

HELPING YOUR CHILD ADJUST TO PRESCHOOL

Preschool offers many benefits — it can be a great place for kids to interact with peers and learn valuable life lessons such as how to share, take turns, and follow rules. It also can prepare them for kindergarten and beyond.

But going to preschool does come with its fair share of emotions, for both the parent and the child. For a kid, entering a new preschool environment filled with unfamiliar teachers and kids can cause both anxiety and anticipation. Parents might have mixed emotions about whether their child is ready for preschool.

The more comfortable you are about your decision and the more familiar the setting can be made for your child, the fewer problems you — and your little one — will encounter.

Easing Your Child's Fears

Spend time talking with your child about preschool even before it starts. Before the first day, gradually introduce your child to activities that often take place in a classroom. A child accustomed to scribbling with paper and crayons at home, for example, will find it comforting to discover the same crayons and paper in his or her preschool classroom.

Visiting your child's first preschool classroom a few times before school starts can also ease the entrance into unfamiliar territory. This offers the opportunity to not only meet your child's teacher and ask about routines and common activities, but to then introduce some of those routines and activities at home. While you're in the classroom, let your child explore and observe the class and choose whether to interact with other kids. The idea is to familiarize your child with the classroom and to let him or her get comfortable.

You can also ask how the teacher handles the first tear-filled days. How will the first week be structured to make the transition smooth for your child?

While acknowledging this important step your child is taking and providing support, too much emphasis on the change could make any anxiety worse. Young kids can pick up on their parents' nonverbal cues. When parents feel

guilty or worried about leaving their child at school, the kids will probably sense that.

The more calm and assured you are about your choice to send your child to preschool, the more confident your child will be.

The First Day

When you enter the classroom on the first day, calmly reintroduce the teacher to your child, then step back to allow the teacher to begin forming a relationship with your child. Your endorsement of the teacher will show your child that he or she will be happy and safe in the teacher's care.

If your child clings to you or refuses to participate in the class, don't get upset — this may only upset your child more. Suggestions for leaving kids at preschool are simple but can be hard on a parent. Always say a loving goodbye to your child, but once you do, you should leave promptly. Never sneak out. As tempting as it may be, leaving without saying goodbye may make kids feel abandoned, whereas a long farewell scene might only serve to reinforce a child's sense that preschool is a bad place.

A consistent and predictable farewell ritual can make leaving easier. Some parents wave from outside a certain classroom window or make a funny goodbye face, whereas others read a short book before parting. Transitional objects — a family picture, a special doll, or a favorite blanket — can also help comfort a child. Also, keep in mind that most kids do well once their parents leave.

Whether your child is eager or reluctant to go to preschool, make sure that a school staff member is ready to help with the transfer from your care to the classroom when you arrive in the morning. Some kids may jump right in with their classmates, whereas others might want a private cuddle and a story from a caregiver before joining the group.

Many preschools begin with a daily ritual, such as circle time (when teachers and children talk about what they did the day before and the activities that are ahead for the day). Preschoolers tend to respond to this kind of predictability, and following a routine will help ease the move from home to school.