

Preparing Students for Separation

Separating from your child each day may be difficult. Young children often show signs of great distress at their parents' departure. This, in turn, creates anxiety and distress for their parents and for many parents it becomes impossible to think of anything else during the day at work or home.

If this is your child's first experience in a formal school setting, there will be a period of adjustment because your child is faced with a new environment and developing new relationships with new people. You may have ambivalent feelings about the choice you have made to leave your child with others during the day, and this may make it difficult to respond to your child's distress without guilt and distress of your own. You are also faced with the task of developing a relationship of trust and mutual concern with those who are caring for your child in your absence.

How can parents prepare their child for separation?

1. Examine your own feelings. Children will sense your feelings about separation and draw clues and conclusions from your behavior. If you are anxious, guilty, or fearful about separating yourself, this is the model you are giving them to follow.
2. Transfer the attachment the child has for the parent to developing a relationship with the teacher. This is the main goal between parent and teacher. Ways to do this are talking about the teacher in positive terms at home and using her name frequently. Model that you like and trust the teacher through statements and actions.
3. Show the child that you feel comfortable about leaving him at school by exiting quickly. Remember for every minute you stand there and try to comfort the child, the subtle message that the parent doesn't trust the situation is being communicated.
4. Learn the school procedure for drop off and then establish a routine. Your child's teacher will explain the procedure for her classroom. A routine builds security. This routine can include walking the child to the classroom door, acknowledging the teacher, saying one goodbye and leaving. A routine helps produce the least amount of distress. More distress is seen in children whose parents leave abruptly with no staff acknowledgement or the parent who says goodbye several times.

If problems separating from the parent continue after the first couple of weeks of school, set a conference with the teacher to develop a parent/teacher plan. Remember, with the issue of separation anxiety the goal is to help the child bond with the teacher. By working with the teacher, you give a gift of empowerment to the child.