**Pre-School Separation Anxiety**

**Advice from a Teacher**

As a Preschool teacher, I spend most of my days trying to see things through the eyes of a three-year-old. I design my classroom with their height in mind; I constantly look for new teaching strategies that would be appropriate for their attention span; I stock toys and manipulatives purposefully for little hands, and I constantly find myself saying "if I were 3, would this interest me"? My goal is to make their first impression of school a happy one. However, year after year one of the most heart- breaking things I have seen through the eyes of a toddler is the anxiety they feel at drop off on that first day of school. It comes in many forms depending on the temperament of the child. One child may throw an all out crying fit complete with pleating and begging for Dad not to leave while another may cling on to Mom's leg and look at me "The Stranger” with fear in their eyes. Then there is the child who is silent and withdrawn, or the one that suddenly becomes overly shy when they are normally outgoing. Children are all different and they respond to anxiety in many different ways.

Let’s not forget the poor parents. I have had the ones who reluctantly drive away thinking, "Why is my child the only one screaming at the top of their lungs?" or the parent that has to literally rip their child from the car at drop off. Then there are the parents who often are so sad by their child's unwillingness to want to go to school that they second guess the decision to send their little ones to pre -school at all. To every parent I say "don't worry, this too shall pass". The fact is all those tears and fears are totally normal. Your child is about to conquer many milestones in Pre-school. Being able to function in an environment other than their inner circle is a huge milestone necessary for developmental growth. I do believe there are things parents and teachers alike can do to help our little ones through this major transition. First and foremost, as a teacher I never forget that these children have only been on this earth for 3 short years and frankly I am in awe of them. I think of all they have learned in such a short amount of time and what they will learn in my class in one school year is just a miracle to me.

So before we discuss what we can do to make school cool, let's go back and start at the beginning of your child's life. In infancy, it is crucial for babies to establish a strong and necessary bond with parents and/or their caregivers. Emotionally healthy babies come to understand that they have nurturing responsive caregivers who will meet their basic needs. In turn, they view the world as a safe and predictable place. This allows them to enter trusting relationships with their parents and caregivers and later with others. Sadly, babies who are neglected or abused, who do not have responsive caregivers to meet their needs, come to doubt and mistrust the world. The truth is when a baby doesn't have a healthy attachment with a parental figure there can be lasting effects on the stability and viability of that child. This can be for many reasons such as illness of the child or the parent, depression, drug use, teenage pregnancy, and poverty just to name a few. Babies growing in a healthy environment understand that their parents/caregivers are the sole providers of everything they need to survive in this world. With that said, it is a perfectly normal response for a baby 9 to 18 months to cry the moment a parent leaves the room. This tells that parent you have done your job! You have a smart baby that knows that he/she can depend on you!!

Now moving forward, your baby starts to walk and enters the next developmental stage of independence. I can do it by myself. Your child is perfectly content to try new things knowing that you are right there by their side. This loving, beautiful bond of trust continues. Somewhere along the way your child realizes that you have an inner circle of family and friends that you know and trust and that it's ok to form bonds with them too. Then a major milestone is reached and your little one can finally successfully stay at grandmas for the day or have a little playdate that lasts for a few hours without crying when you walk out the door. Obviously, the child who lives in a home where both parents work has had an opportunity to bond with a caregiver or another family member. They know that they are safe with this person that you know and trust. It is so beneficial for your baby to form a bond with someone other than you. In a perfect world, all children would feel safe, have all their needs met, and be allowed to grow and flourish in those all-important early stages of development.

Here’s where life starts to get interesting, around the ages of 2 and 3 when toddlers become very mobile we teach them to never run off and never never go with strangers, all very good advice.

Now let's stop here. This is where we pretend to be three. Not that long ago you put on our big girl/boy panties for the first time. You spend your days moving through the routine that you know and love with people you know and love. Now it's time to start Pre-school. On the first day of school, you are dropped off by yourself in a strange place with a total stranger. WHAT! Doesn't this go against everything we have taught our children? Yes Yes Yes it does!! Which is why parents and educators need to prepare their little ones for school so that this major and necessary milestone they are about to reach can be a smooth, less traumatic transition for all.

