Transitioning to Preschool

Transitioning into a new environment can be a difficult and stressful time for both parent and child. In the book *What to Expect the Toddler Years* by Arlene Eisenberg, Heidi E. Murkoff, and Sandee E. Hathaway, the authors outline steps for making the transition to preschool “happier and smoother” (p. 824).

- **First step:** Prior to starting school, speak to your child regarding the new adventure on which he/she is about to embark. Discuss with enthusiasm the daily activities of preschool, talk to siblings or neighbors who currently attend school, and read books on the subject. Be careful not to be overzealous, as this may make your child apprehensive and suspicious – “nothing can be that good” (p. 824).

- **Next step:** In the beginning it is important to be available to your child. Having a loved one close by gives the child the sense of security needed to feel comfortable to investigate their new environment. The authors stress the importance of letting your child know you are available; however, “do not hover as he or she explores new surroundings and meets new people” (p. 825). Allow the child space to bond with the teachers, and as the child becomes more comfortable, gradually remove yourself from the classroom environment.

Many of you have heard us say that you should be “boring” when you are in the classroom. An important part of the preschool experience is the social skills which are developed and strengthened. In order for the children to bond with their teachers and create relationships with their peers, they need to become engaged in the activities of the classroom.

- **Final step:** “Saying goodbye” (p. 825). While it may seem that your child would transition better if you left the room without him/her noticing, it actually creates anxiety for your child. Always make sure you say goodbye to your child. Tell your child who is picking up that day and when that will be (“After you sing the goodbye song, Lauren will pick you up. I will see you later after your nap”). It is most important that “you leave with a convincing smile on your face that tells your toddler that you’re confident he or she will have a good time” (p. 825).

Some other points to remember when you are leaving: Reassure him/her that you always come back and that you love him/her; give one kiss and one hug (two-year-olds are great negotiators so make sure they do not convince you to prolong the separation – this will only make it more difficult); never lie about who is picking up – if you won’t be picking up but you think it may be easier to say you will, please know that this will only bring disappointment when someone else picks up.

A few other reminders:
- It is extremely important to keep drop off time consistent. As much as possible, we would like all students to arrive within at least 15 minutes of class start time. Young children are easily distracted and if children are arriving sporadically throughout the day, this can create a distraction for the children already in class. Also, if a child arrives late and expresses anxiety
about separation, it can bring about anxiety in the other children who have already transitioned into the day.

- After the children are ready to make a full transition to school, we ask that parents/caregivers refrain from remaining in the classroom past the initial drop off. After all of the children are fully transitioned, we will have events in the classroom which will give the parents an opportunity to participate in the day.

- Sometimes children need a security item from home to help console them in times of stress. Pick out a favorite small toy or stuffed animal which can remain in the classroom or child’s cubby and is accessible whenever the child needs it.

- Pick up time is also an important part of the day. Parents/caregivers should be at the facility at least 5 minutes prior to dismissal time and remain in the lobby or library area. The children become anxious when they watch their peers leave school and do not see anyone there for them. Also, the teachers finish the day with a story and the goodbye song. If a child sees his/her parent or caregiver prior to dismissal time, he/she is no longer interested in the activity and is ready to leave school.

We hope this information is helpful in making the transition to preschool successful and as stress-free as possible!
Separation Anxiety: 15 Ways to Ease Your Child's Fears

by Cathryn Tobin, MD, author of The Parent's Problem Solver

It took months before I was able to leave five-year-old Madison, my fourth child, at school without having to peel her fingers off of me one-by-one and endure her tears and tantrums. The curious thing was that she'd gone to nursery school the previous year without making a fuss. Although Madison's teachers reassured me that she settled down and seemed worry-free within minutes after I left, I didn't know how heart-broken I would feel leaving her in such a state.

