

# Separation Anxiety



For many children preschool is the first time they're going to spend a considerable amount of time away from their parents. There are new people involved in their lives, new friends to make and new rules to learn.

As a parent, we can help ease the transition into preschool, allowing the experience and separation from the primary caregivers to be one that is positive and successful. This transition can also cause stress and anxiety for the parents. Almost all children display anxiety when separating from parents. Regard anxiety as normal and understand that these feelings are all part of a learning phase.

The following are some ways to help ease the transition to preschool for your child. It is important to realize that just as each child's experience of separation anxiety from their primary caregiver is different, so might the strategies we use to support them differ.

## **Over the summer:**

Help prepare your child for the new experience in the following ways:

- Drive past the preschool. When you do, say to your child, "Look, who's preschool is that?" or "Who is the big boy/girl who is going to preschool next year?"
- If possible, arrange to see the classroom and watch the other children engaged in activities.
- Always be excited when you speak to your child about preschool. Read books about going to school and talk about what might happen there. Be enthusiastic, and focus on some fun activities you know will interest your child.
- Take your child shopping to choose a special big boy/girl backpack, a pair of indoor shoes, a snack bag and some new clothes.
- Arrange to leave your child with a caregiver or friend for short periods of time and gradually

increase the length of time spent away. This is the perfect opportunity to establish goodbye rituals. This can mean developing a special kiss, hug, or a saying that you repeat each time you are separated from your child.

- Read books about going to school. A good suggestion is *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn.

### The first day of school:

Staggered entry is a great opportunity to ease children into the preschool classroom. It helps children become familiar with a new environment which helps reduce anxiety on the first day of classes. Here are some Dos and Don'ts for the first regular day at school:

**Do:** Keep your good-byes short and sweet. This is a great time to perform your simple goodbye routine.

**Don't:** Hover around, prolong your departure, or come back several times.

**Do:** Allow your child to have a familiar object or toy from home. A security toy can bring comfort.

**Don't:** Sneak out. You want your child to know unequivocally that he/she can trust you.

**Do:** Say *"I'll be back"* and if possible explain where you will be for the short time while your child is at school.

**Do:** Send clear messages. Your child needs to know that you expect him/her to go to school no matter how much he/she fusses or cries.

**Don't:** Get upset or scold your child. Your child is already distressed, and he/she needs you to be positive and calm. It is normal for parents to feel uncomfortable too, you can manage these feelings with normal relaxation techniques (deep breathing, self talk).

**Do:** Arrive on time to pick up your child. Being late may increase fears and anxiety.

**Don't:** Give up. If you give in, your child will have a good reason to continue with his/her behaviour the next day you go to school.

**Do:** Involve the teacher. You need someone on the other end who will greet your child and ease the transition. Avoid discussing the problems with the teacher in front of the child. It is best to find a quiet moment to talk after class.

And remember...

**Don't:** Be surprised if you solve the problem and it reoccurs after holidays or sick days.

**Do:** Believe in your child's ability to make positive changes.

### Back at home:

- It is important to continue to be enthusiastic whenever you talk about preschool.
- Find time to discuss what happens at school each day. Learn about the daily activities, names of new friends, etc.
- Try to display school art on the walls for everyone to see.
- Allow your child to phone grandparents to tell them about his/her day at school.

Plan a celebration dinner to celebrate your child becoming a **"big preschooler."**

For more information, please Google **"Separation Anxiety in Preschoolers."**

This document was compiled from the following articles:

Separation Anxiety in Young Children **Written by Carol E Watkins MD**

Separation Anxiety in Preschool children – No More Tears for Children When Parents Leave

**Written by Cassandra Eccleston**

Separation Anxiety: 15 Ways to Ease Your Child's Fears **Written by Cathryn Tobin MD** (author of The Parent's Problem Solver)

How to Ease Separation Anxiety for Preschoolers **Written by R.L. Hanlon**

