

# Minimizing Separation Anxiety in Preschool

By Janelle Durham, MSW, Parent Educator, Bellevue College. [www.GoodDaysWithKids.com](http://www.GoodDaysWithKids.com)

Starting preschool is a huge change for a child who has mostly been at home with a parent. Suddenly they're in a new environment, surrounded by strange new adults and new children who behave in unpredictable ways, and there are new routines and expectations to adjust to. It's a lot!

Some children make the adjustment with remarkable ease. Some will struggle for the first few days and then settle in. Some jump in to the new experience happily, then struggle with it a few weeks in. Here are some ways to help ease the transition

- Preparation and Practice
  - Talk about what to expect at preschool and what will be expected of them. What is the day's schedule, what activities will they do, who will be there.
  - If possible: Meet the teacher in advance, spend time together, demonstrate to your child that you are comfortable with this person. Or show your child a picture of the teacher and talk about what the teacher will do and how s/he can help them.
  - If possible: Visit the environment in advance, get familiar with it. Or look at pictures and talk about the fun activities that happen there. Point out that the parents aren't all there, but the children are playing happily.
  - Prepare your child for the fact that you will leave – talk about when/where you'll be going, talk about when you'll be back, and what you'll do when you're back together. Sometimes talking about this upsets your child, but better that than to be surprised to discover you gone. When talking about this, show confidence that they will handle it well.
  - Read books about preschool, and books about parents going away and coming back when promised. You can find lots of recommendations for books on these topics (like <https://chaosandquiet.com/childrens-books-separation-anxiety/>). I encourage you to choose books that mostly focus on positive experiences and transition rituals (like the book *The Kissing Hand*), and not choose books that *overly* focus on how hard separation is – we don't want to create separation anxiety in a child who otherwise might not have had it!
  - Practice being apart – if your child has not had much time apart from you, try little 10 minute separations or half hour separations where another adult cares for your child to help get them used to the experience.
  - If you're feeling anxious about this transition, talk to other adults about that. Don't let your worries bleed over to your child. In front of them, be calm and confident.
- Ease the first day(s)
  - Dress your child in their most familiar, most comforting clothes (there is so much new and unfamiliar, it helps if your clothes feel familiar). If you send a snack or lunch from home, make it their comfort foods.

- Give them part of you to hold on to – a picture of you, a love note from you, a smiley face drawn on their hand, or a matching bracelet, so you're "there with them."
- Some teachers recommend a transitional object (like bringing a special toy from home). Others find that it can cause more issues if other children try to take it... ask your teacher.
- Some parents try a few short stays on low stress days when you don't *need* to be away, so that the child is up to a longer stay when you do. Some preschools let the parents stay with the child for the first few days until the child adjusts.
- Allow plenty of time for getting ready in the morning and for the commute so you're not feeling rushed and stressed when you arrive.
- When the time comes to separate:
  - Don't try to sneak out! If your child cries when they see you leave, it might seem like a good idea to sneak out. But it will be much harder and more anxiety provoking if your child "discovers" that you left when they weren't looking.
  - It's much better to have a nice consistent ritual for departure. Something like a high five or three kisses or a little rhyme you say "see you later alligator..."
  - Don't rush the drop-off. Help them make a plan for what they'll do first: "after I go, you can go play with the blocks" or "wow, they have purple play-dough today – I'm going to go so you can get to playing."
  - Don't linger. If you've told them you will leave, but every time they look sad, you come back, then it's confusing and inconsistent. Say goodbye briefly before leaving, be cheery and positive demonstrating your confidence that they'll be fine while you're gone.
- Be casual when you return: In the book Owl Babies, when the mother comes home, she says "What's all the fuss? You knew I'd come back." And the babies say "I knew it." If your child tells you (or shows you) that they were sad that you were gone, you can empathize with that, but also reinforce that they were safe and well cared for while you were gone, and you came back just as you had promised.
- Don't be late for pickup! Your child needs to know they can trust you to return when you say you will. If you ever are late, apologize to them for this.
- Most children adjust pretty quickly to preschool. If they have any on-going challenges, you and the teacher can work together to find a solution.