

# 4-5 Years: Getting Ready for School When Your Child Isn't Talking Yet

*A practical guide from Hulya Mehmet, Speech & Language Therapist*

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## Let Me Start With the Truth

I've sat with hundreds of parents in the spring before school starts. The worry in their eyes is always the same: "How will my child cope when they can't even ask for the toilet?"

I understand. The standard school readiness checklist feels like a list of everything your child can't do. But after 22 years of supporting families through this transition, I can tell you: your child can thrive at school, even without words.

Let me show you how.

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## Your Child at 4-5 Years

### Where They Might Be With Communication:

- Not speaking yet, but understanding most of what you say
- Using a few single words, but not consistently
- Repeating phrases from TV or things you've said
- Starting to use AAC (pictures or device)
- Communicating through pointing, pulling, or showing
- Perhaps beginning to put two words together

### What I See in My Clinic:

At this age, children know they're different. They see other children chatting away and wonder why words won't come. They might:

- Feel frustrated when teachers don't understand their pointing
  - Become overwhelmed in noisy classrooms
  - Want desperately to join in but not know how
  - Have big feelings they can't express
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# What School Readiness Really Means

Forget what the parenting magazines say. Here's what actually matters:

## The Standard List (That Doesn't Apply to Us):

- Speaking in sentences ✗
- Writing their name ✗
- Counting to 20 ✗
- Circle time participation ✗
- Playing with friends ✗

## What Your Child Actually Needs:

- A way to communicate "help" and "toilet" (any way works)
- Understanding of "stop" for safety
- Ability to separate from you (even with tears)
- Some independence with snacks or coat
- Curiosity about learning (however they show it)
- One calming strategy that works

That's it. That's the real list.

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# Finding the Right School

## Questions I Tell Parents to Ask:

When you visit schools, take this list with you. I've refined these questions over years of helping families navigate this process.

### **About Their Experience:**

- "How many children do you currently support who use AAC or don't speak yet?"
- "Can you show me how you've adapted the classroom for different communication needs?"
- "What happened the last time a child had a meltdown?"

### **About Getting Support:**

- "How quickly can you get support in place? (The answer should be immediately, not 'after assessment')"
- "Who's on your SEND team and when can I meet them?"
- "How will you communicate with me daily? (Not just when there's a problem)"

### **About Their Approach:**

- "How do you help children participate when they can't speak?"
- "What sensory breaks do you offer?"
- "Show me how you'd include my child in story time"

### **What You Want to Hear:**

- "We already support three children using communication devices"
- "Let me show you our visual schedule system"
- "We'd love to meet before term starts to plan together"
- "Progress means something different for each child"
- "We've made these adaptations for other children..."

### **Warning Signs (Run, Don't Walk):**

- "They'll need to talk to access the curriculum"
  - "We believe in treating everyone equally" (This means no accommodations)
  - "Once they're here, the language will come"
  - "We're not really set up for that level of need"
  - "Have you considered special school?"
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## **Getting Ready: Your 6-Month Plan**

I've helped hundreds of families prepare for this transition. Here's what actually works:

### **Starting Now (6 Months Before):**

#### **Make School Familiar:**

- Take photos of everything - the gate, classroom, toilets, playground
- Visit after school hours when it's quiet (most heads will allow this)
- Drive or walk past daily, pointing and saying "your school"
- If possible, meet the teacher for just 5 minutes

#### **Build School Skills Slowly:**

- Start with 5 minutes of sitting (build up gradually)
- Use a visual timer for everything
- Play classroom sounds quietly at home
- Practice "finished" and "more" during play
- Work on one self-help skill at a time

## 3 Months Before:

### **Communication Focus:**

- Make a simple communication book together
- Take photos of school vocabulary (bag, lunch, toilet)
- Practice your chosen "help" signal every single day
- Work on toilet communication (whatever method works)
- Create their "All About Me" page with photos

## 1 Month Before:

### **Daily Practice:**

- Put uniform on for 10 minutes each day
- Practice the morning routine at weekends
- Open lunch boxes, unwrap snacks
- Look at school photos every night
- Talk about "after school" rewards

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## **Your Child's One-Page Profile**

This is the most important document you'll create. I help parents write these every week. Here's my template:

### How [Child's Name] Communicates:

*Example: "Sam points to what he wants. He understands everything you say. When he's happy, he flaps his hands. When overwhelmed, he covers his ears. He's learning to use PECS cards for 'toilet' and 'help'.*

### What Helps [Child's Name] Feel Safe:

*Example: "Quiet spaces, his dinosaur toy, deep pressure hugs, warning before transitions, visual schedule, movement breaks every 20 minutes."*

