

First day of school is just as traumatic for mom and dad left behind

By [Will Morris](#), Stars and Stripes
Pacific edition, Friday, September 7, 2007

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — They tried to put on brave faces. Lined up in rows, some stood waving while others looked around in a daze. Others shuffled along slowly, wiping tears from their eyes.

And that was just the parents.

This week, parents at Department of Defense Dependents Schools in the Pacific said goodbye as their kids went to school for the first time.

About 1,900 kindergartners are registered in the system, with about 800 of those registered in Okinawa and about 290 in South Korea, DODDS officials said. The rest are split between mainland Japan and Guam.

Korea's kindergartners started school on Tuesday. Elsewhere, they started Wednesday.

Seconds before his 5-year-old son, Logan, passed the threshold into his classroom at Camp Foster's Killin Elementary School, Marine Maj. T.B. "Sweaty" Missler, 37, a KC-130 pilot, offered a few words of encouragement to his son.

"I was telling him to have a great time on his first day of school," Missler said.

Missler said his son started talking about going to school two years ago. Logan would watch his 10-year-old brother get off the bus each day with growing anticipation.

"He got excited when he got his bus pass," Missler said about his younger son.

Both Misslers maintained their composure as they parted Wednesday.

Other parents, however, were not so brave.



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Major T.B. "Sweaty" Missler whispers words of encouragement to his son Logan, 5, on his first day of kindergarten at Killin Elementary School. Logan was one of about 800 students attending their first day of kindergarten Wednesday on Okinawa.

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Students enter Jennifer Ehret's kindergarten class at Killin Elementary School.

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"I was bawling," said Erin Harding, 34, to another tearful Killin Elementary parent. Minutes later, Harding explained.

"This is my first child, and she's going off to school. I'm just going to miss her smiley face," Harding said. "Cutting the apron strings is hard."

As for the students, many were too shy to speak.

Not so in Korea for 5-year-old Isabella Martinez, who said she enjoyed the move to kindergarten.

Things she liked the first day? The playground, lunch and no homework.

And she was quick to rattle off a list of friends she's already made, including "Nicole and Carmen."

Peter Grenier, Korea District assistant superintendent, said the first day of school for the youngsters was smooth.

They're "off to a wonderful, productive start to their educational careers," he said.

Back on Okinawa, in a meeting called the Boo-hoo Breakfast at Killin after kindergarten classes started, another mother, Jackie Rodriguez, 34, laughed when she talked about her tearful goodbye and the reaction of other mothers.

"I was crying. I tried to get away, hiding behind my sunglasses, but they told me, 'It's OK,' and to take them off."

Until Wednesday, Rodriguez said, she had never been away from her son, Isaiah, 5.

DODDS school administrators and teachers take steps each year to make the transition from home to school easier. Teachers visited kindergartners homes before classes began. Schools also held open-house sessions, where students could sit in the classroom and meet other children under the guidance of a nearby parent.

"The house visits helped," said Nicole Doyle, 28, parent of first-timer Abby, 4. "The teacher came and met the kids in their own environment, so when they got to school there was someone there they already knew."

Jennifer Ehret, Logan's kindergarten teacher, said the home visits are an important part of transitioning a child into school. The visits lessen a child's fear of school, she said. Ehret spent about 20 to 30 minutes in each student's home, coloring and talking with them.

"We're just there to meet the child on their terms in a place where they're comfortable," she said and added, "We're a familiar face, a familiar person, so they'll be comfortable with us, so they won't be scared."

Before entering the classroom, Taryn Harding, 4, had some advice for her mother.

"She told me if I got sad I could look at the pictures I took of her this morning, and I guess that's what I'll do."