

# A kiss, a hug, and a reassuring goodbye: Transitions

“I don’t want you to go,” Justine whispers to her dad. He smiles as Justine’s voice raises from whisper to an emphatic, “Don’t go.”

The dad looks plaintively at Ms. Cooke, the toddler teacher—and a beloved friend of Justine’s.

Ms. Cooke smiles, opens her arms, and takes a whimpering Justine from her dad. She makes a mental note that it’s a good time to make home-to-classroom transitions the theme of her next parent newsletter.



All emotionally healthy children sometimes find it difficult to separate from their parents. Indeed, just as in a toddler classroom, there will likely be separation tears at a kindergarten door and a college dorm—both on children’s faces and the cheeks of their parents. Some children deal with separation issues in infancy, others as older toddlers, and some

not until kindergarten age—the crisis is as unpredictable as it is normal. Whenever it occurs, separation anxiety marks a strong child-adult attachment. It reflects a child’s ability to tell the difference between attentive, familiar family members and strangers who may look, feel, sound, and smell unfamiliar.

In general, infants younger than about 6 or 8 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 the caregiver is familiar. Preschool children often develop and rely on rituals and comfort objects to ease themselves through a transition. Often 5- and 6-year-olds rely on their parents’ cues—if the parents are uncomfortable and nervous, the children will be too. Some children seem to make an early and smooth transition to a new environment only to suffer separation anxiety several weeks or months later. With careful preparation and patient reassurance, caregivers can ease difficult transitions for both children and their families.

## Prepare for transitions

Share information about separation anxiety with parents when they come for an enrollment interview. Ask how their child deals with separation now—when left with a babysitter or grandparent, for example—and what you might do to ease any difficulties when entering the program. Seek information on the child’s favorite activities and materials, and make sure the classroom is well equipped. Share some books and other resources that introduce children and their parents to the day-by-day routines of early care and education programs and schools.

Anticipate some difficulty with transitions when children are unfamiliar with out-of-home care. Entering a classroom for the first time is scary—for both children and their parents. Surrounded by

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strangers in an unfamiliar setting unnerves even the most secure. Children who have experienced other difficult separations, like a parent who was hospitalized for a long time, may show a heightened fear or anxiety level.

Children who speak a language other than that spoken by the teacher will likely find separating from a parent especially frightening. Make sure you know and can pronounce essential phrases in the child's language. Some examples: *Come and sit with me, It's lunch time, Here's the bathroom, and We're going outside.* Try to use both the child's home language and your own as much as possible.

If a child enters the group 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. "Keesha will come to our school on Wednesday. She hasn't been in a school before, but she really likes to build with blocks and draw with paint." Point out shared interests to encourage, rather than direct, peer play.

If the child has a physical disability, share that fact with the group but avoid being dramatic or sappy—it's simply a characteristic that the other children will recognize and accept. "Marty 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." Avoid broadcasting your own expectations of difficulty by describing *special* needs or challenges, and instead let friendships form naturally as everyone

learns the skills of accommodation.

Make sure you prepare the classroom for a new child by having an assigned cubby, a labeled nap cot, a name tag (if you use them for all the children), and accessible materials 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 new families at a time. This gives teachers more personal time to tell about their classrooms and gives children time to investigate materials without competition or pressure—while their parents are nearby.

## REASSURE THE CHILD THAT THE PARENT WILL RETURN.

Other programs encourage parents to stay in the classroom with their children for the first few days of school. If possible, allow children to attend a few shortened days before their first full day. Gradually increase the length of time children spend away from their parents. After a few unpressured days, familiarity will increase and challenges will diminish because children aren't overwhelmed and exhausted by the many new faces, experiences, and expectations.

Ask parents to give their child simple reminders of home and family—a photograph, scarf, handkerchief, or note tucked in a lunch box or backpack. These and other *transition security objects* like a blanket or favorite stuffed toy can bridge the distance between home and school. 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 touch it with my fingers when I'm feeling lonely for her."

