

A Preschool Transition and Adjustment Guide

Dear Parents,

As the beginning of the school year approaches, a majority of parents become concerned about transitioning their children to school and placing them in a new environment. It might be the first schooling experience for some children and a new classroom for others. Whichever the transition, starting preschool is a big step for both children and parents. The anticipation of adjusting to a new situation, along with the concept of saying goodbye and separating from parents can be a challenge for some children.

This important milestone sometimes makes parents and children feel anxious and stressed. Separation anxiety often stems from the fear of the unknown, of being left alone in the company of strangers, or a fear of a parent not returning. You may observe behaviors such as crying, temper-tantrums, whining, clinging on to parents, screaming, or some regressed behavior. Transition is not a one-day event, but rather a process that extends over many months before and after the first day of school. In order to assist you with the process, we have prepared this lengthy, yet informative guide which includes information from experts in the field of early childhood education.

The Parents' Role

Children look to their parent(s) for reassurance in new environments and situations with unknown people. The first step is for you as a parent to prepare yourself for the change and separation. If you are feeling worried or nervous about your child starting school, he or she will probably be able to sense your uneasiness. Since children can pick up on nonverbal cues, it is important to act calm and assured about this new milestone. Stay positive and supportive, yet do not make too big of a deal about starting school. Placing too much of an emphasis on this new transition may just increase your child's worries. The more comfortable you are with this step, the more confident your child will be. The following are some suggestions that can be implemented starting a few weeks before school to ensure a smoother and more successful transition.

The Preschool Countdown

A Few Weeks Before:

- Spend time talking to your child about the concept of going to school and how it is a fun place for teachers and children only (not for parents). In order to help them realize that this is a normal experience in childhood, share stories and pictures about when you and loved ones went to school.
- Build excitement about preschool - pinpoint the fun aspect of learning new things, playing with new toys, painting, making new friends, etc.

- Make a book together about the new preschool experiences your child is going to have. You can include actual photos of the school, as well as text like, “This is John at school. This is his new uniform. This is Mommy picking up John after school.”
- Dramatize school life by setting up a pretend play area and acting out common preschool experiences such as circle time, story time, sharing, and so on.
- Wean off your child from his or her bottle and pacifier and potty train by the start of school if it is the requirement.
- Visit your local library during a read-aloud time so your child gets used to hearing someone other than his or her parents reading a book in a group setting.
- Play the *object-permanence game*. Hide a familiar object/toy and ask your child to rediscover it. Explain that even though we cannot see the object, it’s still there and it is “Just like when mommy goes to work.” The notion is for the object (parent) to disappear (say goodbye and leave child at school) from sight for a short while, but the child can rediscover it again (pick up time).
- Establish a routine for “school bed time” and “school wake-up time” to help your child adjust to the new schedule.
- Align the home eating and sleeping schedule with that of the school for easier transition.
- Include your child in packing the necessary items for school, such as bedding, an extra set of clothing, and a family picture.
- If possible, arrange a play date with children who will be in your child’s class.
- If your child has never before been cared for by someone else, start to leave him or her for short periods of time with friends or relatives. Reinforce the fact that you will return and that they are safe with others.
- Read story books to your child about starting school. Refer to the list of books provided below.
- Attend “Meet Your Teacher Day” to have a chance to visit the new classroom environment, get to know your new teacher, and see your peers. This will make the first day of school less overwhelming.

The Day/Night Before:

- Let your child choose a transitional object to take to school, like a favorite stuffed animal or a blanket. You might also put a scent from home onto a small piece of cloth and place it in a snack bag, such as favorite hand cream, perfume, etc.
- Make sure your child goes to bed at a decent time to get a good night’s rest.
- Do not focus too much on the first day unless your child wants to.
- Read a story at bedtime about the first day of school.

The Big Day:

- Review the day’s routine together- what preschool will be like and when they will be picked up.
- Come to school with the child’s immediate family members only. Avoid overcrowding with extended family members as it becomes overwhelming for all students.
- Bring your child to school and plan to stay for about 15 to 30 minutes. Together you can explore the classroom, play with a few toys, read a book, and meet the other students. Show your child around and make sure that he or she is as comfortable as possible.

- Calmly introduce the teacher to your child and step back a few moments to allow for her to begin forming a relationship with your child.
- As soon as your child is engaged in an activity, say your goodbye, communicate with the teacher, and leave. If he or she may be having a hard time getting engaged in an activity, you may decide to ask the teacher to stay with your child as you say goodbye so they have support when you leave.
- Consider promising your child a treat together after school, such as ice cream. Do not promise a treat for not crying! When not crying is discussed beforehand, it might set up the idea of “I am supposed to cry” in the child’s mind. To ensure trust, the promise should always be honored.

The Good-Bye

- Never sneak out of the room when your child is not looking. Once your child realizes you are gone, they will be frantic, less trusting, and clingier the next day.
- Goodbyes build trust. It strengthens the child’s belief that the parent will come back.
- Keep your tone positive and upbeat and try not to look worried or sad. Saying a quick, upbeat goodbye assures your child that all will be well.
- Create a secret handshake or a fun “goodbye routine” with your child and use it consistently.
- Give lots of reassurance to your child that you will be back to pick him or her up.
- Resist the rescue! Try not to turn back if you hear your child cry, as upsetting as this may be. During this transition time, your child may feel a little sad or scared. However, avoid coming back because it sends the message that your child will only be okay when you are there.
- Rest assured that the teachers have many years of experience and can help your child make a successful shift to preschool.

Final Thoughts

Not every child will experience distress as they transition to school and separate from their parents. While some children sail into a new setting in a few minutes without a backward glance, others may need a few weeks to adjust. At times, some children have a delayed reaction to separation and begin to act out or cry after some time in school. This is normal behavior and can be dealt with in the same manner as your initial separation.

Teaching your child to be independent, giving him or her an idea of what to expect, and coming up with a special goodbye routine will help ease the transition to school. It is important for parents to have continuous clear communication with the teacher and be informed about their child’s day. Most importantly, shake off any negative feelings or sadness you may have. Your child will stop crying sooner than you think and will begin to enjoy all that preschool has to offer!

In order to have the opportunity to visit the classroom and meet the teachers prior to the first day of school, parents and students will be invited to “Meet Your Teacher Day” on Monday, August 21, 2017. Everyone will have the opportunity to meet their teacher, tour and become acquainted with the classroom setting, and drop off their bedding/belongings. This is a highly recommended activity that helps prepare your child for a smooth preschool transition.

List of Useful Children's Books:

- *The Kissing Hand* by A. Penn
- *Llama Llama Misses Mama* by A. Dewdney
- *The Night Before Preschool* by N. Wing
- *David Goes to School* by D. Shannon
- *What To Expect At Preschool* by H. Murkoff
 - *Will I Have a Friend?* by M. Cohen
 - *Take a Kiss to School* by A. McAllister
 - *Time for School, Mouse!* by L. Numeroff
 - *A Pocket Full of Kisses* by A. Penn
 - *It's Time for Preschool* by E. R. Codell
 - *I Love You All Day Long* by F. Rusackas
 - *Spot Loves School* by E. Hill
- *Corduroy Goes to School* by D. Freeman
 - *First Day of School* by A. Rockwell
 - *When I Miss You* by C. M. Spelman

