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ABSTRACT

Most children (and their parents) look forward to the start of school. However, many parents (and children) also worry about the physical and social environment and the way in which it might impact on their child's emotional well-being. Curtis (1986) identified four areas that could lead to anxiety in children, thus hindering their learning. These are the physical environment; classroom organisation; curriculum content; and differing ideologies. Other areas of concern include the ratio of adults to children (Dowling, 1988; Cleave and Brown, 1991); developing friendships, bullying and school security (Fabian, 1998). Children need to make sense of school with its institutional ways, bewildering amount of unfamiliar words and strange culture, while also making their own mark and participating in the creation of the school culture.

This paper explores one way of empowering children with coping skills for this transition, giving them an understanding of the nature of school and helping them develop some social and emotional resilience in dealing with new situations. This (on-going) research suggests that families can help children before they start school to develop strategies for approaching new situations. It outlines the way in which cartoons, focusing on common school scenarios, can be used to raise questions with children about to start school. These form the focus of a discussion between child and parent(s) and/or family members. It is suggested that by discussing possible solutions children are enabled to cope with unfamiliar situations as they have rehearsed strategies beforehand in familiar surroundings and without anxiety.