

A PRESCHOOL TEACHER'S TIPS FOR EASING SEPARATION ANXIETY

By Annette Gendler, NPN member since 2008

LEAVING YOUR CHILD AT SCHOOL FOR THE FIRST TIME IS HARD FOR PARENTS AND CHILD ALIKE, BUT MINDING THE 3 CS—BEING COOPERATIVE, CLEAR AND CONSISTENT—WILL EASE THE PROCESS FOR YOU AND YOUR CHILD.

“Fake it until you make it.” That is one piece of advice Kelli Harris, associate preschool director at Akiba-Schechter, gives parents who are leaving their two-year-olds at preschool for the first time. “Even if you’re uneasy about leaving your child, don’t show it,” she said. “Cry in the hallway. Kids know when their parents feel unsure, and that makes them feel unsure themselves.”

Based on her 10 years of experience teaching preschool, Harris says easing separation anxiety boils down to 3 Cs:

Cooperation. Trust your child’s teacher. Even if you don’t know that teacher well yet, trust that she’s been doing her job for a while, and rely on her experience. See the teacher as a resource to help you through the process. Most likely, she’s been through it many times. Ask for her advice. Keep in mind that your child’s teacher wants to work with you. You’re a team.

Clarity. If you’ve been telling your child school is a good thing, and he’s going to have so much fun there, then don’t tell him you’re sorry you’re leaving him. That is confusing. When you tell your child you’re leaving, leave. Say goodbye and don’t stick around. Actions need to follow words.



Photo by Matt Dinerstein.

Consistency. Stick with the program. Leave even if your child is crying. According to Harris, saying goodbye is the hard part, so make it swift but something your child can count on. Knowing what will happen is comforting. Most kids, Harris says, are done crying by the time you get to your car. But never just leave. Saying goodbye is an important part of the routine you’re trying to establish. Similarly, be on time when you pick up your child. Being the only one left after all the other children have been picked up is scary, especially during the first few days. Once your child understands the school routine and is comfortable with his teachers, a parent showing up late is less of an issue.

For most kids, Harris has found, separation anxiety is not an issue after two weeks. If your child is having a particularly hard time, find a classroom activity she likes, and head for that when you arrive. Get her situated and comfortable before you leave. Take that time to read her favorite book or get her set up at the easel. Bringing a lovie, like a favorite blanket, might also help, but check on classroom policy first.

Leaving your child at school for the first time is hard for parents and child alike, but minding the 3 Cs—namely, being cooperative, clear and consistent—will ease the process for you and your child. Pretty soon your child will have adjusted to the big world of school while you might still feel that little twinge at how grown up he already is.

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