Separation anxiety is a little one's way of saying how much they really don't want to say goodbye. Most preschoolers and grade-schoolers experience it at some point in their early lives. Sometimes it occurs out of the blue after a change in the environment. Other times separation anxiety occurs because children are worried about life at home -- perhaps because parents are fighting or someone is sick -- and they feel a sense of uncertainty about leaving home. Most often, however, separation anxiety is purely a "missing mom" issue. Madison fussed for months on end until I had my eldest daughter drop her off. Almost immediately, the tears and tantrums disappeared. Follow these 15 strategies and you may be able to minimize the problem too.

**DO:** Keep your good-byes short and sweet. In doing so, you convey the message that you have confidence in your child's ability to cope.

**DON'T:** Hover around. Your child will sense your anxiety, and this will make it more difficult for her to calm down.

**DO:** Tuck a family picture or a loving reminder away in your child's backpack for her to look at later in the day.

**DON'T:** Sneak out. You want your child to know unequivocally that she can trust you.

**DO:** Develop loving good-bye routines. Madison and I invented a kiss-hug-nose-rub routine that we both enjoy.

**DON'T:** Bargain or bribe your child to behave. Your little one should be allowed her feelings.

**DO:** Send clear messages. Your child needs to know that you expect him to go to school no matter how much he fusses, cries or stamps his feet.

**DON'T:** Take your school-aged child home. If you do, you send the message that if your child cries enough he won't have to stay.

**DO:** Invite children from the class over, so your child can forge friendships that will make the transition easier.
DON'T: Get upset. By keeping an upbeat and positive attitude about your child's school, teacher and friends, you'll help your child feel safe and enjoy his time at school.

DO: Ask your spouse or another family member to take a turn dropping your child off, or pick up one of your child's classmates on the way to school, and your problems may disappear with lightning speed.

DON'T: Discuss problems with the teacher in the morning. Save conversations and questions for the end of the day.

DO: Involve the teacher. You need someone on the other end who will greet your child and ease the transition.

DON'T: Be surprised if you solve the problem and it reoccurs after holidays and sick days.

DO: Believe in your child's ability to make positive changes.

Remember: Separation anxiety means that a strong and loving bond exists between you and your child.

Cathryn Tobin, M.D., is a pediatrician, midwife and a member of the Canadian Pediatric Society and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons. Her new book The Parent's Problem Solver: Smart Solutions for Everyday Discipline and Behavior Problems was published by Random House. Dr. Tobin has been speaking on parenting issues for more than 20 years. She lives with her husband and four children in Ontario.

Accessed online at http://parenting.ivillage.com/tp/tpbehavior/0,,n8sx-p,00.html on 8/11/08
A Smooth Start

When your child starts preschool, she may experience separation anxiety and regressive behavior. Child psychiatrist Joshua Sparrow explains what you can expect.

By Gail O'Connor

Source: Scholastic Parents

The transition to preschool is often marked with two steps forward, one step back, as your child grows and learns in amazing ways — but at the same time, regresses in some behaviors, too. Child psychologist Joshua Sparrow, M.D., is an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School professor and co-author, with T. Berry Brazelton, of Touchpoints 3 to 6. He's also a former preschool teacher and gives this advice about how to ease your child's transition.

Starting preschool is a big step for many young children. What are some of the biggest challenges they face?

The most common challenge for most kids is saying goodbye to their parents, or trouble separating. For some children this may be their first time out of the home. Others may have separated before, but are now in a new, possibly more demanding situation (if they have to share the adult caregiver with a number of other children).

How can parents help soothe their children's separation anxiety?

First, they can look within for whatever ambivalence they have about leaving their child, because he will pick up on those feelings. If there's any hesitation or discomfort or doubt — which there often is; you hate to leave your child when he's unhappy about it — but if you don't feel good about where you're leaving him, or about the fact that you have to leave him, your child's going to feel, "Well, maybe this isn't really a good place or idea." The first thing you have to do to prepare your child is to prepare yourself.

How else can parents help ease the transition for their preschooler?

There are a number of things you can do to prepare your child. Prior to starting school, take your child to visit the classroom and meet the teacher. If there's a way of having a playdate with one of the other children who will be attending the preschool, that's great, because then the children can welcome each other when they begin school. You could give your child a transitional object, like a favorite blanket or teddy bear they can carry around with them all day; or even a story so the teacher can read it. And give your child lots of reassurance that "Mommy's coming back," or "Daddy's coming back."

