Research shows children learn and develop more in their first eight years of life than at any other time.

Positive relationships and experiences in these years are the building blocks that support health, learning, development and wellbeing at school and beyond.

Choosing a primary school

School is compulsory for all Victorian children aged between six and 17 (up to 17th birthday). The school year runs from late January/early February to December.

Primary school is from grade Prep (preparatory year) to grade six. To start Prep, your child should be five years old by 30 April. More than 69,000 Victorian children started Prep in 2011!

Victoria has 1142 government primary schools, 381 Catholic schools and 42 independent schools (non-denominational or other religions).

All schools within the government, or state school system, must adhere to statewide standards in key areas such as literacy, numeracy, the arts, health and physical education.

Some government schools offer bilingual immersion programs in languages such as Chinese, Japanese, French and Auslan (language for the hearing impaired). Some schools offer alternative curriculum options as well as the mainstream curriculum. For example, some schools have a strong environmental focus, while others focus on providing intensive English language teaching to new arrivals. There are currently 97 specialist schools for students with additional needs and disabilities.

There are also over 150 specially accredited Victorian government schools able to accept international students. For more information about applications and fees, visit www.study.vic.gov.au

So it makes sense to do some research in the year before your child starts school. Ask people you know about where they send their children, and even visit some schools yourself.

Where to go?

Most children attend primary school close to home. Government schools have an obligation to accept any student who lives in their neighbourhood.

If you wish to send your child to a school in a different area, you need to contact that school directly.

To find a school, visit the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development’s Find a School website www.education.vic.gov.au/findaservice

The My School website also enables you to search the profiles of almost 10,000 Australian schools. Information on the site has been provided by individual schools and education authorities. For more information, visit www.myschool.edu.au

Transition-to-school programs

It’s a great idea to attend transition-to-school programs at your child's new school in the year before they start Prep. These programs help you and your child get a better understanding of what school will be like. Most importantly, they allow families to start getting to know school staff, other families and children.

For further information about transition-to-school programs, contact the school your child is enrolled in or your child's early childhood service.
Transition Learning and Development Statement

A child’s transition to school is usually more successful when there are strong community relationships and shared information between early childhood services, such as kindergartens and local schools.

Before your child starts school, you and your child’s school will receive a Transition Learning and Development Statement.

It provides information on your child’s learning and development, and strengths and interests, in early childhood.

The Statement helps Prep teachers to get to know the children entering their classes before they start and to plan for each child’s learning and development when they start school.

You will be asked to tell the school more about your child and give your perspective by completing Part 1 of the Statement – the family.

If your child has a disability or developmental delay and receives assistance from the Kindergarten Inclusion Support Service, your child will have a Transition Learning and Development Statement that includes an additional Part 1C.

Further information is available in Transition: A Positive Start to School Resource Kit. It provides information sheets for families and a plan outlining actions to support your child’s move from kindergarten to school. For more information, visit www.education.vic.gov.au/earlylearning/transitionschool/kit.htm

There are many things you can do to help your child look forward to starting school:

- ask your child what they think about school
- encourage questions about going to school
- help your child stay healthy – have regular health and dental checks and keep immunisations up-to-date
- encourage your child to do things on their own, such as dressing, going to the toilet, washing their hands, unwrapping their food, opening/closing their drink bottle
- talk to friends and other families about what school is like
- attend transition-to-school programs and activities at your child’s early years service and school
- talk to your child’s early childhood educator about things you can do at home to help your child’s learning and development
- talk to the school about how you can be involved in your child’s learning and development.

Early childhood opportunities for Koorie children

Koorie Engagement Support Officers and Koorie Preschool Assistants provide extra support to Koorie children to participate in kindergarten, and to ensure a culturally rich experience for them.

They can help with advice about the move to school. You can find out more about Support for Koorie students on page 20 of this guide.

Victorian Student Number

The Victorian Student Number (VSN) is a student identification number that is assigned by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to all students in government and non-government schools at the time of their initial enrolment in a Victorian school. The number, which is unique to each student, is used as a key identifier on a student’s school records, and will remain with the student throughout his or her education, until reaching the age of 25.

The VSN is included on each student’s report card or is available by request from the student’s school. Students transferring to a Victorian school from interstate or overseas will be assigned a VSN as part of their enrolment.

Financial assistance

The School Start Bonus helps low-income families with the costs associated with their child starting Prep or Year 7 at a government or non-government school. If you receive an eligible Centrelink benefit and hold a valid Health Care Card or Pension Card you may be eligible to receive the one-off $300 payment.

The Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) is provided to low-income families to help with education-related costs. If you have a child under 16, receive an eligible Centrelink benefit and hold a valid Health Care Card or Pension Card you may be eligible to receive the EMA. The allowance is split evenly between the parent and the school, and is paid in two instalments, one in March and one in August.

The parent portion is often used for uniforms and excursions, while the school portion may be used for expenses such as textbooks, stationery and special programs. Parents can elect to have the parent portion of the EMA paid into their bank account or receive a cheque. To apply for the EMA, contact your child’s school.

The Education Tax Refund is a Commonwealth Government tax refund to help with the cost of educating primary and secondary school children. Eligible parents, carers, legal guardians and independent students can be reimbursed for half the cost of items such as computers, educational software, textbooks and stationery.

For more information about the School Start Bonus and the EMA, visit www.education.vic.gov.au/aboutschool/financial

For more information about the Education Tax Refund, visit www.educationtaxrefund.gov.au
Children with additional needs

Each child is an individual with unique strengths, abilities, learning styles and needs. Sometimes children with additional needs require extra support and special learning programs to help them participate fully in school activities.

If your child has additional needs, you may already be receiving support from an early childhood intervention service or a Preschool Field Officer. They will help you prepare information about your child’s developmental needs to give to the school. This enables the school to start planning programs or arrange support before your child attends school.

Every Victorian government school is encouraged to establish a Student Support Group for individual students with additional learning needs. A Student Support Group is a cooperative partnership involving parents, school representatives and professionals. The group develops educational goals and a tailored education program. You can find out more about support for children with additional needs in the Student Support Group Guidelines at www.education.vic.gov.au/healthwellbeing/disability/handbook/default.htm

Parent payments in Victorian government schools

Victorian government schools provide free instruction in the standard curriculum program. Schools may, however, charge for the materials and services used by students.

School councils are responsible for developing and approving a policy about parent payments at their school, which must comply with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development’s policy. The school’s policy must be distributed to parents.

School councils can ask families for payment for:
- essential education items, for example, stationery, textbooks and school uniforms
- optional extras, for example, school magazines or extracurricular programs or activities
- voluntary financial contributions, for example, building and library funds.

For the Department’s policy and further information, please visit www.education.vic.gov.au/aboutschool/financial/default.htm