

6-8 Years: When "Big School" Gets Real

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

The Phone Call I Get Every September

"Hulya, she was fine in Reception. But now in Year 2, everything's falling apart. The teacher says she's behind. The other children don't include her. She comes home exhausted. What do I do?"

I've had this conversation hundreds of times. Your child who managed the play-based early years is now facing worksheets, tests, and playground politics.

Let me help you navigate this. Because yes, it's harder now. But there are ways through.

What I See at This Age

Your Child's Communication Now

Every September, I assess children starting Year 1 or 2. Here's the range:

Some children:

- Still not using words (but understanding everything)
- Using 10-20 words when calm
- Speaking in 2-3 word phrases
- Echoing questions before answering
- Flying with their AAC device
- Writing or typing what they can't say

The new struggles:

- "Write a sentence about your weekend" (nightmare)
- "Work with your partner" (anxiety spike)
- "Tell the class your idea" (impossible)
- Spelling tests requiring verbal responses
- Following multi-step instructions
- The dreaded reading aloud

What's Really Happening Inside

A mum recently said: "He knows he's different now. He sees it."

Your 6-year-old who didn't notice is now a 7-year-old who does. They see friends chatting easily. They feel the teacher's frustration. They know they're "behind."

This awareness? It's growth. And it hurts.

Making School Work (Real Strategies)

Reading Without Speaking

What I tell teachers: "She can read. She can't read aloud. These are different skills."

Accommodations that work:

- Point to words while teacher reads
- Record reading at home when calm
- Use reading apps that track progress
- Focus on comprehension questions (pointing to answers)
- Partner reads aloud, child follows
- Never, ever force reading to class

A success story: Jamie, age 7, selective mutism. Teacher let him record stories at home. By Year 3, he was the class's "podcast narrator." Still didn't speak at school. Still brilliant.

Writing When Your Hands Won't Cooperate

Forget handwriting. I'm serious. Your child has ideas trapped because we're obsessed with pencil grip.

Start here:

- iPad or laptop from day one
- Voice recorder for ideas
- Mum as scribe is NOT cheating
- Draw the story first
- Use word banks (circle the words)
- One sentence is enough

My rule: If they can show knowledge without writing, let them.

Maths (When Word Problems Are The Enemy)

A child in my clinic could do complex mental maths. Failed every test. Why? Couldn't read "If Sarah has 5 apples..."

Solutions that work:

- Pictures instead of words
- Real objects always available
- Calculator for computation (test the concept, not the adding)
- Point to answers on number grid
- Show with manipulatives
- Parent reads word problems

Everything Else

Science: Do the experiment. Draw what happened. Knowledge shown.

History: Timeline with pictures. Point to sequence. Understanding proven.

PE: Modified participation is STILL participation. Timekeeper, equipment manager, photographer - all valid roles.

Music: Shaker instead of recorder. iPad music app instead of singing. Still making music.

The Playground Problem (And Solutions)

What Breaks My Heart

"He stands by the fence every playtime," a dad told me last week. "Just watching."

By age 7, playground games need quick verbal negotiation. "I'm the mum, you're the baby, no wait, let's be puppies, but magical puppies who can fly!"

Your child is still processing "puppies" while everyone's moved to flying.

Building Real Connections

Forget forcing group play. Try this:

Find one child. Just one.

- Who likes similar things

- Maybe quieter themselves
- Often younger is easier
- Set up structured play dates
- Same activity each time first
- Build slowly

Teach the class about AAC: I go into schools. 20 minutes. Show the device. Suddenly your child is interesting, not weird. "Can I try?" they ask. Magic happens.

Lunchtime clubs save lives:

- Computer club
- Library monitors
- Gardening group
- Art room helper
- Anything but the playground chaos

When It's Bullying (Not Just Exclusion)

The signs in non-speaking children:

- Sudden school refusal
- Toileting accidents return
- AAC device "mysteriously" broken
- Belongings missing
- Meltdowns increase Sunday nights
- Sleep disrupted

My script for schools: "My child cannot tell me if someone hurts them. This makes them vulnerable. What specific safeguarding do you have in place?"

Watch them scramble. Get it in writing.