We must start preparing our little ones months in advance. Here is a list of things a parent can do to lay the foundation for a successful transition into Pre-school:

* Set up play dates with children your child's age. It's important for them to become used to an environment with other children. Not only is this great for social development in general, but it prepares them for the classroom environment. Being in the presence of lots of other children can be totally overwhelming for the child who is having this experience for the first time.
* Consider joining a Mommy and Me class. If you are a working parent this can be a Grandma or caregiver and me experience. This could be the best possible situation for a gradual entry into school independence. These classes typically last for a few hours a day and meet only a few days a week. The classes are designed for children 2 and 3 years old.
* Take your child with you to visit the school and meet the teacher as often as you can. This can be done at the end of the school year in the months of May and June prior to the school year they will enter. Make this event an exciting one. Point out all the fun activities and friends they will make. If you are lucky enough to have a teacher who will allow it, stay long enough for your child to interact a little. This can be participating in circle time or a short activity.
* Visit your local library for story time. Almost every library has a program for toddlers. This is the perfect opportunity for your child to be in the company of other children their age. They may even make a friend! This is a semi-controlled atmosphere perfect to prepare little ones for circle time in the classroom.
* Children have no concept of time. 12:00 means nothing to them. Teach your child to tell time in a way they can understand. Use your daily routine as a guideline. Say things like after lunch we will do this or when you have 2 sleeps we will go there. This is so critical when they go off to school. They not only need to know that you will come back for them, but they need to know when. Children love routine. They can absolutely relax and learn when they know what comes next. A child brought up in an environment with no structure or routine can experience anxiety that can interfere with their development. I can't tell you the miraculous transition children have once they learn the class routine. If I deviate, they are quick to remind me that I am doing it wrong!
* Read stories to your child about school!! I cannot stress this enough. There are wonderful books purposefully written to help with separation anxiety and starting school. They are full of relatable characters and situations that describe feelings they are having that they are unable to describe themselves. Read Read Read to your child! I have added a list of my favorites.
* Take your child to buy school supplies. Let them pick out their book bag or school box. Consider placing a picture of the 2 of you together in their supplies. This could be on the inner lid of their school box.
* As the days grow closer do a dry run of the school drop off routine. Actually take them to school and go through the motions.
* Make sure your child is adjusted to the time they need to wake up to come to school. An overly tired child will be out of sorts
* Establish a morning routine.
* Have a special way you say your good-byes at drop-off and make it part of the morning routine.
* Once school has started, praise the work they are doing in school. Tell them how proud you are of the craft they have made and display it with pride.
* Your child will follow your lead when it comes to school so keep your own anxiety in check. Put on a happy face!

Now that you have done everything you can to make your child's transition into school a successful one, don't be surprised if they still experience some anxiety. Please remember it's normal. Here is a list of don'ts:

* Don't discount their feelings. Remember this is a huge milestone for them and they will have to be brave.
* Don't say things like “Why you are crying? Everybody goes to school,” or “Be a big boy/girl, only babies cry.”
* Don't linger at drop-off; your prolonged presence only gives more time for the anxiety to escalate.

Once school has begun, if your child is still experiencing extreme anxiety after the first few weeks of school, talk to their teacher about sending something from home like a stuffed animal or blanket. They can tuck it in their book bag or cubby. Just knowing it's there sometimes makes all the difference.

Teachers need to do their part too. I like to send a postcard to my new students over the summer to let them know I am excited to have them in my class. Once school begins, I keep the lines of communication open with parents. I know that they too are experiencing stress. No parent wants to leave their child visibly upset and crying. I can tell you that 99% of children in my class will stop crying and enjoy their day as soon as class begins, and parents need to know that. They also need to know if the anxiety continues throughout the day, so together we can form a plan to help them to move forward.

Being a teacher is a very rewarding job. I love to watch the wonderful transition from the beginning of the school year to the end when your little ones become confident independent students.

My Top Ten Back to School Books!

The Kissing Hand by Audrey Penn

Llama Llama Misses Mama by Anna Dewdney

Pre-School Day Hooray! by Linda Leopold Strauss

Bye – Bye Time by Elizabeth Verdick

Froggy Goes to School by Jonathan London

Peppa Pig and the Busy Day at School by Candlewick Press

Pout Pout Fish goes to school by Deborah Diesen

Clifford's First Day of School by Norman Bridwell

Mommy in My Pocket by Carol Hunt Senderak

The Invisible String by Patrice Karst

Written by Renee Banashak