go outside."



Activity 11 – Mirror Play

Why it works:

Mirrors build self-awareness and emotional literacy. Seeing themselves reflected encourages identity and emotional exploration.

Setup:

- ✓ Use child-safe mirrors placed low on the wall. Provide scarves, textured fabrics, hats, or loose parts for exploration.

Extension:

Older children can recreate their reflections using art materials like buttons, pebbles, or feathers.

Language Tip: “You made your eyebrows scrunch, are you feeling unsure?”



Activity 12 – Sticker Choice Board

Why it works:

Nonverbal choice-making empowers children and boosts confidence. It gives insight into what interests them.

How to do it:

- ✓ Make a board with visual prompts for common activities (e.g., blocks, books, painting). Ask: "What would you like to play today?"

Extension:

If a child has a new idea, take a photo of that activity and add it to the board. This shows their input matters.



Activity 13 – Welcome Handprint Mural

Why it works:

Collaborative art fosters community and gives children visual belonging.

Activity:

- ✓ Invite children to dip their hands in paint or press them into ink pads to make handprints. Add their names underneath.

Adaptations:

Offer tracing or stamps if children don't want to get messy.

Bonus Tip: Display the mural in a central spot and revisit it often to remind children they're part of the group.



Activity 14 – Nursery Mascot Introduction

Why it works:

A mascot creates consistency, comfort, and playfulness. It becomes a familiar figure children can relate to.

How to introduce:

- ✓ Name the mascot and bring it out with a note, song, or during circle time. "This is Leo the Lion, he's a little shy, but excited to meet you."

Home Connection:

Let children take turns bringing the mascot home. Include a small journal where families can write or draw what they did together.



Activity 15 – Quiet Book Nook with Choice Cards

Why it works:

Books soothe, stimulate language, and offer a safe retreat. Choice cards support nonverbal communication.

How to set it up:

- ✓ Display 5–6 books face-out. Use matching visual cards children can point to.

Multilingual tip:

Include books in children's home languages to affirm identity.

Group activity:

Let the class vote on “Book of the Week” using tokens.



Activity 16 – Tactile Welcome Bracelets

Why it works:

Crafting bracelets creates a meaningful transitional object and encourages connection.

How to do it:

- ✓ Provide pipe cleaners and large beads. Children make and wear their bracelets as a comfort item.

Extension:

Make a matching bracelet for their caregiver too.

Language Tip: "This bracelet is special, you can wear it if you miss home."



Activity 17 – First-Day Photo Booth

Why it works:

Captures a milestone and helps families feel included.

Setup:

- ✓ Provide a small chalkboard, crown, or frame with “My First Day” and the date.

Follow-up:

Send home via app, email, or print. It builds trust and reassures families.



Activity 18 – Music and Movement Freeze Dance

Why it works:

Movement helps children release energy and feel joy. Music builds rhythm and group bonding.

How to do it:

- ✓ Use familiar songs or calming drum beats. Play and freeze, then start again.

Variation:

Try “stop and wiggle” or use scarves, ribbons, or themed playlists.



Activity 19 – Welcome Basket Scavenger Hunt

Why it works:

Encourages playful exploration and eases children into the space.

How to do it:

- ✓ Hide familiar items like color blocks or animals around the room. Give children baskets and a simple “find one of each” prompt.

Adaptation:

Hide multiples for toddlers and let them move at their own pace.