Getting an EHCP (The Truth)

When I Tell Parents "Apply Now"

Schools say "wait and see." I say "wait in the queue while seeing."

Apply if:

- Your gut says your child is struggling

- Current support isn't enough
- You're doing hours of teaching at home
- Behaviour is communication of need
- School are "managing" not progressing
- You're exhausted from fighting

Building Your Case (What Actually Works)

The reports you need:

- Speech therapy (get updated one)
- Educational Psychology (worth going private if waiting)
- Occupational Therapy (sensory needs matter)
- CAMHS if involved
- Paediatrician letter

Your evidence (THIS is what tips it):

Daily diary for two weeks: "7am: Meltdown getting dressed. Needed 20 mins calm down."
 "8:30am: Refused to enter school. Assistant helped. Took 15 mins." "3:30pm: Collected early.
 Hitting children. Overwhelmed." "4pm-7pm: No communication. Hiding under bed." "7pm: Bath refusal. Sensory overload from day."

Videos:

- Homework attempts
- Communication at home vs school
- Meltdowns (if safe to film)
- AAC use successfully
- What regulation looks like

The Application Secret

Don't write: "Needs speech therapy"

Write: "Requires 45 minutes individual speech therapy weekly focusing on AAC implementation, plus 15 minutes daily practice with trained TA, plus termly training for all staff on communication methods."

Be specific. Think hours and minutes, not vague support.

Homework Hell (And How to Escape)

What Happens at 4pm

"She held it together all day," a mum told me. "Then homework, and she's under the table screaming."

Your child used every ounce of energy to cope at school. Now you're asking for more. It's like running a marathon then being told to do star jumps.

My Homework Rules

Rule 1: 10 minutes per year of age over 5

6-year-old = 10 minutes TOTAL

7-year-old = 20 minutes TOTAL

8-year-old = 30 minutes TOTAL

Tell school. Get it in writing.

Rule 2: You're not the teacher If it's causing meltdowns, stop. Write on the homework:

"Attempted 10 minutes. Too distressed to continue."

Rule 3: Mornings might work better Brains fresh. Less sensory overload. Try 15 minutes before school.

What Actually Helps

The setup:

- Same spot every time
- Wobble cushion for sitting
- Noise-cancelling headphones
- Fidget in left hand
- Timer they can see
- Reward ready and visible

The adaptations:

- Spelling test? Point to letters on alphabet chart
- Reading? You read, they point to words
- Maths sheet? Do 5 problems not 20
- Writing? They talk, you write
- Research project? Watch YouTube video together

My Email to Teachers

"Dear [Teacher],

[Child] spent 2 hours attempting tonight's homework. This affected family dinner, bedtime routine, and sibling relationships.

Going forward, we will spend 20 minutes maximum on homework. We'll focus on understanding over completion.

Please let me know which elements are priority.

Best wishes, [Your name]"

Send it. Save your family.

Tech That Actually Helps (Not Just "Educational" Apps)

The Game-Changers I Recommend

For Communication:

- **Proloquo2Go** - Yes, expensive. Life-changing.
- **ChatterBoards** - Quick boards for specific situations
- **Siri/Google Assistant** - Seriously. "Hey Siri, remind me snack time."
- **Voice Memos** - Record thoughts when writing fails
- **Canva** - Child makes visual cards for needs

For Learning:

- **Epic!** - Books read aloud while highlighting
- **Khan Academy Kids** - Maths without language barriers
- **Explain Everything** - Draw your understanding
- **Book Creator** - Make books about interests
- **Minecraft Education** - Learning through building

For Daily Life:

- **Time Timer** - Visual time passing
- **First Then Visual Schedule** - See the day
- **Habitica** - Gamify routines
- **Calm** - Regulation support

- **YouTube Kids** - Yes, really. Model language through interests.

Screen Time Reality Check

"But screen time!" people gasp.

Your child's AAC device IS a screen. Their main learning tool IS a screen. Their regulation support IS a screen.

The 1950s called. They want their moral panic back.

My rules:

- Communication device = always available
 - Learning apps = tool not treat
 - YouTube interests = language exposure
 - Games = fine motor practice
 - Everything in balance
 - You know your child
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When Behaviour Changes (What's Really Happening)

New at This Age

"She never did this before!" I hear this weekly.

