

School starts

It's almost time for kids to go back to class; here are the ABCs of registering your kids this September

By Lisa Evans

It may be the most exciting time of the year for many Canadian parents who watch in delight as their children strap on their backpacks and return to school. While television commercials show parents giddily flying down the school supplies aisle singing "it's the most wonderful time of the year," many newcomer parents feel more anxious than joyous at the start of their child's first or second year at a Canadian school.

While being the new kid in school is almost always a difficult transition, for immigrant children, adapting to a new school culture, plus a new coun-

try and perhaps a new language can be overwhelming.

Canadian schools recognize these challenges and aim to overcome them by providing a number of supports including English as a second language (ESL) classes for those whose primary language is not English, and community support workers who aim to promote a greater level of integration between newcomer parents, students and schools.

Frank Ricci, principal at Briar Hill Junior Public School in Toronto, advocates parental engagement as key to newcomer children's success. He recommends parents begin their rela-



tionship with the school starting at registration.

Ricci says the more information a parent can share with the school about their child, the more equipped the school can be to make their integration into the new academic environment as seamless as possible. "Sharing report cards from the home country, anecdotal documenta-

tion and letting the school know who the child is as a person prepares the school a lot better in terms of how to deal with the child," says Ricci.

Diane Brown is the vice-principal of Kane Middle School in Toronto and has spent most of her teaching career helping immigrant children integrate into the Canadian school system.

She says that while non-English speaking children are challenged by understanding the nuances of the language, all newcomer children experience difficulties adapting to new school structures and social codes.

She discusses two Cuban brothers who worked with who engaged in play fighting at school, something accepted in their home country, but viewed as abuse in Canadian classrooms.

"The one boy kept asking 'Why can't I kick my brother?' They're accustomed to doing that. He says 'I kick him and he kicks me back,' and the brother is not particularly concerned, but when the teacher sees them doing that, then it becomes a huge issue," says Brown.

The example highlights the challenge children face understanding the difference in acceptable behaviour between their

former schools in their home country and their new school here in Canada.

Parents can play a vital role in helping their children to understand the behaviour they are and aren't allowed to exhibit by asking these questions ahead of time and opening the lines of communication between themselves and the school.

Brown understands firsthand the challenges newcomer parents

face trying to navigate the Canadian school system. When she immigrated to Canada with her 12-year-old daughter, she struggled to understand the new school structure and social norms. In her native country of Dominica, the relationship between parents and teachers was close and informal. Children addressed the teacher by their first name with the suffix "Auntie." Teachers were given complete trust.

School facts

September is back-to-school time for kids entering elementary and teenagers entering high school or university. But going to school in Canada may be a bit different than back in your country of origin. Here are a few school facts you need to know.

The basics: Elementary schools are often broken up into primary grades (nursery to Grade 3) and intermediate grades (Grade 4 of 5). Some districts also have middle schools for grades ranging from 6 to 8. High schools may be organized in semesters, where students study four courses from September to January and four courses from February to June. Report cards are given in the middle and at the end of each semester. Final exams are at the end of each semester.

Attendance: Don't be late! Children are expected to be at the school on time each morning.

Absences: Parents are expected to call the school when students will be absent due to illness, etc. If a child does not arrive by 9 a.m. and a parent has not contacted the school, the school secretary will contact the parent.

Supplies: There are no fees to attend public school, but you will be asked to buy your children school supplies, including a gym strip, which can all cost 50¢ or more. Your school will provide you with a list of required supplies.

Food: In most cases, you'll be required to send a snack and lunch with your child. Schools are encouraging parents to think healthy these days, so pack a lunch with lots of fruit, vegetables, water and healthy choices that don't need to be reheated, like sandwiches or soup in a thermos. Some schools are "nut-free" zones because of the high rates of allergies to nuts like almonds. At the high school level, schools may have cafeterias where students can buy their lunch if you want.

Meet the teacher night: Most schools provide an opportunity early in the year for parents to meet their child's teacher and learn about school programs. The program will discuss the subjects the students will be learning, special class projects or events, homework expectations, rules of behaviour for students and how parents can help their children at home.

Parent-teacher interviews: Usually held twice a year, in late fall and early spring, parent-teacher interviews are an opportunity for parents and teachers to open the lines of communication about how they can help the child succeed in school. The interviews are usually 10 to 15



minutes long. Parents and teachers talk about the student's work and behaviour. Contact the school in advance if you require an interpreter.

Newcomer help: The Settlement Workers in Schools program, available across the country, provides settlement workers on-site at the school to provide parents with information that will help them integrate quickly into the school and community and to provide emotional support to new students.

