

Understanding Separation

When a child starts to school for the first time, it is likely that both child and parent will experience mixed feelings. It's normal, on one hand, for the child to feel positive and excited about the adventure of a new environment, to be attracted to the other children and the interesting things to do at school; and it's normal for parents to want their child to have the playmates and the social and intellectual stimulation that school can provide. It is also inevitable for both to have some negative feelings right along with the positive ones.

The child may feel afraid that she is not safe without the parent, anxious about controlling herself and somewhat lost without familiar boundaries to rely on. She may even wonder if she is still loved and feel some anger because of this new anxiety. The sadness at being parted for a while from the parent may come rushing over her at the moment she says goodbye at the school door. All of these feelings are combined with positive excitement and high expectations.

You may have many of the same negative feelings. You have arrived at the decision carefully, convinced that a Montessori school is just what your child needs and perhaps are looking forward to a little freedom for the first time in a few years. When the moment actually comes, you, too, may be filled with uneasiness. This is especially true if your child looks downcast, expresses some discomfort or cries. You may be wondering if the teachers here really know what they are doing or how they will respond to your child's fears. Other traditional areas of concern are:

“Is my child too young for school?” or

“Why should I force him to go to school at three years old?”

It is quite possible that even deeper unconscious insecurities may reside under this surface layer of discomfort. During the past few years this child may have defined your identity as “parent”. Now he is growing up. Who will he be now? The house will seem empty without him. You will miss him, perhaps feel a bit lonely at first and wonder if you have done your job well enough that your child will measure up to the others.

In short, both parent and child are experiencing feelings of fear, sadness, and anger associated with separation. Recognizing these feelings and resolving them may be the most important task to be accomplished all year. Facilitating this first separation is an important step in your child's emotional development since it may be the prototype for all the others that will follow in his or her lifetime. Only the child who feels relaxed and comfortable can afford to be intellectually open to the environment the school has to offer. Teachers and parents who understand the confusion as well as the connections between dependency and attachment are better prepared to be effective partners in the child's growth. Your child is making an effort to progress, grow and explore new activities beyond the parent-child relationship. It is our role as parents and teachers to assist her.

What to Do

Be prepared. Know in advance that some of these feelings of fear, anxiety, insecurity, sadness, and anger are normal and recognize their signs. You decided your child was ready for school and chose one you trusted. You can set the tone for the day by providing positive encouragement, subtle yet firm.

Avoid Rewards. You may be implying that the experience itself is not sufficiently fulfilling and requires outside coercion. Prolonged goodbyes give the message that you're not really sure this is the place you want her to be.

Be honest about your feelings. If you feel concerned or saddened by the goodbyes at the door, don't feign cheerfulness but be firm and sure. Let your child know you have confidence in the adults you are entrusting him to. Also let him know that acting out those feelings will not alter your decision. You are sure this is the best place and the right time.

Give support with your positive expectations. Remember, you are happy and excited that she can go to school, that she will have many new and positive experiences and that you expect her to like it as you do.

Give special attention at home for a while. If you haven't done this already, set aside some "special time" just for this child every day, so both of you can count on it. Most young children enjoy rituals and respond to specific information about future events involved in the morning routine: what time you will get up, breakfast details, which way you will drive to school and what will happen when you get there. Talk about the teacher and the other children briefly but be sure to include the time you will return and what you will be doing while he is in school. We all like to have prior information before we begin a new job, a new social excursion, or just another day. Your child does, too. The more prepared he feels, the less anxiety he will feel. He will become less fearful as he experiences the stability of the daily schedule and begins to accept and enjoy this special environment which has been carefully and explicitly prepared for his needs.

When you pick her up . . . Try to avoid the questions: "What did you do today?" or "Did you have fun at school today?" These kinds of questions put the child on the spot. She may not remember all her new experiences specifically enough to relate them to you. She may actually enjoy her new independence to the extent that she may not yet want to share her feelings with you. Consider saying nothing at all, which will allow your child to open up on her own and to tell you about her day gradually as she remembers.

Ask for what you want. We understand that every parent is concerned about their child's success at school and we're happy to answer parental questions and concerns. Although we frequently appear busy at school (and frequently we are), don't let this put you off. If something is on your mind, call and leave a message for the teacher. She wants to talk to you.

Helpful Don'ts

Don't make the beginning of school a topic of daily conversation as the school year approaches.

Don't allow older children, adult relatives, or friends to tease or frighten younger children with tales of how awful school is.

Don't set a pattern of prolonging goodbyes or delayed departures for the purpose of ensuring that your child is adjusting. This simply will prolong the adjustment period. We welcome you to observe any time once the classroom settles.

Don't force the child to be exuberant about school. It is natural for the child not to be ecstatic about giving up a comfortable and safe relationship at home for the uncertain territory at school. Allow her to express her feelings about school but don't give the impression there is any choice about going.

Don't assume that all the anxiety associated with beginning school is the child's anxiety. Parents may experience some of their own. Try to separate your anxiety from that of your child. Tension and worry are highly contagious. Acknowledge and accept these feelings, then relax and share your feelings with a friend.

Helpful Do's

Do treat school as a part of the normal course of events.

Do tell her what her schedule will be, how many days she will go to school, how many hours, when you will return, and what you will be doing while she is in school. Gradually incorporate names of individuals she will encounter at school. Some children even like to name the streets they travel each day on their way to school.

Do make transportation plans clear and consistent, i.e., "Today I will take you to school but tomorrow Tommy's mom will take you." "Daddy will pick you up today at 12 o'clock."

Do pick up your child on time. A change in schedule will be frightening to young children, especially before their new experiences become consistent.

Do create a normal, routine atmosphere at home, especially during the first few weeks of school.

What happens if, after all your good planning, the big day arrives and your child begins to cry or complains of being sick? Sometimes this doesn't occur until the child has been in school for weeks or even months. Parents should remind themselves that the child should go, even though tears may flow. Don't be surprised. We are not. The staff knows what to do.

The crucial moment is the point of separation between parent and child. If a problem arises, the teacher will help you. Demonstrate your trust by smiling, saying goodbye, and promptly leaving. The teachers are prepared to handle this situation. Your leave-taking will demonstrate your trust in them and will be reassuring to your child. Once the moment of separation is over, the child usually recovers quickly and has a successful day. If you need reassurance, we welcome your phone call during the morning. A successful integration into the classroom is a milestone for your child. He will benefit from the experience and continue to grow intellectually and socially.