To reinforce the idea, you can play a little game in which something disappears from sight but your child rediscovers it. Roll a ball under the couch and say, "Look, we can't see it. Do you think it's still there? Let's go look." When your child finds the ball, you can say, "See, even though we couldn't see the ball it's still there, just like Mommy when she went to work." What you're doing is reinforcing "object permanence," a concept that comes earlier (by the end of the first year) but can be threatened by the emotional challenge that separation presents.

What are some of the ways preschool helps a child grow?

For some children this may be the first time they're going into a group setting where the attention by caregivers will be divided among several children. Learning to share the relationship to the teacher will be a major new gain. Also, the child will be learning to make friends, share, take turns, and hold back on impulses, areas in which they're still making progress. Preschool will present them with more opportunities to practice these skills. They'll also have opportunities to learn about other children's feelings, and to discover the joy of being generous. It's very early, but you'll see examples where the
child will say, "Do you want to play with this doll?" That's their little gift, and they're learning the internal pleasure they get out of that.

Also, at this age kids love the daily routine of preschool. They get excited about mastering the schedule — they know when storytime and snack and lunch and nap happen — and they're really thrilled with themselves. Their fantasy play becomes stronger around this age, and there are ways of being more elaborate with their imagination when other children are around. They also benefit from their peers in terms of language acquisition, and even motor development. You may start to see them climb up on a slide more readily, for instance.

**When children are learning so many new things in preschool, is it likely they may regress in some other areas?**

In general, whenever a child is challenged by a new developmental area, she's likely to temporarily lose ground in an area she's only recently mastered. So at age three, it might be bedwetting, because she may just have learned to stay dry through the night. It's very likely there could be more crying, more clinging, more wanting to stick close to parents, and maybe some baby talk. There could be trouble separating at bedtime, and with getting to sleep. One of the things kids are working on at that age is learning to control their feelings, which in a way, we work on our whole lives. You can expect more crying, more temper tantrums, more irritability, and more impulsiveness.

**How do you know whether regression is a sign of something other than a touchpoint, in this case the transition to preschool? When do these behaviors signal something more serious?**

Certainly the regression should not last more than a couple of weeks, at the most. And it shouldn't be pervasive throughout the day, for days and days. So although new preschoolers may be talking some baby talk, or they may wet the bed or have more trouble separating to go to sleep, you shouldn't see less of other normal functioning at other times of the day. And they shouldn't lose interest in playing, for example, or having playdates with other kids.

**How can parents assess whether the preschool they've chosen is working for their child?**

The first thing is to gauge whether the teachers understand that they're not just there to support the child, but also the parent. Do they let parents stay in the classroom for the first several days, to help the child make the adjustment? How forthcoming are they about reporting both the ups and downs of the day? Again, you would expect a child to resist going for the first several days, maybe for the first week or two. And you might also expect him to have a temper tantrum at the end of the day when he sees you. But what's really helpful is to sneak in and spot your child before she spots you. See what she's doing. If she's on the teacher's lap reading a story, or conversing and playing interactively with another child, or busily playing with something side by side with a child who's playing with something else — those are all good signs. If she is wandering around aimlessly or sitting in a corner looking sad and not being attended to, those are obviously not good signs.

**Some children have emotional outbursts when their parents pick them up from preschool. Are these a cause for concern?**

When your child has a temper tantrum, that does not mean that he is not doing well. It tells you that he really missed you and can finally let go and be flooded by the feelings he was trying to fight back all day long. The fact that he misses you doesn't mean preschool is not going to work for him. You can reassure your child and say, "I missed you too, and I'm eager to see you because we love each other and we have fun together."