Activity 20 – Water Painting Outdoors

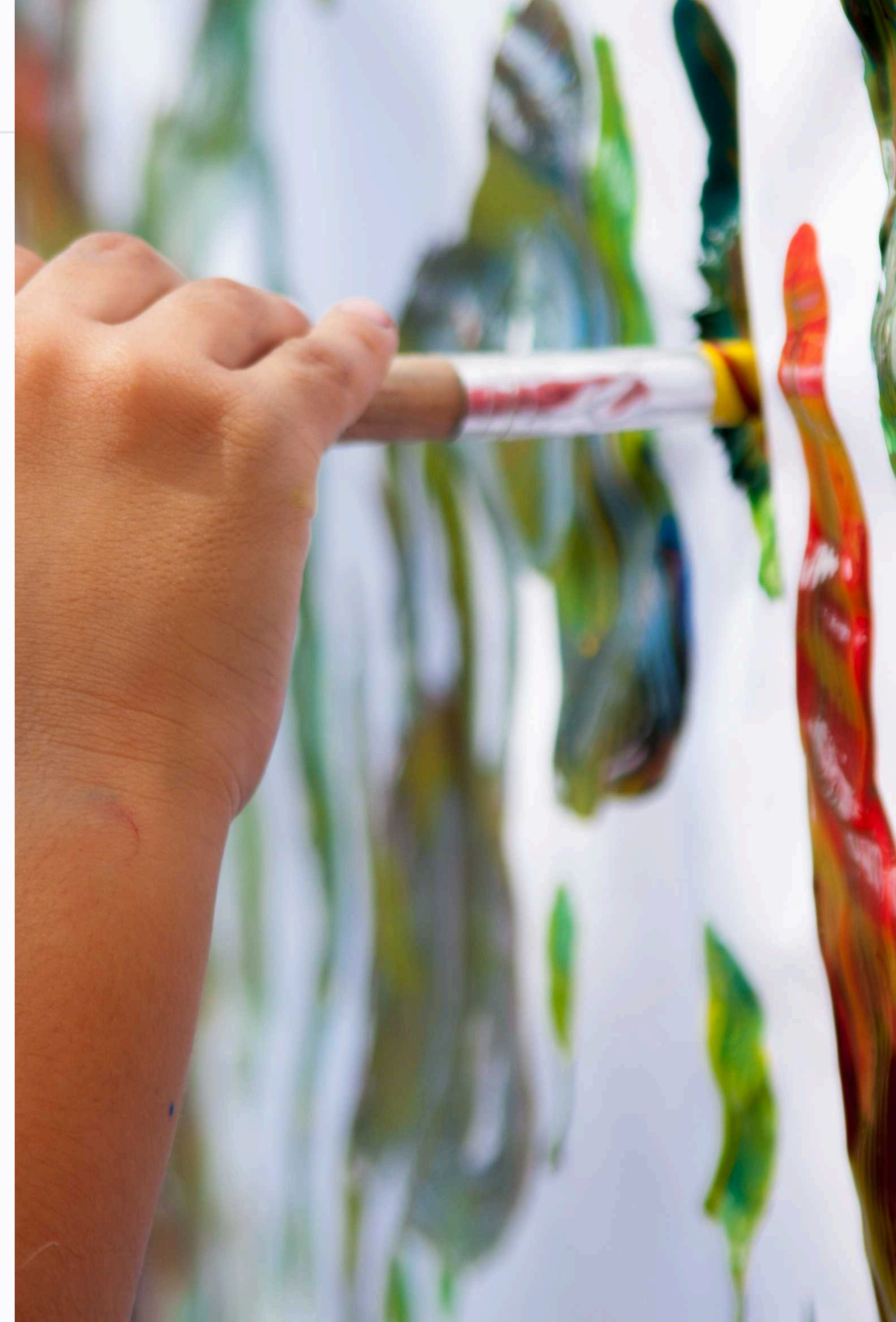
Why it works:

Mess-free art relieves pressure and promotes creativity.

Materials:

- ✓ Buckets or cups of water, large paintbrushes, and an outdoor surface like a wall or pavement.

Language Tip: Celebrate process: “Look at your big swooshes! Your brush is dancing.”



Supporting Families on First Day..

Supporting Families on the First Day

While you're welcoming children, don't forget the parents. First-day nerves affect adults too.

- ✓ Offer a clear drop-off routine, practice it beforehand
- ✓ Have tissues ready (for big and little tears)
- ✓ Send a quick photo, voice note, or message to reassure them
- ✓ Follow up with a small story or moment of joy from their child's day.





Final thoughts

Start Small, Build Trust..

You don't have to do it all at once.

- Choose a few warm, low-pressure activities.
- Watch, listen, and respond to what each child needs.
- Some may dive right in; others will need more time and space.

Most importantly:

Your tone, energy, and presence help children feel safe enough to explore, connect, and belong.

Here's to a joyful start and a beautiful year ahead!



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