What appears:

- Hand flapping increases (they're regulating)
- Hitting when frustrated (communication attempt)
- Hiding under desks (overwhelm response)
- "Rules" about everything (control seeking)
- Can't sleep Sunday nights (school anxiety)
- Younger behaviour returns (regression is protection)

The Real Reason

A 7-year-old in my clinic drew a picture: stick figures in a playground. One alone, scribbled over in black.

"That's me," he typed on his device. "Different."

Your child knows now. They see how easily others speak, play, learn. They feel the gap. Behaviour is their voice screaming: "This is hard!"

What Actually Helps

Instead of consequences, try:

For aggression: "You hit because mad. Mad is okay. Hitting hurts. Let's hit pillow/stomp feet/rip paper."

For withdrawal: "School was hard today. You need quiet. I'll be here when ready."

For rigidity: "You like things the same way because it helps you feel safe. That makes sense. Let's keep your important routine and maybe try one small change when you're ready."

For stimming: "Your body needs this. You're clever to know what helps. Do you need space?"

Track the Triggers

Get a notebook:

- Monday: Refused breakfast. Assembly day.
- Tuesday: Hit sister. Spelling test returned.
- Wednesday: Good day. PE cancelled (less demands).
- Thursday: Under table. Group work in class.
- Friday: Calm. Watched film afternoon.

Patterns emerge. Share with school.

Growing Independence (Realistic Version)

What Independence Actually Looks Like

Forget the milestone charts. Here's real independence for our kids:

Morning Success:

- Chooses between two breakfast options (pointing fine)
- Gets dressed with clothes laid out in order
- Puts shoes on (Velcro, not laces, who cares?)
- Remembers water bottle (with visual reminder)
- Walks to classroom with one prompt

That's independence!

Communication Independence

A mum asked: "How will she tell someone if she's hurt?"

We practiced:

1. **Card in pocket:** "I need help. Call my mum: [number]"
2. **Phone photos:** Mum, Dad, pain symbols
3. **Practice with safe adults:** Teacher, TA, office staff
4. **Reward brave attempts:** Even failed ones

Three months later: Fell at playtime. Showed card to dinner lady. Success.

Life Skills That Matter

Forget tying shoelaces. Focus on:

- Knowing their address (card is fine)
- Using an iPad to call home
- Making a sandwich (any sandwich)
- Getting own snack from box
- Finding right classroom
- Asking for toilet (any way)

My Independence Programme

Week 1: Choose one skill. Practice when calm. No pressure.

Week 2: Add visual support. Practice daily.

Week 3: Fade one prompt. Celebrate attempt.

Week 4: Try in real situation. Support nearby.

Example - Making Toast:

1. Watch Mum (Week 1)
2. Help put bread in (Week 2)
3. Push lever down with visual card (Week 3)
4. Do whole sequence with Mum nearby (Week 4)
5. Make toast independently (Week 8)

Eight weeks for toast? YES. Independence earned, not rushed.

The Long View

Year-by-Year Planning

Age 6 Focus:

- Settling into school
- Building communication
- Finding one friend
- Basic academics
- Regulation priority

Age 7 Focus:

- Expanding communication
- Academic adaptations
- Social skills building
- Independence growing
- Confidence focus

Age 8 Focus:

- Preparing for upper elementary
 - Self-advocacy emerging
 - Friendship deepening
 - Academic strategies
 - Future planning
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When to Get More Help (Trust Your Gut)

The Signs I Take Seriously

After 25 years, these make me say "Let's get more support":

Regression that sticks:

- Lost words stay lost (beyond 2 weeks)
- Toilet accidents return and remain
- Skills disappear entirely
- Won't enter previously happy places
- Communication attempts stop

New concerning behaviours:

- Hurting themselves (beyond frustration hitting)
- Not eating/drinking at school
- Complete school refusal (not Monday blues)
- Extreme anxiety (physical symptoms)
- Siblings seriously affected
- You're breaking

Getting Help (What Actually Works)

Start with GP: "My child's behaviour has significantly changed. I need a CAMHS referral. Here's my evidence." [Hand them your diary]

School meeting: "What we're doing isn't working. What's your escalation process?"

