

Separation Anxiety

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As a child's first day at school approaches, most parents are awash with conflicting emotions. On one hand, they see this day as an important milestone. Their baby is now becoming more independent and beginning to develop as a separate person in her own right.

Sometimes, she seems so big, so confident. But, at other times, she still seems so small and vulnerable. To a mother, who has been with her child constantly, this separation implies handing over care of your child to someone else, so you are confronting all sorts of feelings of doubt and possibly even guilt: *Should I keep my child with me a little longer (which conflicts with your growing need to re-establish your own identity and maybe rediscover a hobby or friends) or return to work?*

These feelings are all natural. They are also probably the biggest hurdle your child will encounter as she begins

to move away from you. Separation anxiety is more often than not harder for a mother (who is dealing with protective, nurturing instincts) than for the child, whose natural drive is towards independence.

While it is a good idea to prepare your child for this huge transition in her life, you should also be aware that by making too big a deal of it, you actually create, rather than alleviate, anxiety. It is true that children often fear the unknown more than the familiar, so it is certainly wise to ensure that the child has visited the classroom, met the teacher and, perhaps, at least a few of the other children with whom she will be spending her days. When you talk about the school, it is essential that you convey only positive thoughts, and certainly don't let your child hear any doubts or anxieties you may have. If your child has any reason to suspect that you are not completely happy about this transition, she will also feel anxiety.

While there are many children's stories about starting school, almost all start with the child feeling scared. If your child is not already anxious, this may suggest that she should be. For this reason, I would not recommend such books, unless you are already faced with a child who is expressing fear or reluctance about starting school.

Sometimes, a good-bye ritual could help. This has to begin sometime before the start of school so the child doesn't associate the two in a negative context. It is vital, however, that the first day at school is not the first time you leave your child with another person. Have some practice runs, where your child goes to play at a friend's house or stays with a family member. Always come back to collect her soon, so the experience is not unpleasant.

Tell the child exactly what will happen when you arrive at school. Make it clear that you will not be going into the classroom but will say goodbye at the door. If at all possible, do not carry your child from the car to the classroom; let her walk by your side, preferably carrying her own bag. These actions help her to feel independent and confident from the outset. Don't, however, tell her that she is "a big girl now," as she may be feeling very small and vulnerable, and the words could just accentuate that.

While you don't want to suggest negative feelings, you should certainly acknowledge any feelings she expresses. If she is sad, affirm the feeling; ask what

she is sad about. Say you understand, and that you hope that she will feel less sad as the day progresses. If she says she is scared, ask her to explain her fear rather than dismissing it.

Don't put words in your child's mouth by telling the teacher that she is sad, or excited, or whatever. If you want, you can suggest to the child that she tell the teacher how she is feeling. Let the teacher respond. This creates an opportunity to begin to build a relationship between the child and the teacher independently of the parent.

Once you are certain that the teachers are ready to take over, say good-bye (following whatever ritual you have developed) and then, unless your child is clearly distraught, leave. Resist the temptation for another kiss, another look through the window, as these actions just delay the good-bye and create more anxiety in the child. One thing you should never do is sneak away while your child is distracted.

Sometimes, it is helpful to give the teacher your phone number just before saying good-bye. Although, of course, the office has all your contact details, the child does not necessarily know that – this assures the child that the teacher knows how to get hold of you if need be. You can also say the time you will be fetching your child (most schools have a shortened first day), and the teacher can show the child on the clock when that is likely to be. Although the child does not yet understand time, knowing that there is a definite arrangement is often a comfort. Then, be on time.

It is best if you can avoid going into the classroom, and, preferably, you should let the teachers take over as soon as possible. Even changing shoes, stowing a bag in a cubby, and such routines are best handled by the teachers, who will begin presenting self-care skills to your child. This conveys clearly to your child that you have full confidence in the teachers. If you do these things for her, it could be interpreted as a reluctance on your part to leave her in their care.

At my school, I always reassured parents (at the pre-first day meeting) that I would phone them if the child was clearly upset and took a while to settle. More often than not, the children had a wonderful day, while mom sat outside in the car, clutching her cell phone and waiting for the call which didn't come. When the teacher says "don't worry, she'll be fine," she is usually right.