

# Starting school with eczema

Independent Dermatology Nurse Julie Van Onselen and Primary School teacher Kirstin Fraser discuss the challenges eczema can pose when your child starts school, offering lots of practical advice and tips. We also have input from Emma Deeley, whose son has eczema, and Sandy Enjily, who manages a Nursery.

Starting school is a huge milestone for every child and parent. When a child has eczema starting school can be even more of a wrench, as parents are additionally passing on the care of their child. For some parents this may be the first time they are entrusting their child's eczema care to someone else. Children who have been at nursery school will have been cared for by nursery staff, who are able to be hands-on in providing eczema care and will have been following parents' instructions.

Remember that at home and nursery your child's care has been on a one-to-one basis, and you or the nursery staff have met personal care needs. School is different from nursery – as your child is growing up, they will be expected to meet their own personal care needs. Therefore, it is important to prepare for and make the transition from home or nursery to school as easy as possible.

This article with focus on eczema and skin care in school. Your child may also have allergies – for example, food or nut allergies – which you will also need to address with your child's school. Allergy UK has a helpful factsheet on Starting School, with lots of information and practical support.

This factsheet can be downloaded from [www.allergyuk.org](http://www.allergyuk.org)

## Before starting school – forward planning is key

Preparation and forward planning before your child starts school is essential. One of the biggest problems with eczema is that it is such an individual condition. It can vary enormously in severity, from child to child and from time to time. Eczema is a common condition, so the school teachers and staff will have had previous experience of children with eczema. However, it is likely that this experience may differ – for instance, experience of a child with mild eczema will be quite different to that of a child with severe eczema. The other problem with eczema is that triggers (and responses) to different things in the school environment really do vary with each individual child. Eczema is not a one-size-fits-all condition.

So thinking ahead is extremely important and this may even start with choosing the primary school for your child. You may have a choice of schools, and asking relevant questions about how the school will be able to help your child with eczema will be a good starting point. You could ask related questions – for instance: 'Is your school nut-free?'. The answer to this question may be very revealing in how seriously the school considers medical issues.

In the term before your child starts school, you should book an appointment with the head teacher and your child's reception teacher. This is an important meeting to forward plan, as you need to build an understanding between you and the school about your child and their eczema. You are passing on the care of your child during the school day and as a parent, you know a good deal about your child and their eczema care, and it is best that you pass this information on in person. You will have filled in a medical form as part of the school admission procedure, so all being

well the school will already have an idea of your child's needs in regard to their eczema. Try to plan and book your meeting on a different day to the settling-in days, as the school and your child's new teacher will not be able to be entirely focused if they will be getting to know a whole new class and their parents.

Remember that this meeting is about your child and their individual needs concerning their eczema. The meeting will give you a great opportunity of getting to know your child's head teacher and class teacher and starting to build a positive relationship with them, before your child starts school. Prior to your meeting, spend some time thinking about what you will cover, and discuss this with your partner. It is a good idea to make a list of everything you need to cover, otherwise you are bound to forget something! Here are some suggestions of what you may like to include in your list:

## Medical and eczema history

- When your child's eczema developed.
- The pattern of your child's eczema.
  - How often the eczema flares.
  - Whether the eczema becomes infected.
  - If the eczema is better/or worse depending on the season.
- Explain how often your child routinely needs to visit healthcare professionals.
  - Does your child attend regular hospital appointments?
  - Can you predict how much time off school will be needed due to appointments?
- Does your child have any other relevant medical history: any allergies related to eczema or other medical issues?



## Your child's normal routine and daily eczema treatment

- How much time is spent every day just treating your child's eczema?
- How much time is lost each day because of eczema?
- Set down your child's skin-care routine and the creams and ointment you apply – explain how and when each treatment is used.
- Write down all your child's treatments and have a list ready to hand over.
- Make a note to remember to take in your child's emollients, as these are the treatments that will need to be applied during the school day.
- Explain how important it is that your child avoids soap for washing, and show them the soap substitute they must use to wash their hands.
- You will need to discuss how they will support your child with emollient application at school.
- What about drawing up a school healthcare plan together and ask how this will be communicated with school staff.

## Impact of eczema on sleep

- Be ready to explain how your child's sleep is affected by their eczema.
- If your child has very restless nights ask if they can come into school late on these occasions.

## What triggers your child's eczema?

- Write down your child's major eczema triggers.
- Remember to include that eczema will be triggered by your child getting too

## A nursery view - transition from nursery to school

“ I run a family-centred nursery school where we place great emphasis on nurturing and cherishing each individual child in a kind and loving environment. I am also a mother and my son had atopic eczema as a child. So my staff and I completely understand the needs of a child with eczema, and we work closely with parents to ensure that each child's eczema and skin-care needs are fully met at nursery. The transition from nursery to school begins in the nursery environment itself, as we proactively and sensitively support children to augment their confidence along with their personal and social life skills, thereby preparing them effectively for school.