**Once regressive behaviors — like trouble separating — subside and the child**
appears to have successfully made the transition to preschool, can parents expect those behaviors to occasionally return?
Yes. For example, if you go away on a vacation or the preschool closes for a break, your child may experience another, shorter adjustment period. If a teacher or someone the child is close to leaves the school, you may see these behaviors again. Then there are other things of course that can cause these regressive behaviors, like developmental touchpoints, or the birth of a new sibling, or a stressful time in the parent's life. When you think about it, we all regress throughout our entire lives, whenever we do something new and challenging like move, or switch jobs, or get married. There will be things the child is working on, too.
Like so many parents, I fretted about my preschoolers’ first days of class. Will he think I’m abandoning him? Will he be scarred for life? (“That’s right, Dr. Therapist, she left me there with strangers for three hours every single morning!”)

I’ve made this transition with three children, and, amazingly, it hasn’t gotten any easier. I felt just as guilty leaving Kip, who entered preschool this week, as I did leaving Otto, now in kindergarten, and Zane, a big-time fourth-grader. Yet, until this year, it never occurred to me to stop by the annual separation workshop offered by their school, the Brooklyn Heights Montessori School. I could just hear my mother’s exasperated voice: “Oh, come on, Hope, you parents today can’t do anything by yourselves. What ever happened to ‘just shut up and do it’? You think parents 40 years ago had workshops on stuff like this?”

Maybe my generation of parents does get a little more hand-holding. Until six years ago, preschool teachers here discussed separation issues and offered tips at Back to School Night. But when the school psychologist, Kathy Reiss, began working more with the preschool, she decided to offer a dedicated workshop on the issue. Anybody at the school was invited to attend.

“The main reasons were to help parents help their children with separation, to realize they are not the only ones experiencing this, and to give
parents a chance to meet me,” Dr. Reiss told me.

Martha Haakmat, the head of school, agreed that the meetings were an opportunity for parents to get good advice while hearing other parents’ problems — problems sometimes bigger than their own.

“Parents rarely walk away with a foolproof plan of action to perfectly handle every difficult separation moment, but they do offer thanks and a smile for validation of their feelings and worries,” Ms. Haakmat said. “They may also secretly be feeling like, ‘Jeesh, I thought I was having a hard time!’ after hearing a story about another parent’s woes, and while this may not seem particularly generous to that other parent, it does help keep things in perspective.”

I asked Dr. Reiss and Ms. Haakmat if they thought we parents were in as much need of separation advice for ourselves as for our children, and their answer was a resounding “yes.”

“A very common place where parents can go off line in their thinking about separation is when we conflate our fears and feelings with our children’s,” Ms. Haakmat said. “We can forget that our deep sadness about separation (‘My child is growing up so quickly’) is also tinged with guilt (‘What kind of parent am I to be leaving my children?’) and maybe fear about trusting them to the care of others, while our children’s feelings are a lot less complicated and thus more easily assuaged.”

Dr. Reiss echoed the “don’t confuse your child with yourself” message.

“As parents, we have to be watchful of bringing our own stuff to the table,” she said. “If school beginnings were wonderful for you, you’ll see your child’s upcoming experience as an exciting opportunity. If you dreaded school every year, you’ll assume your child does, too.” As for my mother, the card-carrying member of the “why do parents these days need all this touchy-feely hand-holding when we got by just fine on our own?” club — of course parents can
handle the school transition alone, Dr. Reiss said. But why not get help?

So I did. Here’s what I learned:

**Never sneak out of the room.** Your child won’t be happy when he figures out you’re gone. (I learned that teachers hate this tactic.)

**Never make promises or bargains you can’t keep.** Don’t say you’ll be sitting on the bench outside if you won’t.

**Keep things stable.** Don’t introduce any other new thing into the routine.

**Expect regression.** Your child might be great the first week and drag her heels the second, or she might be completely potty trained but start having accidents.

**Don’t put words in her mouth.** Don’t say, “I know you hate school.” Reflect instead: “I hear you saying you feel sad.”

**Connect with old friends.** Make a play date with a friend from last year.

**Remind your child that he is an expert at mastering new places.** Say something like, “Remember how afraid you were of the zoo? Now you love it!”

