Saying goodbye: Making hard transitions easier

Please don’t go,” Janie musters in her barely controlled two year-old voice. As Janie’s face reddens, lower lip quivers, and the activity in the room stops, Ms. Black smiles and prepares herself for her routine and reassuring parent conference on toddler transitions. She knows that Janie’s parents need to know that they aren’t harming their child by leaving her, that Janie’s response is normal, and that, with attention and care, the crisis will soon pass.

All emotionally healthy children sometimes find separating from their parents difficult. Some children deal with separation issues in infancy, others as toddlers, and some not until kindergarten. (Many young adults revisit separation panic before starting college or going off to a first job). In all cases, separation anxiety marks strong parent child attachments. It says that children are able to tell the difference between attentive, familiar parents and strangers who may look, feel, sound, and smell unfamiliar.

In general, infants younger than about six or eight months don’t seem to notice when their parents leave them with a caregiver. Slightly older children, however, may cry, scream, and sob when parents say goodbye, even when their caregiver is familiar. Three to five year-olds frequently rely on rituals and comfort objects, while 4 to 6-year-olds generally take their cues from their parents. If the parents are uncomfortable and nervous, the children will be, too. Some children seem to make a smooth transition to a new environment only to suffer separation anguish several weeks or months later. In all cases, careful preparation and patient reassurance ease difficult transitions.

Preparing for transitions

Share information about separation anxiety with parents when they come for an enrollment interview. Ask how their children deal with separation now, and what you might do to help ease the transition. Get information on the child’s favorite activities and materials. Share some books and other resources that introduce children and their parents to the day-by-day routines of child care programs and school.

Anticipate some difficulty with transitions when children are unfamiliar with out-of-home care. Entering a child care program or school for the first time is scary, for both children and their parents. Children who speak a language other than that spoken by the teacher will likely find separating from a parent especially frightening. Make sure you have a list of and can pronounce essential phrases in the child’s language. Try to use both languages as much as possible. Children who have had other difficult separation experiences, like a parent who was hospitalized for a long time, may also have a difficult transition to school.

If a child enters your classroom mid-year, spend some time preparing the other children for the new arrival. A couple of days in advance, tell the group the new child’s name and share what you know about the child’s interests. “Kenta will come to our school on Wednesday. He hasn’t been in a school before, but he really likes to play with blocks and to draw pictures.” If the child has a physical

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disability, share that fact with the group but avoid being dramatic or sappy. “Kenta uses hearing aids to help him hear more sounds. The hearing aids look like buttons in his ears. I’m sure he’ll tell you about them if you ask him.”

Make sure you prepare the classroom for a new child by having a cubby ready, labeling the cot, making a name tag if you use them for all of the children, and having materials available that you know the child likes.

**Getting comfortable**

Encourage parents to spend time in the classroom with their children. Some programs schedule an open house for a few families at a time. This allows caregivers and teachers time to tell about their classrooms and gives children time to investigate materials without competition or pressure, while their parents are standing by. Some programs encourage parents to stay in the classroom with their children for the first few days of school. If possible, make provisions for a few short days before the first full day of school. Gradually increase the length of time children spend away from their parents. You will see that after a couple of unpressured days, the children will naturally move away from their parents and investigate materials and activities independently.

“. . . it is never OK to leave without saying goodbye . . .”

Ask parents to give their child reminders of home and family, a photograph, security objects like blankets or a favorite stuffed toy, a scarf or handkerchief, or a note tucked in a lunch box or backpack. These objects help children bridge the distance between home and school, especially when separating is difficult. Five-year-old Sarah told her kindergarten class at circle time, “This is my mommy’s scarf. I hold it in my pocket. She told me to hold it in my fingers when I’m feeling lonely for her.”

