

First Days of Preschool

by Lilian G. Katz

The first days at preschool can be unsettling to many preschoolers and to some of their parents as well. Some children become anxious about how to cope all at once with the new adults, groups of strange children, and unfamiliar surroundings. Other children are more upset by the separation from home than by the new experiences. Still others make the transition to the new world with few hesitations. Whatever your youngster's pattern of adjustment turns out to be, the ideas outlined below may help.

"I'm Okay, You're Okay"

It is easier to help your child through the adjustment period if you are sure the environment she is entering is a sound and sensitive one. Such confidence will make it easier for you to reassure her that she will be all right. Many children pick up on their parents' uncertainties and anxieties and persist in behavior that will either get them reassurance or cause a change in plans.

Easing In

It is invariably helpful to plan one or two visits to the setting with your youngster in advance of enrollment. Having a friend or sibling whom already attends preschool or who starts at the same time as your child can make the new experience easier and more interesting.

Some children find it comforting to take along a favorite object, like a teddy bear or story book, that can serve as a bit of home during the adjustment period. It is best to wait for a child to ask for such a "transition object" rather than to suggest it yourself. It is not a good idea for adults to behave as though they agree with the child that a piece of old blanket can keep her safe, but it is generally wise to respect a child's desire to cling to something familiar in times of stress. Most children spontaneously give up these symbolic comforts by the time they enter kindergarten.

If you suspect your child will put up a struggle or find the new experience painful, plan to spend a few minutes with her in the class during the first few days. Ask the teacher to help you decide when it is all right to reduce the time.

Avoid Mixed Signals

If you react to your child's hesitation or upset about going to preschool by offering her a reward or a bribe, such as promising a special treat for good behavior, you may signal that she has cause to be upset.

Tears Are Understandable...

Resist the temptation to threaten or tease a child about being a "cry baby." Rarely does such strategy help. Reassure your child that it is all right to cry when you miss someone that you love. Remind her that you will be reunited every day, and that as she gradually makes new friends and gets used to things, she will not miss Mom/Dad and home so much.

...But Please Hold Yours 'Til She's Out of Sight

If you are one of those parents who is tempted to cry when the little one disappears into the nursery crowd, hold on until the child is well out of sight and sound! While it is only natural to become upset at separations, one frequent reaction to such crying is irritation and anger with oneself -- mainly because of feelings of helplessness in the face of your child's tearful suffering. But anger usually makes matters worse and may even set the stage for a power struggle. It is usually helpful to **make the good-byes short, sweet, warm, and firm.**

Offer Support and Understanding

Instead of asking your child whether she'll be okay, indicate that you believe she will do fine, and there will be people at the school ready to help her if necessary. Be careful not to promise that it will be all fun from the word "go." For some children that may be so, but for most, which feel they belong to their families, some upset at separation and uneasiness in the new surroundings should be expected. Accept the child's feelings without dwelling on them, and let her know that you understand that it takes time to get used to new people and places.