



Helping Preschoolers Cope with Separation Anxiety



By Katie Hurley, LCSW

Sep 8, 2015

The first day of a new preschool, or even the first day in a new classroom in the old preschool, can be met with a mix of excitement and anxiety for kids and parents alike. Although it's fun to embark on a new adventure and many preschoolers delight in the feeling of being "big," change can be scary for little ones (and their worried parents).

While a highly orchestrated morning routine might get you and your little one out the door on time, that final goodbye can leave even the most upbeat preschooler in a puddle of tears. Preschool parking lots are packed with tearful parents afraid to put their cars in reverse for good reason: separation is hard.

It's only natural for kids to feel anxious when saying goodbye to their parents. In fact, separation anxiety is a normal part of child development. It can begin before the first birthday and pop up again (multiple times) until age four, and sometimes even into elementary school. It can even begin later in the school year. Some kids seem to be doing just fine with the transition only to experience separation anxiety a few weeks into the school year.

Crying, tantrums and clinginess are all common symptoms of preschoolers struggling with separation anxiety. Parents should also be on the lookout for signs of regressed behavior. Try not to worry too much if your recently potty trained preschooler suddenly fails to make it to the bathroom on time. When a child is challenged by a new developmental task, he is likely to temporarily lose ground in an area recently mastered.

As you prepare to drop your child off at preschool, try these strategies to help your child cope with separation anxiety:

Confront parental ambivalence. It's perfectly normal for parents to worry about the transition to a new preschool classroom. It's hard to trust a new person or a new school with a little one! Kids will pick up on parental ambivalence. If parents hesitate, kids will feel unsafe.

- Talk your feelings out with a friend who knows the drill to get some perspective.
- Plan a coffee date with a friend or your spouse immediately following drop off so that you have support.
- Get to know the school and teacher as much as possible in advance (talking to other parents involved in the school helps!) so that you feel comfortable with the environment.

Start with a warm up. Bring your child to visit the school a couple of times before the first day. Many preschools offer visiting days. Comforted by parental presence, your child will feel free to explore the classroom and check out the toys. This is also a great time to ask about the first day routine and chat with the teacher about the typical schedule.

Create a goodbye ritual. Creating a specific goodbye ritual prior to the first day of preschool can ease some of the anxiety about that final goodbye. Try one (or more) of these ideas:

- Develop a special handshake or special wave.
- Hug, kiss, high five and goodbye!
- Tuck a transitional object (i.e. a wishing stone, a small photo or a special charm) in your child's backpack and fill it with love before you drop your child each day.
- Love notes in the lunch box remind kids that mom and dad love them and will return soon.

Send positive signals. While it might be tempting to sneak out the moment your child is distracted, this can actually cause stress for your child later in the day. Acknowledge your child's feelings and normalize his worries. It's perfectly

natural to feel a little bit scared, and a little bit of empathy can help your child feel safe and understood.

Watch your body language as you say goodbye. You might feel sad, but you want your child to feel safe and secure in this new fun environment. Stand up straight and smile for your little one to model a cheerful goodbye!

Stick to a routine. Children are at their best when they have plenty of rest, eat a nutritious breakfast and don't feel rushed.

- Prepack lunches and snacks the night before to save time in the morning.
- Wake up twenty minutes before your kids to factor in extra time for you.
- Have shoes, socks and backpacks waiting by the door at night.

Read all about it. Preschoolers love to read and there are several great books to help prepare kids for preschool. Anna Dewdney's *Llama Llama Misses Mama* and Audrey Penn's *The Kissing Hand* help ease the transition and normalize the process of separation for little ones.

The preschool years provide a great foundation for kids and kids have a lot of fun during this first school experience. Once you get over that first hurdle of saying goodbye, you will see your child grow and learn in leaps and bounds!

More resources:

- Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood: Adjusting to Preschool
- Separation Anxiety: Letting Your Child Go



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