

SCHOOL STARTERS

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Starting school can be a frightening experience. Perhaps today it is less of a shock to a system than it was in the past, for most children have already had to socialise with others at play group and at nursery school. Indeed, some children have been in a nursery almost from the moment they were born. Yet, 'proper' school is very different from what they have experienced before. Suddenly they find themselves surrounded by large numbers of children, many of whom are considerably older than they are.

Starting secondary school can also be a frightening experience. For again there is often a major contrast between the junior school and the new secondary school. My oldest child, Jonathan, for instance, moved from a very small school with less than 100 children, to a school with over a thousand pupils. The difference between the two schools was immense. Yes, even at eleven, many children can feel almost overwhelmed by the experience of starting a new school.

Precisely because a new school can be a challenging experience, it is good for local churches to assure school starters of their prayers. In our church, for instance, we call all the school starters forward, introduce them to the congregation (sadly our church is too large to expect everybody to know all the children by name) and get the children to tell us the name of their new school. We then make token presentations to the children: sometimes we have given the younger children special rulers or pencil cases with a Christian message (e.g. one year the rulers were all stamped with a green frog and the words 'Fully Rely On God'); however, more recently we have given them a small Scripture Union book *Get, Ready, Go* (which together with an accompanying book for parents only comes to £2.99; or £10 for five). The older children receive *Its Your Move*, also published by Scripture Union (£2.99 – with a pack of 10 costing £12). Before they return to their seats, we tell them that they will not be on their own as they start school, for God will be with them, and then go on to pray for them then and there.

We do our best to ensure that all the children of the church – including children who just come to the Brigades – are included. A letter is written in good time to all parents informing them of the date when the presentations are to be made. Normally, of course, it is the first Sunday in September. However, with younger children off starting school later in the year, we find ourselves making presentations also in January and in April.

It will be noted that we don't present Bibles to school starters. Our custom is to give Good News Bibles to all eight year olds on Bible Sunday – on the assumption that giving a Bible to a five year old is perhaps a bit premature, whereas giving a Bible to an eleven year old is a bit late.

Whatever one does, however, the important thing is that children know that they are loved by God and feel affirmed by the church.