### [Child's Name] Loves:

*Example: "Thomas trains, water play, numbers, being helpful, praise, iPad time, snacks in a special order."*

## When [Child's Name] Is Struggling:

*Example: "He'll hide under tables, make high-pitched sounds, or try to leave. Give him space, speak quietly, offer his dinosaur. Don't touch him when upset. He recovers faster in quiet spaces."*

## Important Medical/Safety Info:

*Keep this section brief but essential*

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## **The First Days: What to Actually Expect**

### Your First Day Plan:

#### **Morning at Home:**

- Wake 30 minutes earlier than needed
- Look at school photos during breakfast
- Keep routine exactly as practiced
- Pack comfort item (yes, even if they said no toys)
- Take a photo for "later" (helps with separation)

#### **At School Drop-off:**

- Keep goodbye short and consistent
- Use the same words each day
- Don't sneak away - clear goodbye
- Trust the staff (even when it's hard)
- Leave quickly once you've said goodbye

**After School Reality Check:** Your child has worked harder than a CEO today. They've:

- Processed new sensory information all day
- Tried to communicate in a new environment
- Held it together for 6 hours
- Navigated social confusion

### What Happens at Home:

They'll likely fall apart. This is good - it means they feel safe with you. Expect:

- Complete exhaustion by 4pm
- Meltdowns over tiny things

- Refusing dinner (sensory overload)
- Sleep disruption
- Temporary loss of skills

This is their nervous system recovering. It's not regression - it's regulation.

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## **Working with School: Your New Team**

### Key People to Know:

#### **Your Essential Three:**

1. **Class Teacher** - Daily contact person
2. **SENCO** - Your advocate in school (Special Educational Needs Coordinator)
3. **Teaching Assistant** - Often knows your child best

Also important: Office staff (they see everything), lunchtime supervisors (unstructured time is hardest)

### Communication That Works:

Set this up in the first week:

- Home-school diary that travels daily
- Weekly 10-minute check-in (even when things are fine)
- Text/email for urgent things (agree what's urgent)
- Monthly proper meeting to review

### How to Advocate (My Scripts for You):

#### **Use These Phrases:**

- "My child shows you they understand by..."
- "What's working at home is..."
- "Could we try... for a week and review?"
- "I've noticed they do better when..."
- "How can I support this at home?"

#### **Never Say These:**

- "Sorry my child is so difficult"
- "I know they're extra work" (They're not - they're a child)
- "If you have time..." (It's their job)

- "They can't help it" (This excuses rather than explains)
  - "Just do what you can" (Too vague)
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## **Real School Challenges (And Real Solutions)**

### Circle Time:

This is often the hardest part of the day. Your child is expected to sit, listen, and participate while processing multiple sensory inputs.

#### **What Actually Works:**

- Special cushion or spot by the wall
- Holding something quiet in their hands
- Standing at the back (yes, this is fine)
- Coming in for just the song, then leaving
- Adult sitting behind for deep pressure

### PE (The Nightmare for Many):

Changing clothes + noise + following group instructions = overload

#### **Practical Solutions:**

- Come dressed in PE kit on those days
- Change in the disabled toilet (quieter)
- Do PE in uniform if needed
- Start with 10 minutes, build up
- Have a PE buddy who helps

### Lunch Time (Sensory Chaos):

200 children + smells + noise + social confusion = impossible

#### **What I Recommend:**

- Pack lunch always (control over food)
- Eat in a quieter space first few weeks
- Same seat every day
- 15 minutes eating, then outside
- Lunchtime club as escape route

## Assembly (Just Skip It):

Seriously. No 4-year-old's education was ruined by missing assembly. Fight the important battles.

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## **When to Worry (And What to Do)**

### Red Flags That Need Action:

I see these patterns in my clinic. If you're seeing them, it's time to act:

- Your child has stopped doing things they could do before
- Sunday night means tears, aggression, or complete shutdown
- They're hurting themselves or others
- They've stopped eating or sleeping properly
- The light has gone from their eyes
- You're seeing school refusal (hiding, running, complete meltdown)

### Your Options (You Have More Than You Think):

#### **Option 1: Fix What You Have**

- Request immediate meeting with SENCO
- Start with reduced hours (mornings only)
- Create sensory breaks every hour
- Change their environment (different classroom?)
- Get an EHCP assessment started NOW

#### **Option 2: Find Something Better**

- Visit other mainstream schools (some are amazing)
- Look at specialist provisions or units
- Consider special schools (visit without prejudice)
- Explore flexi-schooling (part time)
- Yes, home education is valid

#### **Option 3: Force Change**

- Formal complaint to governors
- Contact Local Authority SEND team
- Get advocate involved (IPSEA, SOS!SEN)
- Contact your MP
- Consider legal action

Remember: A miserable child learns nothing. Your job is to protect them.

