

# How to Prepare Your Child for Preschool

**Start by reading stories about preschool.** Choose books that include typical preschool activities, as well as those that deal with separation. Point to the pictures and ask your child how the different characters might be feeling. Don't be surprised if she wants to read these books over and over. This is how children process new ideas and work through feelings.

**Help your child picture what preschool will be like.** Take turns playing the roles of Mommy, kid, and teacher. Act out saying good-bye to Mom and hello to the teacher. When you get tired of that scenario, add other activities, like snack time and finger painting.

**Schedule a visit to the school.** Seeing the classroom, meeting the teachers, and playing with the toys can make this transition easier. Familiarity helps children feel safe.

**Answer your child's questions, even if they're difficult.** It's important to respond honestly, in language she can understand. ("Yes, I will leave you for a little while, but I will come back to get you at lunchtime.")

There's nothing like seeing your little one, practically tipping over in his towering backpack, striding into his "big-kid school." But how can you minimize the stress? Here are some ideas for making the good-bye as good as it gets:

- **Prep your child about the day's routine.** Talk about what preschool will be like, how your child will get to school/come home, and what he will do during the day. If your child is bringing lunch, pack his favorites. Let him choose a special stuffed animal or blanket to bring. He can leave it in his cubby or near his coat hook. Just knowing it's there should be a source of comfort for him.
- **Stay, play, and say good-bye.** Plan to hang around for about 15 to 20 minutes on the first day. Together, you and your child can explore the classroom and meet other children. Find an activity he enjoys to ease the transition. Once he's involved in the activity, it's time to go. Let the teacher know you're heading out. Sometimes separation is easier when another caring adult can provide support when you leave.
- **When you say good-bye, stay positive.** Your child is watching your reaction to figure out how he should feel. If you appear worried or upset, he may feel more fearful. Say a quick, upbeat good-bye, tell him that yes, you will both miss each other, but he will have a great day. And remind him you'll be back at lunchtime (or whenever it is that you'll return).
- **Resist the rescue.** Don't run back to the classroom if you hear your child crying. He may, quite understandably, feel sad and a little scared. But if you return to the classroom, you might prolong his distress. Have confidence that the teacher knows how to deal with these situations. If you're worried, call the school to see how he is doing.

**Mommy, don't go!** Some children -- often those who are more cautious and slow to warm up to new situations -- have a hard time with separation. The adjustment is sometimes more difficult for children who go to preschool two or three days a week instead of five days, since saying good-bye is not a daily ritual. There's no secret to this one. You just have to hang in there. If you are consistent, supportive, and positive, your child will eventually adjust. Build extra time into your morning routine so you can spend a few minutes at school to help him get engaged as opposed to rushing off.

**Can't I stay home today?** You can't blame a child for thinking, "You're so fun to be with. I love my toys. The house is so cozy. Why go to school?" If your child protests going to school,

validate his feelings and help him move on: "I know it's hard to leave home. But it's a school day, and it's time to go." Here are some ideas to get your child from home to school.

- Mention a favorite toy or an activity to help remind her of the fun she has at school: "Do you want to play with the water table or the puppets today at school?"
- Set a kitchen timer to give your child a visual reminder of how much longer he can play before it's time to get dressed.
- Start an activity with your child that you finish later when she comes home, like reading a few pages of a book or starting to draw a picture together. This creates a tangible connection between "now" and "later" and gives her something to look forward to.
- If getting out the door is tough, blow bubbles as you walk to the car, and have your child "catch" them as he makes his way down the driveway.

**Where did my big girl go?** Children often regress as they transition to preschool. You might see more clingy behavior, potty accidents, thumb sucking, pacifier requests, or even nighttime wake-ups. This is because kids are working hard at school to cope with separation, follow the rules, share, and get along with peers. When they are home, they can let go a little and want to feel nurtured. Go ahead and baby your child if she needs it. This period is likely to pass more quickly if you're patient and supportive.

**Daddy, I don't like school.** Toddlers have trouble articulating their thoughts and feelings, so when they say "I don't like school," it can mean many things: I had a bad day; I don't know how to ask other kids how to play; I miss you. Or it could mean something else entirely -- maybe he really doesn't like the program. Sit down with your child's teacher, share what your child has told you, and ask how things have been going. If there are indeed challenges, brainstorm together how to make the school experience a more positive one.

As your child sets out for her first day of preschool, remember that ups and down are normal. But with time, she will not just adapt but will thrive, making friends and delighting in new discoveries. Before you know it, the problem won't be crying when you drop her off, it will be crying when you pick her up -- because she's having so much fun and she doesn't want to leave.

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