**Sandy Enjily, Manager, 'The Aunties' Old School Nursery, Stanton St John, Oxford**

This is even more essential for a child with a long-term condition, such as eczema. A child with eczema requires a conscientious approach to the application of emollients, but it is important that the older child, in readiness for school, is helped to understand how to apply emollients themselves.

Thus, when the child starts school and needs to be independent in looking after their skin, we would hope that the loving support and gentle encouragement given at nursery will not only support the care of the child's skin but also promote the child's independence and dignity.



hot and with some school activities (especially messy play with paint, sand, water and clay).

- Ask what steps can be taken to recognise and avoid triggers in school.

## How your child copes with their eczema

- Explain how your child feels about their eczema.
- Identify the times when your child does not cope so well.
- You will need to ask how they will help your child to cope with their eczema at school and how they will also help other children to understand what it is like to live with eczema.

You should now feel that you have adequately prepared your child's new school and their classroom teacher in good time before their first day at school.

If your child has a change of teacher – and when they move into the next school year –

you will have to explain everything all over again.

## Eczema treatments at school

Your child will need to have access to emollients at school. If your child has a skin infection, they will need oral antibiotics administered at school. The Department of Education gives clear guidance to schools on this. Treatments for 'eczema flares' (topical corticosteroids or topical calcineurin inhibitors) are applied once or twice a day, so they will be applied outside the school day.

Managing Medicines in Schools is guidance from the Department of Education and the Department of Health. This document sets out how families and schools can work together to ensure children requiring medicines in schools receive the support they need. It is important to know that the document states that parents have prime responsibility



Stanley

for their child's health and there is no legal duty that requires staff to administer medicines (although many schools have developed the administration of medicines into job roles). Emollients are prescribed therapies for eczema, so should be treated as medicines.

The document encourages self-management for children with long-term illness, with the child becoming responsible under the supervision of a parent, so the school only needs to supervise. This means that a child should be able to apply their own emollients before starting school. A child who needs medicines in school or has a long-term condition should have a health plan. The plan clarifies the help the child needs at school and is drawn up by the school and parents, with additional input from healthcare professionals, if required.

The school nurse covers an entire area and not an individual school. The school nurse's role is to address the physical, social and emotional health of school children. They are also responsible for working with the school to assess the health needs of children and ensure that the school healthcare plans are in place.

You may well meet or have contact with the school nurse, either before or when your child starts school. If you want to find out who your school nurse is, your school or health centre will be able to give you this information and contact details.

## A parent's view

“ My son Stanley is now 9 years old and has had severe atopic eczema since birth. I remember well his days at playschool. As we lived in the village, it was easy for me to pop in at lunchtimes and apply his emollients. When Stanley started school, I met with the teacher and head teacher and the school was excellent. They listened and tried their best to understand Stanley's eczema needs. However, Stanley was in a busy reception class and sometimes it was difficult. On one occasion his arms flared badly, as he did not wash the paint off, after an art class. There were other occasions when the teachers were fantastic – one teacher recognised when Stanley became overheated and would take him out of the classroom and walk him around the playground until he cooled down. Stanley was expected to apply his own emollients, but he had to remember to ask his teachers for his creams, which were kept in a safe place at school. We did help Stanley prepare

Emma Deeley, mother of Stanley

for applying his own creams at home, building up his confidence and using sticker charts. In his early school years, one big problem for Stanley was tiredness and even exhaustion at the end of the school day. His eczema was particularly severe during Year 1 – he was in hospital for a week with eczema herpeticum – and he had very restless nights. However, school was very understanding and, if he was in a deep sleep and could not wake, I was able to take him in later. Stanley was also allowed to wear 100% cotton at school, wearing a sweatshirt the same colour as the synthetic regulation school uniform; again this was very helpful. Stanley is now 9 years old and copes extremely well with his eczema at school. He understands when he needs to moisturise, is allowed to shower after PE and swimming and knows his own triggers. I feel very proud of my son and also am very grateful to his school for being so understanding.

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## Triggers at school

Your child's eczema will be triggered by some things that are difficult to avoid anywhere. However, there may also be some new triggers that are school related. Common triggers at school include:

**Getting too hot** – This can happen in the classroom or during PE and playtime and can provoke a scratching frenzy.

**TIP: Ask for your child not to be seated by the radiator or sunny window in the classroom.**

**Games, PE and playtime** – As well as getting hot running around, sweat can be a trigger. Dust may also be a problem, especially when limbs are exposed in PE kits (school halls tend to be dusty places). In the winter moving from the outside into warm, centrally heated environments can be a trigger.

**TIP: Ask if your child can wear long-sleeved cotton T-shirts and maybe leggings/track-suit bottoms for PE, to reduce dust exposure.**

**Swimming** – Chlorine will irritate eczema but it is also very important that children learn to swim.

**TIP: Discuss with the teachers that your child will need to put on a layer of oily emollient before getting into the pool. Your child will also need time allowed for an emollient shower and emollient application after swimming (this may mean getting out of the pool early).**

**Messy play, art and cookery** – In the early years, messy play, art and cookery are regular learning activities. Your child's eczema may be triggered by sand, water, paint, clay and some foods. Plants may also be problematic.