**Introduce your child to the school and new teachers before the first day.** Take pictures of the front of the building, the teachers’ faces and the new cubby, and show him a few times before school starts.

**Let her take a small transitional object to school.** Maybe a note from you or a stuffed animal (but not an absolute favorite; ask teachers).

**Most of all, shake, shake, shake off the guilt.** Your child will stop crying a lot sooner than you think.
They, you, we, all of us, will be fine.

Hope Reeves is a writer who lives in Brooklyn.
The First Day of School: Dealing with Preschool Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety is a very common problem for preschool children, especially during the first few weeks of school. You may also see some separation anxiety in children after an illness, a vacation, or even a long weekend, where they have become accustomed to being at home for a long period of time.

A preschool child is at the age where he is learning to negotiate his independence, a concept that is both exciting and scary at the same time. With the realization that he is his own person, with wants and needs that are separate from yours, comes the realization that you may not always be by his side. Going to preschool can make this last point painfully clear, causing your child to become anxious about letting you out of his sight. Here are some tips for cutting down on separation anxiety during the preschool years:

- **Remember that children do pick up on your mood, even if they cannot yet articulate their feelings, so try to remain calm and positive about your child going to school, especially if it is for the first time.**
- **Do not automatically assume that your child is worried about starting school or that she will have separation anxiety. Do not signal that she should be nervous by asking leading questions, such as, “Are you worried about starting preschool and being away from mommy?” Instead, focus on the exciting aspects of starting school.**
- **Make sure that you have made the right choice in selecting a preschool for your child. Check out a few different places, ask for referrals from other parents, and spend a few hours in each school that you are considering. Think about the environment with your own child in mind: Is this a place where she will feel comfortable? Is this a good match for her personality and activity level? Finding the right fit for your child is extremely important.**
- **Make a few visits to the preschool in the weeks leading up to the first day. If there is an orientation, make sure to attend it with your child so he can meet the teacher, or arrange another time for him to do so. If possible, spend time in the classroom and in the play areas, or simply walk around outside the building on a few different occasions. Make sure your child knows where the bathroom is located and any other orienting details that he needs. The more time you can spend at the school before school actually starts, the easier the transition will be.**
- **Try to find at least one or two other children that will be in your child’s class (or at least attending the same preschool) and get together with their families before school starts. If your child starts to express worry about preschool, remind him that he will see his friends there.**
- **Prepare ahead of time for the first day of school, and make it a special event to look forward to. In the days leading up to the first day, talk to your child about what will happen that morning. Tell him how excited you are about all the fun he is going to have, and how you can’t wait to hear about everything he is going to do.**
- **Do not drag out the separation process, especially on the first day. Take your child to the classroom, hug her, tell her that you love her, tell her what time you will back to pick her up, and then leave. Do not stay or return if your child begins to cry. If you have put the effort into selecting the right school for your child, then the teachers will know how to distract your child and make her feel comfortable.**
- **Plan ahead about how you will handle your own feelings about leaving your child so that she does not see you getting upset, and then get upset herself. Think about what you will say when...**
you leave your child and how you will keep from getting emotional in front of her.

- Always be there on time to pick up your child. Being on time is especially important during the first few days of school. If she believes that you will be there to pick her up when you said you would, then she will be more likely to separate easily.

Children may display anxiety about separation in different ways, such as fighting with you about getting dressed in the morning, refusing to make eye contact with or talk to the teacher, being overly clingy, and/or throwing a tantrum. Understand that different children react to separations and new situations in different ways; some children adapt more easily (which does not mean that they don’t love you or miss you while you are gone!) and some are shyer and take longer to adjust. However, if you can manage to stay consistent with your routines, both at home and at school, your child should eventually become comfortable with the process of you leaving her at preschool.

Planning ahead can cut down on problems with separation, both for you and your child. Stay calm, be positive, and trust the teachers to handle the situation once you leave. Keep to a regular routine as much as possible, and keep any other major changes to a minimum in the few weeks leading up to the start of school.
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## Separating - Starting School

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