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## **Supporting Your Child at Home**

### **After School (The Recovery Zone):**

When your child walks through that door, they've used every ounce of energy to hold it together. What they need:

- First 30 minutes: No questions, no demands
- Sensory recovery (whatever works - trampoline, iPad, bath)
- Snack without conversation
- Their favorite activity
- Early dinner (yes, 4:30pm is fine)
- Bed 30 minutes earlier than usual

### **Weekends (Restoration Time):**

**Saturday:** Complete rest day. Pyjamas all day? Perfect. Same food? Fine. No leaving house? Absolutely okay.

**Sunday:** Gentle preparation. Look at school photos. Pack bag together. Early night. Keep it calm.

### **School Holidays:**

The relief of holidays can be huge, but returning is hard. I recommend:

- Keep wake/sleep times similar
  - Visit school playground during holidays
  - Meet school friends if possible
  - Start school routine 3 days before return
  - Contact teacher for a "welcome back" plan
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# Learning Differently at School

## Reading and Writing:

Forget handwriting for now. Your child needs to communicate ideas, not win handwriting awards. Ask for:

- Keyboard or tablet from day one
- Symbol support for all text
- Audio books as "reading"
- Adult to scribe their ideas
- Focus on understanding, not performance

## Maths:

Many non-speaking children are brilliant at maths. They need:

- Concrete objects (always)
- Visual number lines on desk
- Extra time to show understanding
- Different ways to demonstrate knowledge
- Calculator for computation (focus on concepts)

## Everything Else:

Art, music, PE - these aren't "extras." Often, these are where non-speaking children shine. Insist on:

- Participation over perfection
- Adapted materials if needed
- Partner support without taking over
- Celebrating their way of creating

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## Your Rights (UK Law Is On Your Side)

### What the Law Says:

Under the Equality Act 2010 and Children and Families Act 2014:

- Your child has the RIGHT to mainstream education
- Schools MUST make reasonable adjustments
- They cannot discriminate based on disability

- They must provide SEN support
- "We can't meet their needs" must be proven, not assumed

### When School Says No:

**Get it in writing** - "Could you email me that decision?"

**Quote the law** - "Under the Equality Act..."

**Contact SENDIASS** - Free legal advice in every area

**Join Facebook groups** - Other parents know the system

**Document everything** - Screenshots, emails, diary

**Escalate quickly** - Governors, LA, ombudsman

You're not being difficult. You're advocating.

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## **What Success Really Looks Like**

Let me tell you about success. Last week, a mum cried in my office because her son sat through 10 minutes of circle time. That's success.

Another child used their AAC device to say "toilet" for the first time at school. Success.

A little girl who spent September under the table joined in with music time in October. Success.

### **Forget These Measures:**

- Speaking like everyone else
- Top of the class
- Perfect behaviour
- Lots of friends
- Following every rule

### **Celebrate These Instead:**

- Using ANY communication at school
  - Feeling safe enough to stay
  - Participating in ANY way
  - Managing transitions better
  - Finding ONE thing they enjoy
  - Trusting ONE adult
  - Simply coping with being there
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## Your Next Steps

### This Month:

1. List three schools to visit (include one special school - just to see)
2. Book visits when it's quiet
3. Start taking photos of everything
4. Practice one school skill (your choice)
5. Find your local SENDIASS number

### In 3 Months:

1. Choose your school (trust your gut)
2. Meet the SENCO properly
3. Start the one-page profile
4. Begin school visits with your child
5. Set up home-school communication

### Final Month:

1. Confirm all support
2. Do practice runs
3. Prepare yourself emotionally
4. Plan first day exactly
5. Remember: it won't be perfect

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## A Final Word From Me

I've supported hundreds of families through this transition. Some sailed through. Most didn't. All survived.

Your child will find their way - maybe not the way you imagined, but their own unique path. Some children bloom in mainstream with the right support. Others thrive in specialist settings. Many need something creative and flexible.

What matters is finding what works for YOUR child.

You might be reading this at 2am, worried sick about September. I see you. Your concern shows how much you care. That care is what will get your child through.

School isn't about making your child "normal." It's about helping them learn, grow, and feel valued exactly as they are.

You've got this. And when you don't, that's okay too.

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*Hulya Mehmet*  
*Speech & Language Therapist*  
*Mum who's been there*

**Remember: The right school is out there. Keep looking. Keep advocating. Keep believing in your extraordinary child.**