Consider:

- Educational psychologist assessment
- Occupational therapy (sensory)
- CAMHS for anxiety
- Family support services
- Respite options
- Private assessment if waiting

Remember Though...

Normal at this age:

- Monday morning tears
- Homework meltdowns
- Friend dramas
- Stimming increases
- Some regression when tired
- Good weeks and bad weeks

You know your child. Trust yourself.

Celebrating Your Child (Not the Milestones)

What Success Really Looks Like

Last week, a mum cried in my office. Happy tears.

"He pointed! At school! To his lunch choice!"

Her son is 7. This was his first time communicating a choice at school. HUGE.

Document Different

My celebration folder method:

Get a folder. Not for reports. For JOY:

- Photo: First time stayed in assembly
- Drawing: Their first friend picture
- Note: "Played near someone today!"
- Video: Using AAC to tell joke
- Card: From classmate saying "I like you"
- Screenshot: First typed sentence

Show your child. Show grandparents. Show doubting professionals.

Reframe the Wins

Instead of: "Still not talking"

Celebrate: "Communicated need without meltdown"

Instead of: "Can't write name"

Celebrate: "Typed password independently"

Instead of: "No friends"

Celebrate: "Parallel played for 10 minutes"

Instead of: "Behind in reading"

Celebrate: "Chose book about dinosaurs"

Share Success Strategically

Annual review: Bring celebration folder

Family gatherings: One success story ready

Hard days: Read through together

New professionals: Start with strengths

Your child: "Remember when you..."

Building Your Village (You Can't Do This Alone)

Finding Your People

The friends who get it: Forget the NCT group still discussing organic weaning. Find the mum at pickup whose kid is also melting down. Make eye contact. Swap numbers.

Where to find them:

- School SENCO coffee mornings
- Local NAS (National Autistic Society) groups
- Facebook: "[Your area] SEND parents"
- Therapy waiting rooms (seriously)
- Online communities (midnight friends)
- Siblings groups for your other children

Teaching Your Village

The grandparent script: "He's working so hard on communication. When he points, that's him talking. Can you respond like he's used words?"

The friend script: "She communicates differently. Want to see her AAC device? It's actually really cool."

The sibling script: "Your brother's brain works differently. That's why some things are harder. You're an amazing sister for understanding."

Looking After You (No, Really)

The reality:

- You've been in fight mode for years
- Your nervous system is shot
- "Self-care" feels like another job
- Wine isn't a food group (apparently)
- You need actual help

What actually helps:

- One friend who gets it
- 10 minutes hiding in bathroom
- Saying no to one thing
- Accepting "good enough"
- Therapy for you (yes, you)
- Remembering: this is temporary

The Truth About the Future

What I Know After 25 Years

Children surprise us: The 6-year-old who couldn't speak became a computer programmer. Types everything. The 7-year-old who hit everyone became an artist. Paints his feelings. The 8-year-old with no friends became a youth worker. Helps others like him.

Progress isn't linear:

- Age 6: No words
- Age 7: Three words
- Age 8: Explosion - 50 words
- Age 9: Simple sentences
- Age 10: Won't stop talking about Pokemon

This happened. Last year. After everyone gave up.

What Your Child Needs From You

A dad asked me: "What's the most important thing I can do?"

"Believe they're complete now. Not when they talk. Not when they catch up. Now."

He cried.

My Promise to You

Your child is learning in ways we can't measure. They're developing strengths we don't test for. They're becoming exactly who they're meant to be.

The system measures the wrong things. It values the wrong skills. It rushes the wrong timeline.

Your job? Stand between your child and a system that doesn't understand them yet. Be their translator. Their advocate. Their soft landing.

Some days you'll win. Some days you'll hide in the car park crying. Both are okay.

One Last Thing

I keep letters from families. Here's one from last month:

"You told us to document everything. We did. Today we watched videos from two years ago. We couldn't believe it. The progress. The joy. The growth. Thank you for making us record the journey, not just the destination."

Your child is on a journey. It's not the one in the parenting books. It's better - it's uniquely theirs.

And you? You're exactly the parent they need.

*Hulya Mehmet
Consultant Speech & Language Therapist
Still learning from every child I meet*

Remember: Different timeline, same destination - a fulfilling life.