**Saying goodbye**

Rituals make saying goodbye easier for children and their parents. Help children and their parents make a ceremony of hanging a family photo in a cubby or on the bulletin board. Encourage the parent to sit down and share a book or fingerplay before saying goodbye. Notice the routine that each family uses for separation, a kiss on each cheek and on the top of the head, or a wave from a particular window, for example. These rituals comfort children who know that their parents are willing to take the time for the routine. Most of all, avoid looking impatient when a goodbye takes longer than usual. Remember the parent-child relationship will last far longer than any activity you have planned.

Help parents when they decide to leave their children for the day. Children pick up on ambivalence and guilt, so encourage the parents to act gently but matter-of-factly. Share these guidelines with parents and help them follow through:

**When it is time to leave, leave.** Say goodbye, go through your personal ritual, and walk out the door. Don’t complicate painful separation by saying, “OK, but just for a few more minutes.”

**Always return at the expected time.**

Talk about the day’s schedule. “I’ll come to pick you up after nap, snack, and story time. You will be on the playground and I will find you playing there.”

**Ask for a teacher’s help with words or signal.** Teachers are trained to distract and redirect. Trust that your child’s teacher will have the child calm and involved in the day’s activities.

Deborah Hewitt (1995) offers these suggestions for helping children who are upset when their parents leave.

- **Avoid ridicule.** Never say things like “Only babies cry,” or “You’re in kindergarten now. The other children will laugh at you for crying.”
- **Reflect the child’s feelings.** “It’s sad when Daddy has to leave.” Reassure that the parent will return. Make up a song like My Mommy Always Comes Back.
• Do a puppet play or a flannel board story that tells what will happen during the day.

• Make a pictorial schedule of the day. Review it as necessary to identify when pick-up time is.

• Allow the child to hold a lovey or security toy.

• Engage the child in a favorite activity as soon as possible. Many children find clay and water play activities soothing and reassuring.

Make sure that parents know that it is never OK to leave without saying goodbye to their child. Tell them that you are ready to deal with separation difficulties and that these difficulties will only be worse if the parent sneaks away.

Going home

At the end of the day, children sometimes have the same transition difficulties that they experienced at the beginning. Some burst into tears (convincing uninformed parents that their child has been miserable all day), while others ignore their parents or balk at leaving their play. Unfortunately, because everyone is tired at the end of a long work day, the transition may be more challenging for children, their parents, and you. Work with parents to develop routines for the end of the day. Try these suggestions for easing the going home transition.

• Announce the transition. For example say, “Hannah, your mom will pick you up in about five minutes. What do you want to tell her about the day?”

• Gather personal items from cubbies, including dirty clothes, lunch box, daily log, diaper bag, art work, or the day’s found treasures.

• Give the children hints about the activities you have planned for the next day.

Encourage parents to be gentle but firm about leaving. Ask that they gather their children’s personal belongings, say goodbye to you and the other children, and leave. If you have important news to share with a parent, make notes that will help keep the conversation short. Offer to schedule a conference if your chat will last more than a couple of minutes. Remember, short messages have a way of becoming long, involved conversations. You’ve worked hard to make the transition easier, don’t undo your work by making children wait.

Remind parents that a simple, nutritious snack, a piece of fruit or some crackers in the car will cushion end-of-day crankiness. Encourage parents to talk about their day and to ask their children to share stories, too. A parent might say, “Today I had a meeting and I had to sit still for three hours. Tell me the best thing that happened to you today.” Stories help families reconnect at the end of the day, and build memories that ease separation in the future.

Smoothing transitions

Work with parents on separation issues before the crisis comes. Use these ideas. You, the parents, and the children will find transitions easier.

• Encourage parents to spend time in the classroom with their children. As the children become familiar with the environment and the people in it, they will gradually move from a parent’s side into new, exciting activities.

• Ask parents to give their children reminders of home to help bridge the school-home distance.

• Help parents develop a ritual for saying goodbye.

• Insist that parents say goodbye and never sneak out.

• Prepare children for changes in a parent’s pick-up routine.

References


**Resources**


Schwartz, Amy. *Bea and Mr. Jones.* New York: Viking/Puffin, 1892.

