

A Smooth Start

When your child starts preschool, she may experience separation anxiety and regressive behavior. Child psychiatrist Joshua Sparrow explains what you can expect.

By Gail O'Connor

The transition to preschool is often marked with two steps forward, one step back, as your child grows and learns in amazing ways — but at the same time, regresses in some behaviors, too. Child psychiatrist Joshua Sparrow, M.D., is an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School professor and co-author, with T. Berry Brazelton, of *Touchpoints 3 to 6*. He's also a former preschool teacher and gives this advice about how to ease your child's transition.

Starting preschool is a big step for many young children. What are some of the biggest challenges they face?

The most common challenge for most kids is saying goodbye to their parents, or trouble separating. For some children this may be their first time out of the home. Others may have separated before, but are now in a new, possibly more demanding situation (if they have to share the adult caregiver with a number of other children).

How can parents help soothe their children's separation anxiety?

First, they can look within for whatever ambivalence they have about leaving their child, because he will pick up on those feelings. If there's any hesitation or discomfort or doubt — which there often is; you hate to leave your child when he's unhappy about it — but if you don't feel good about where you're leaving him, or about the fact that you have to leave him, your child's going to feel, "Well, maybe this isn't really a good place or idea." The first thing you have to do to prepare your child is to prepare yourself.

How else can parents help ease the transition for their preschooler?

There are a number of things you can do to prepare your child. Prior to starting school, take your child to visit the classroom and meet the teacher. If there's a way of having a playdate with one of the other children who will be attending the preschool, that's great, because then the children can welcome each other when they begin school. You could give your child a transitional object, like a favorite blanket or teddy bear they can carry around with them all day; or even a story so the teacher can read it. And give your child lots of reassurance that "Mommy's coming back," or "Daddy's coming back."

To reinforce the idea, you can play a little game in which something disappears from sight but your child rediscovers it. Roll a ball under the couch and say, "Look, we can't see it. Do you think it's still there? Let's go look." When your child finds the ball, you can say, "See, even though we couldn't see the ball it's still there, just like Mommy when she went to work." What you're doing is reinforcing "object permanence," a concept that comes earlier (by the end of the first year) but can be threatened by the emotional challenge that separation presents.

What are some of the ways preschool helps a child grow?

For some children this may be the first time they're going into a group setting where the attention by caregivers will be divided among several children. Learning to share the relationship to the teacher will be a major new gain. Also, the child will be learning to make friends, share, take turns, and hold back on impulses, areas in which they're still making progress. Preschool will present them with more opportunities to practice these skills. They'll also have opportunities to learn about other children's feelings, and to discover the joy of being generous. It's very early, but you'll see examples where the child will say, "Do you want to play with this doll?" That's their little gift, and they're learning the internal pleasure they get out of that.

Also, at this age kids love the daily routine of preschool. They get excited about mastering the [schedule](#) — they know when storytime and snack and lunch and nap happen — and they're really thrilled with themselves. Their [fantasy play](#) becomes stronger around this age, and there are ways of being more elaborate with their imagination when other children are around. They also benefit from their peers in terms of language acquisition, and even motor development. You may start to see them climb up on a slide more readily, for instance.

When children are learning so many new things in preschool, is it likely they may regress in some other areas?

In general, whenever a child is challenged by a new developmental area, she's likely to temporarily lose ground in an area she's only recently mastered. So at age three, it might be bedwetting, because she may just have learned to stay dry through the night. It's very likely there could be more crying, more clinging, more wanting to stick close to parents, and maybe some baby talk. There could be trouble separating at bedtime, and with getting to sleep. One of the things kids are working on at that age is learning to control their feelings, which in a way, we work on our whole lives. You can expect more crying, more temper tantrums, more irritability, and more impulsiveness.

How do you know whether regression is a sign of something other than a touchpoint, in this case the transition to preschool? When do these behaviors signal something more serious?

Certainly the regression should not last more than a couple of weeks, at the most. And it shouldn't be pervasive throughout the day, for days and days. So although new preschoolers may be talking some baby talk, or they may wet the bed or have more trouble separating to go to sleep, you shouldn't see less of other normal functioning at other times of the day. And they shouldn't lose interest in playing, for example, or having playdates with other kids.

How can parents assess whether the preschool they've chosen is working for their child?