## Saying goodbye

Rituals make saying goodbye easier for children and their parents. Help by making a ceremony of hanging family photos in a child's cubby and on a shared interactive display board. Invite children to visit the photos often as they learn to identify their own and

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other children's family members. Invite parents to linger purposefully—to share a book or fingerplay—before leaving. Notice the routines that each family uses for separation—a kiss on each cheek and on the top of the head, a bow with a wish for a peaceful day, or a wave from a particular window.

These rituals comfort children who recognize that their parents are willing to take time for the reassuring routine. Over time children typically become less reliant on specific rituals (it's always best to let the child determine when to stop) and instead recall them as, "How I said goodbye when I was a little kid."

Most essential to successful transitions is the ability to avoid impatience when a ritual takes longer than usual. Remember a 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 adult ambivalence and guilt, so encourage parents to act gently but matter-of-factly. Share these guidelines with parents and help them follow through.

- When it's time to leave, leave. Say goodbye, go through your personal separation ritual, and walk out the door. Don't complicate painful separation by saying, "OK, but for just a few more minutes."
- Return at the expected time. Be familiar enough with the day's schedule to be able to say, "I'll pick you up after nap, after snack, and after story time. You'll be on the playground, and I'll find you playing there."
- Ask for help—with words or a signal. Teachers are trained to distract and redirect. Trust that your child's teacher will have the child calm and engaged before you leave the parking lot.
- Never sneak out. All the careful preparations and reassurances come to naught when a parent disappears. The goal is to make separation less painful, not more.

Deborah Hewitt (1995) offers suggestions that teachers can use for helping children who are upset when their parents leave.

- Avoid ridicule. Never say, or allow others to 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. Say, "I can see you feel sad that your dad's leaving."
- Reassure the child that the parent will return. Tell

stories, share books, and make up songs that reinforce family connections and mutual attachment.

- Use puppets and flannel board characters to review the day's schedule. End with a reassuring, "Then it's time to go home."
- Allow the child to hold on to a security object, or lovie. Encourage the child to keep the object secure in a cubby when the hands are needed for painting, puzzles, or putting on a dramatic play cape.
- Engage in a favorite activity as soon as possible. Many children find clay and water play activities soothing and reassuring.

## Going home

At the end of the day, children sometimes have the same transition difficulties as they did 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 the child, the 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 dad will pick you up in about five minutes. What do you want to tell him about your day?"
- Gather personal items from cubbies including dirty clothes, lunch box, daily log, diaper bag, art



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work, or the day's found treasures.

- Give the children hints about the activities you have planned for the next day. Some teachers gather children for an end-of-day circle to recap the day's activities and to plan the next.

Encourage parents to be gentle but firm about leaving. Ask that they help their child gather all personal belongings, say goodbye to you and the other children, and leave. If you have important news to share with a parent, make notes to keep the conversation short—you still have to say goodbye to the other children. Offer to schedule a conference if your chat requires more time—short messages always have a way of becoming long, involved conversations. Consider using group e-mail or individual messages. Each type can help you maintain a dated log of information shared.

Remind parents that a simple, nutritious snack—a piece of fruit or some crackers—will cushion end-of-day crankiness. Encourage parents to talk about their day and ask children to share their stories too. A parent might report, “Today I had a meeting and had to sit still for three whole hours! Can you imagine? Tell me about the book you listened to at story time when you were sitting in a circle.” Stories help families reconnect at the end of the day, and build memories that ease separations in the future.

## References and resources

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## Helpful children's books

- Appelt, Kathi. (2006). *Oh my baby, little one*. New York, NY: HMH Books for Young Readers.
- Kraus, R. (1986). *Whose mouse are you?* New York, NY: Aladdin.
- McCourt, L. (2014). *I miss you, stinky face*. Indianapolis, IN: Tanglewood Press.
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