

The First Day of School: Dealing with Preschool Separation Anxiety

By Lisa Medoff

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 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 I