The first thing is to gauge whether the teachers understand that they're not just there to support the child, but also the parent. Do they let parents stay in the classroom for the first several days, to help the child make the adjustment? How forthcoming are they about reporting both the ups and downs of the day? Again, you would expect a child to resist going for the first several days, maybe for the first week or two. And you might also expect him to have a temper tantrum at the [end of the day](#) when he sees you. But what's really helpful is to sneak in and spot your child before she spots you. See what she's doing. If she's on the teacher's lap reading a story, or conversing and playing interactively with another child, or busily playing with something side by side with a child who's playing with something else — those are all good signs. If she is wandering around aimlessly or sitting in a corner looking sad and not being attended to, those are obviously not good signs.

Some children have emotional outbursts when their parents pick them up from preschool. Are these a cause for concern?

When your child has a temper tantrum, that does not mean that he is not doing well. It tells you that he really missed you and can finally let go and be flooded by the feelings he was trying to fight back all day long. The fact that he misses you doesn't mean preschool is not going to work for him. You can reassure your child and say, "I missed you too, and I'm eager to see you because we love each other and we have fun together."

Once regressive behaviors — like trouble separating — subside and the child appears to have successfully made the transition to preschool, can parents expect those behaviors to occasionally return?

Yes. For example, if you go away on a vacation or the preschool closes for a break, your child may experience another, shorter adjustment period. If a teacher or someone the child is close to leaves the school, you may see these behaviors again. Then there are other things of course that can cause these regressive behaviors, like developmental touchpoints, or the birth of a new sibling, or a stressful time in the parent's life. When you think about it, we all regress throughout our entire lives, whenever we do something new and challenging like move, or switch jobs, or get married. There will be things the child is working on, too.

9 Parent-Tested Ways to Ease Separation Anxiety

No mom or dad likes to hear that piteous cry: "Don't leave me!" So we polled parents for advice on how to handle tough morning transitions. Here are some of their great ideas:

1. **A Kiss to Keep:** I use the cute technique found in the book *The Kissing Hand*. I plant a kiss on my daughter's palm and it comforts her to know a part of mom is with her during the day. *Lori P., Carlisle, PA*
2. **Secret Picture:** Both of my children had to bring in a plastic box to put their crayons in, so I taped a laminated picture of our family signing "I Love You" into the bottom of it. Now they always have us with them, and can discreetly look at us for support whenever they need it. *Crystal S., Duncan, SC*
3. **Goodbye Game:** Every morning before school, I pull out 10 cards showing a picture of lips (indicating a kiss) and a mom hugging a child. Next to each picture there is a number, which tells my daughter how many kisses and hugs she will get from mommy. Every morning I shuffle the cards and have her choose one. We exchange kisses and hugs and she goes to school much happier. *Wanda S., Brooklyn, NY*
4. **A Rewarding Day:** Sometimes if my children are super clingy, I promise them a reward if they make it through the day. That definitely works! *Lori P., Carlisle, PA*
5. **Brag Book:** We bought a small plastic photo album and filled it with pictures of our family. When we drop off our son at school, if he starts to cry, his teacher says, "Come show me your pictures." He says goodbye to us and brings his album to his teacher. He loves naming everyone in the album for his teachers and friends. *Randi O., Highland Park, NJ*
6. **Summer School:** I took my children to the school to play on the playground several times a week all summer. We also peeked in all the windows, and talked about what we thought happened in there. You need to check and see if it is okay with your school, but ours was perfectly fine with people being on the grounds. *Crystal S., Duncan, SC*
7. **Change the Subject:** What works best with my kids is to distract them. On the way to school, my son used to get upset and talk about how he didn't want to go to school. To distract him, we started to look for school buses and count how many we saw. He loved it and would talk about riding one when he got older. *Tina C., Ocean Springs, MS*
8. **Especially for You:** With my daughter, the key was to find a toy that I knew she would like as soon as we arrived in the classroom. It distracted her, but also was special because Mom picked it out. *Tina C., Ocean Springs, MS*
9. **The Simple Truth:** Sometimes, a simple reassurance works wonders. One day we told our son, "You don't have to cry. Mommy and Daddy always come back." For some reason, this struck a chord with him. He stopped crying and ever since, when we say goodbye, he says, "Mommy and daddy always come back," and waves as we leave. *Randi O., Highland Park, NJ*