

Separation Anxiety at the Beginning of a New School Year

By Katrina Selawsky and Elaine Beguerie

Preschool is an exciting place in the fall for parents, teachers, and children. There may be some anxiety at the start of a new year as well.

Everyone requires time to adjust to new situations and people. For some children, coming to school is the first opportunity to develop friendships outside of the immediate family. Children returning to school for a second or third year will be facing new classrooms, new teachers, and new classmates. And they will be approaching the school environment from a changed perspective, since they have grown since the last school year.

Teachers also undergo a period of adjustment in the fall, as they get to know each child, gaining insight into personalities, needs and learning styles over time. It takes a while to get to know how to best encourage individual children to make the emotional connections that are so important for a successful classroom experience. Teachers will also need time to get to know parents, and to find ways to encourage them to feel comfortable about their child's program, and comfortable bringing concerns about the program back to the teachers.

Parents may be going through an adjustment too. Parents may wonder how their child will like a new classroom, and whether or not he or she will get along with and be understood by teachers. They may be concerned about how quickly teachers will find the unique qualities that make each child such a special individual, or wonder if a child will be able to form friendships quickly. Parents may also be uncertain about how to bring up a suggestion or concern about the program, wondering how teachers will react.

If adults experience anxiety about the beginning of school, it should come as no surprise that some children may express ambivalent feelings about this new beginning.

If your child is anxious about going to school, or is experiencing a tearful separation from you on school days, try to remember that the feelings these behaviors may represent are natural, common, and most likely will pass as familiarity with the school routine and trust in teachers develop. Learning to acknowledge feelings and express them is, in itself, an important step for your child. He or she will find that teachers (as well as parents) can offer caring and sympathetic assistance, and that other people (children and adults) have had the same feelings in their lives. Try to remember that tears at separation do not necessarily represent unhappiness in school, but may be an expression of the temporary difficulty a child experiences at the moment of saying good-bye to a parent. In fact, most children are able to begin their day happily within minutes of their parent's leaving. Sadness passes as enthusiasm for the materials, experiences,

and people associated with school take over.

As children and parents together become increasingly comfortable with, and knowledgeable about the routines and expectations of a day at school, and as children experience the fact that parents do indeed return at pick up time for children, reassurances offered at the beginning of the school day will be able to ease the transition from home to school.

Practical Advice to Parents with Children Experiencing Anxiety at Separation

1. Look for the special ways your child handles the transition time comfortably; take your cues from your child.
2. Support your child and be positive. Children are very sensitive to your ambivalent feelings; these can represent doubt to your child, and add to his or her sense of insecurity.
3. If you enter the classroom and choose an activity to aid in your child's transition, choose something that has a definite end (puzzle, book, etc.) Let your child know that upon completion of this activity, you will be leaving. Then stick to it.
4. It is helpful for some children to bring something from home - a favorite toy, book, photo of a family member, note, etc. This connection to home can be very reassuring.

Helpful Phrases When It's Time to Say Good-bye:

"I know it's hard to say good-bye."

"This is a special place, just for children."

"Will you make me (daddy, sister, etc.) a special drawing today?"

"I'll be back to pick you up at lunch time."

"Have a fun day."

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