Teaching: Methods of teaching may differ from what you're used to. While many school systems around the world place a huge emphasis on memorizing information, Canada's school system values communicative and analytical skills. At the high school level, students will have some choice in course selection. In addition to mandatory classes like English, they may select from a variety of electives that could be anything from accounting to art. One of the biggest concerns is paving the road to university. Make sure your teens are taking the courses they need for university/college admission.

Bullying: Don't be surprised if your child faces some teasing or bullying at school, whether it's racially motivated or not. Bullying is a real cause for concern in schools across the country.

Getting involved: Schools encourage parents to volunteer at school functions such as field trips, hot lunch days and more. Talk to your child's teachers and principal about ways you can participate in your child's school. Every school also has an advisory council of parents. The council discusses school policies and plans with the principal, helps fundraise and more. All parents may attend council meetings and are encouraged to participate in discussions.

"In the Caribbean, you send your child to school and the teacher takes care of everything," says Brown. Her daughter's experience in the Canadian education system taught Brown that she needed to be more involved with the school, so as not to be perceived by her daughter's teachers and peers as an absentee parent, something frowned upon in Canada.

As a teacher, Brown has seen newcomer parents make the same mistakes she did years ago and urges them to become more informed. "There's a lot of stuff that you need to know and you need to start asking questions," she says.

Ethelinda Cuenca, community support worker at the Toronto District School Board and former teacher in her native Guatemala, aims to answer these questions and echoes Ricci and Brown's messages that parental engagement is the most important component to children's success.

She recommends parents familiarize themselves with the support systems that are in

place. Many non-English speaking parents struggle to become involved in their child's school, afraid that the communication barriers are too difficult to overcome. "[Parents need to] be aware that the communication piece can be solved by asking for a translator. We have that support. We just need to request it," says Cuenca.

Ricci reiterates this message, saying "no principal wants to push away parents. If anything, we really want them in. So if it means I have to get someone in to translate so I can reach out to them, absolutely," he says.

Cuenca recommends parents familiarize themselves with the structure of the Canadian school system. Most provincial governments offer information or publications on the school system. In Ontario, *The Newcomer's Guide to Education in Canada*, which is available in 18 languages, guide outlines the subjects kids learn, how parents can become involved, what is needed to register, and the processes and rules surrounding attendance and sick days.

While community centres and immigrant settlement agencies offer a number of supports for newcomer children, Cuenca reasons that even though it is important for parents to make use of such programs, it doesn't mean their obligations to keep connected with the school disappear. "There are programs out there, but actually who really

knows your kid is the school," she says.

She maintains that ongoing family involvement in the school is essential to a child's success. "It's the solution to behavioural issues. It's also a solution for parents to feel integrated because now they're in the school where they have a social unit with other parents," says Cuenca. ♣

REGISTER FOR SCHOOL

To register your child for school, contact your local school district or the school in your neighbourhood as soon as you settle. You will need to provide the following information:

- proof of age (birth certificate or passport)
- proof of address (lease bill or apartment lease with your name and address)
- proof of guardianship if the child is not living with their parent
- proof of immigration status (Canadian passport, record of landing, confirmation of permanent residence or permanent residence card)
- immunization record



WSC
WORKING SKILLS CENTRE

Are you...

- A professional immigrant actively looking for a job in your field?
- Having unsuccessful interviews and a growing period of unemployment?
- In need of relevant Canadian work experience while gaining knowledge of industry trends and terminology?
- Requiring a better understanding of Canadian workplace communication and culture?

Practice positions are available in:

- Supply Chain
- Information Technology
- Marketing and Sales
- SAP Projects
- Business Intelligence Projects
- Accounting and Finance
- Human Resources
- Office Administration

Apply now and call us at
647-258-0388

Or email us your resume at
cs@wscworldwide.com

55 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 208, Toronto, ON M4P 1G8

EMPLOYMENT ONTARIO

World Skills Centre and Institute of Training, Skills Centre (WSC) is a non-profit organization that provides training and employment services to immigrants and refugees.



CES
ACADEMY OF COMPUTER & EMPLOYMENT SKILLS

Education and Training that Works for You!

Academy of Computer & Employment Skills
an initiative of Working Skills Centre

Who are we?
A unique, learner focused post-secondary program devoted to educating and providing immigrants with hands-on experience Canadian employers expect.

What do we do?
Combine technical skills development with the supportive environment found at a multi-service settlement agency that started in 1978.

What is available?
Career training in Medical Reception, Office Administration, Desktop Publishing, Web Design, Accounting, Customer Service and much more.

Free Information Sessions Thursdays at 9:00 a.m.
Call to Register: 416-733-7770
www.workingskillscentre.com

Convenient location (Yonge & Eglinton)
55 Eglinton Ave. East, Suite 703, Toronto, ON M4P 1G8