**Tip: Your child may benefit from wearing PVC gloves with a cotton liner for these activities. Ask if your child's hands can be washed with an emollient after activities and that they do not wash their hands with soap.**

**School uniform** – Wool and synthetic fibres make the itch worse.

**Tip:** Invest in good-quality 100% cotton for your child's uniform, if possible.

Cotton layers can be worn under regulation synthetic uniform. Thin layers of uniform are better, as layers can be removed if your child gets hot.

**Circle or carpet time** – Sitting directly on a carpet can irritate eczema.

**Tip:** Provide your child with a cotton sitter, so their skin is not directly touching the carpet, especially in the summer term, when they wear shorts or dresses. Ask the teacher to ensure that they use it.

**Classroom pets** – Furry and feathered animals and birds may irritate eczema.

**Tip:** Explain to the teacher and your child that it is best that they do not handle any classroom pet, and definitely do not volunteer to look after it for the weekend.

**School trips** – These may be a source of already familiar and different triggers – for example, farmyard or zoo visits, being outside when the pollen count is high or in the hot sun.

**TIP:** Explain to the teacher prior to the school trip any factors or things specific to the trip environment that may trigger

your child's eczema. If you are very concerned, volunteer to be the parent helper for the trip.

## Friendships and other children

Friendships and learning to be in a class with other children are part of becoming a school child and growing up. Some children with eczema may experience teasing, although typically this does not happen in the reception class, usually when a child is older. If this does happen to your child when they start school, remember that by and large the other children are too young to be knowingly malicious. It is part of peer pressure at any age to 'pick' on someone who is or looks different.

There may be times when a child with eczema feels different, self-conscious, or anxious about fitting in at school. Your child may find it hard to make new friends, or find that other children are reluctant to touch them because they have eczema, or this may not be a problem at all. If your child is reluctant or refuses to go to school or becomes irritable and upset when they get there, this may be a sign that they are anxious about their eczema. Being singled out for special treatment may make things more stressful for a child, but the teacher should be discreet. Talk to your child about any problems they have with friendships

and help them to deal with their feelings – work on some coping strategies together.

Your child's teacher is the key person to help with these issues, so always talk to the teacher first and not to other parents. If necessary, the teacher may also involve the head teacher and other school staff. There are some delightful stories about eczema (often about animal or cartoon characters), that could be read to the class in circle time, to help other children understand more about your child's eczema. Hopefully, in the early years at school, these issues will not be a problem as they will be participating in a full school life, including having lots of friends.

## Stay positive

As a parent it is really important for your child for you to stay positive and think of ways in which your child can join in everything at school, rather than not take part in activities. Most children with eczema cope well at school, as long as common sense is applied and special attention is paid to their physical comfort and they are helped to avoid triggers at school. Preparing a child for school is a worrying time for any parent, as it is a big milestone for you and your child. Try not to let your child see, if you have any worries, as your child should be unaware of your feelings. It won't be possible for a school to give your child the one-to-one attention they have had at home or nursery. Remember by working as a team with your child's teacher, class room assistants, head teacher and other staff, you should be able to make your child's time at school a happy one, so they can fulfil their educational potential.

## Useful resources

**NES School Packs** – Designed with activities for teachers to use with children (available for Reception to Year 3; Year 4 to Year 7; Year 8 to Year 11). Can be downloaded from [www.eczema.org](http://www.eczema.org)

**NES booklet Childhood Atopic Eczema:** A useful information booklet to give to your school. Can be ordered by calling the Helpline on 0800 089 1122 or email [helpline@eczema.org](mailto:helpline@eczema.org)

## Managing medicines in schools and early years settings.

Department of Education  
[www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFES-1448-2005](http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DFES-1448-2005)

## A Primary School teacher's view

“ I am Kirstin Fraser, a primary school teacher. My current class is Year 1, but I have also taught the reception year. I have atopic eczema and can still remember what it was like to cope with eczema when I was at primary school. The key to making school life easier for a child with eczema starting school is for the parents to prepare early, before the child starts school and to clearly communicate their child's eczema issues and triggers. It is the parent's responsibility to make this contact and give as much information as possible to the school – the level of information needed and practical issues do not necessarily feature on a school

medical form. As a primary school teacher, I would do my best to support a child with eczema in my class and understand how their eczema affects them and how to avoid triggers at school. It is important for parents to understand that teachers do have to follow policy. One example relating to eczema care at school is that we can only supervise and support a child with moisturising, as school staff are not allowed to physically apply creams and ointments. Schools always want to do their best for each individual child. Your child's happiness is paramount – a happy child is one who will learn and get the best from school.

Kirstin Fraser, Primary school teacher, Benson, Oxfordshire

