

Our journey through the secular year

Back to school – supporting children and young people at a time of transition

For many families with school-aged children, the real 'new year' feeling comes in early September. The new academic year is not only a marker of growth and maturity, but a journey into the unknown – new teachers, new expectations, new subjects to learn – and that's just for children moving up a class in the same school. The big changes – primary to secondary school, and school to college, university or work – are major life events. All these transitions can have an effect on a child or young person, and therefore on their family. Anxiety isn't uncommon, and, depending on the school environment, a return to school can trigger other mental health issues. Parents also can find this a challenging time. The church, as one of the few places in a child's life where they aren't assessed, has a key role to play in supporting its congregations and communities during this time of transition.



Church

Here are some ideas to mark the new school year in a worship context and to encourage the wider participation of young people in church life.

Blessing the bags

Pray over the children's school bags

On the first Sunday of September, ask children to bring their school bags to church. Invite them to come forward, even if they have forgotten their bag, and say the following prayer:

Creator God, we thank you for the gift of learning, and for bodies and minds to learn with and make things, to make mistakes and try again. Thank you for teachers, teaching assistants, and all who work in our schools. We bring to you all the work these bags will carry. We bring you the days when they will feel light and easy, and the days when they will feel heavy and hard. Bless these bags, the children who carry them, and the knowledge they will contain. For you are the source of all knowledge and wisdom, and in your name we pray.

Amen.

Tag your bag

Involve the whole congregation in praying for the children as they start a new school year

Hand out card luggage labels (available from high street stationers) and encourage members of the congregation to write on them two or three things that they hope for the children this school year. They can include ways of coping with frustration and difficult friendships, as well as the joys of learning. Gather them up and distribute them to the children at the end. They can tie them on their school bags, the congregation's love and prayers going with them to and from school. (The labels won't last the whole year, so explain that when they have worn out, the prayer has entered the air around them.)

'You call me teacher...'

Thank teachers and non-teaching staff, past and present, and commission them for the year ahead

Place a large image as the focus in your worship space (or near the entrance, so that people can do this as they come in) that illustrates an aspect of one of the following stories:

- Twelve-year-old Jesus and the teachers in the Temple (Luke 2.41-51).
- Jesus delivering the 'Sermon on the Mount' (Matthew 5-7).
- Jesus and the children (Matthew 19.13-15; Luke 18.15-17).

Provide pens and sticky notes and invite people to write down the names of teachers who have made a difference in their life – at school, at church, or in clubs – and stick these onto the picture. Bring it up to the front and invite anyone in the congregation who is a Junior Church leader, or whose day-to-day vocation is in education, e.g. teachers, lecturers, caretakers, lunchtime assistants, lollipop ladies/men, to come up and place their hands on the image. Say the following prayer:

Lord, you were welcomed into your Father's house by the teachers of the Jewish faith, who were amazed at your questions; and when you grew up, you taught all who came to you. We thank you for these teachers and all those involved in looking after children, who live out your ministry of wisdom. Bless them this year with patience, encouragement and inspiration, give them the Spirit of love for all who come to them, and grant them time for rest and reflection. **Amen.**

You could donate that day's collection to an educational charity, and pray for children around the world to have safe, free and equal access to education.

Growing up

Encourage young people to participate in church life

As children start secondary school, it is important to acknowledge their adolescence and impending adulthood, and to encourage them to take responsibility for their spiritual lives. If you have a youth group, invite them to join in, and offer young people plenty of opportunities to get more involved, e.g. baking cakes for coffee time, serving refreshments, playing in the worship band, singing in the choir, planning all-age services, serving at Communion, reading and writing prayers.



Community outreach

Here are some ways to connect with your local community at times of bigger transition.

Starting primary school

Support parents as their children start school

School will probably be the first place where 'babies' have to fend for themselves, navigate challenging social situations and academic pressure and gain independence. Parents have to acknowledge that their offspring is leaving the baby and toddler stage and becoming a child. It can be traumatic for everyone involved.

- Why not transform your church hall into a café for parents to go after dropping their children off at nursery/school for the first time? They can have a cry, talk to one another, and make friends – with coffee, cake, and tissues available! It will introduce them to your church as a safe and welcoming place and could become a regular event.
- If you have a baby and toddler group, be aware of when children are moving up to big school, and hold a 'graduation ceremony' with prayers for them as they go.
- If you have a ministry in schools, ask the teachers what you can do to support their transition programmes for the newest and youngest children, whether through practical support, collective worship, or prayer.

Transition to secondary school

Support young people at a key moment in their spiritual lives

The first few years of secondary school often lead to a significant drop-off in church attendance. Young people are trying on new identities, they can be overwhelmed by academic and extra-curricular commitments, and they are more concerned about their peers than about their parents. This often adds up to the church losing touch with them. It is difficult to provide simple, one-size-fits-all solutions, but there are a few things you could do.

- Pray for local children moving from primary to secondary school. Churches can provide practical support through after-school homework clubs and mentoring projects where suitable members of the congregation are available to offer teenagers friendship and spiritual guidance.

- If you have a relationship with a local secondary school, ask if you can create a 'Prayer Space' (see www.prayerspacesinschools.com for ideas) for Year 7 children at some point in the autumn term. A 'soul space' might be more acceptable to some schools as it is appropriate for young people of all faiths and none. It can give them a place to contemplate, think, connect with God as they understand him, and bring their worries, hopes and dreams.
- Hold an open social event for local young people, e.g. a games evening or a pizza and film night as a taster session for your youth group, or to launch a new group.

Leaving school

Recognise the transition to work, college or university

If you have young people starting work, college or going to university, public recognition and prayer for this transition will be much appreciated – especially by parents! Knowing that your whole inter-generational church family is praying for you can mean a great deal to an 18-year-old taking that first big step into adult life.

- For churches with large youth groups, where you have a significant number of young people going to college or university each year, the start of September can be 'care package' time. Encourage your congregation to bring in Pot Noodles™, chocolates, stationery and other necessities of student life, bless them in the service and have good luck cards available for everyone to sign. Then ask some volunteers to box them up and send them to your young people to greet them as they arrive at college or university.
- If appropriate, send an email to the relevant university chaplain, encouraging them to look out for a particular student and get in touch. If the university has a branch of the Student Christian Movement or a Christian Union, give the details to your young people before they leave.

And finally...

Even if your church does not have very many children – or none at all – you will still have people affected by the start of the new school year. Your pews may be full of grandparents who have spent long periods of time with beloved grandchildren over the summer, and now won't see them until Christmas – praying for children who are starting school might mean the world to them this September. That 40-something couple with no children of their own might have six nieces and nephews, three godchildren and a best friend who's sending their youngest off to Reception, and might appreciate the chance to pray for all of them. That lovely couple in their 60s might have a son starting his first year as a primary school teacher, and want to hold him in prayer at the start of his career. Every child who starts school this September has a family and a community around them, as do all teachers and school staff. If you do nothing else to mark this transitional time of year, pray for them. You never know the difference it might make.

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