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Tips for Helping Your Child Start School with Confidence

Four-year-old Harris is starting at a new school next week. He is a sensitive little guy who has a hard time with transitions. When he first went to preschool at age 2 he was frantic at separations. It took him several weeks to feel calm and fully engaged in the program. His parents were on the verge of pulling him out and mom was considering quitting her job; but they stayed the course and Harris ultimately adapted and thrived. His parents are naturally worried about this upcoming change for Harris and how to best prepare him.

It's that time of year, when many young children are starting school or changing schools, which can be stressful. But it's what we think of as a "positive stressor"--a challenge that is not detrimental to kids but that leads to growth. It is an opportunity for children to develop close, trusting relationships with other adults and peers. It builds confidence and helps children adapt to future separations. And high-quality programs provide endless opportunities for developing the skills—intellectual, social and emotional—that set children up for

success far into the future. Below are some ideas for how to help your child cope with this transition.

Keep in mind that every child is different and approaches separations in his own way. Avoid comparing! Some kids jump right in. These tend to be the ones who "go-with-the-flow" by nature. But for many, especially the kids who are "slow-to-warm-up" temperamentally, it may take weeks to feel safe and comfortable. One 3-year-old I know sat in the "cozy corner" most of the day and looked at a photo album of her family, that she had brought to school with her, for almost 3 straight weeks. Then one day she got up and stood at the edge of the circle during book-reading time; then she started to join one other child in play. By the end of the first month she was totally engaged and crazy about school, protesting when her grandma came to pick her up at the end of the day.

Validate feelings before jumping to reassurance. Labeling and acknowledging difficult feelings helps children understand, gain control over and work through them in positive ways. "I know it feels scary to go to a new classroom. That makes a lot of sense. But once you spend some time there you will see that it is a great place where you will have a a lot of fun playing and learning." Ignoring or minimizing feelings doesn't make them go away.

It can be helpful to share a story of a time when you started something new. Describe your own feelings of being nervous/scared, what you did to cope, and the ultimate benefit of the experience—what you would have missed if you hadn't forged ahead. If your child has had any past experiences with mastering something new, remind him that he has faced a challenge like this before. Emphasize the strength and bravery that helped him adapt to the new experience and how this led to a good outcome for him; for example, having fun at a birthday party or other activity he had initially been fearful of and protested going to. (This was a very effective strategy for Harris—reminding him of how

he felt really nervous going to his previous school but that once he spent some time there he loved it.) This is how children build resilience. The more experience they have persevering through a challenge, the more muscle, confidence and skills they develop to master future difficult situations.

Visit the school in advance. Play on the playground. Explore inside the school if this is allowed. Meet the teacher/caregiver in advance. The unknown causes anxiety; the more a child is familiar with the new setting the less fearful she is likely to be.

Establish a ritual for leaving home. You might have your child choose a book that you read partway during breakfast or sometime before you leave in the morning. Have your child make a special bookmark he places in the book to indicate where you left off. Then, when you pick him up at the end of the day, or, the first thing you do when you get home, is finish the book together. This provides a connection from morning to evening that helps children cope with separations.

Create a special goodbye ritual. Rituals can help kids cope. Establish a special kiss, hug or mantra you say every time you say separate at school. One dad-child pair held each other in a tight hug for a count of 5 and then said, "See you later alligator" in unison. Doing that every morning eased the separation tremendously.

Provide Transitional Objects: This could be photos of the family that your child can put in her backpack. Some kids bring their special lovey that stays in the cubby and can be used for comfort when the child is upset or for naptime. Be forewarned that this can be a slippery slope; if the child wants to hold it all day long it can become an obstacle to her engaging in classroom activities. Setting limits around its use are advised.

Be clear that going to school is not a choice to avoid protracted battles. It is very common for children to protest going to school. As long as you are sure

that it is a safe, good place, when he says he doesn't want to go, validate his feelings. Let him know you understand that it can be uncomfortable when starting something new, but that going to school is not a choice. Just like mommies and daddies go to work, a kid's job is to go to school to play and learn. Keep moving forward, calmly and lovingly, even if he continues to protest. Avoid the pitfall of trying to convince him to go; that communicates that he has a choice which can lead to more stress for everyone. Once he experiences the daily routine of going to school each morning no matter his protests--that is when the push-back stops and the adaptation begins.

Say a brief, upbeat goodbye. Children look to their parents' for cues to help them assess a situation. If you are calm and positive in your approach, even in the face of your child's distress, you are letting her know that the new school is a safe place that you trust completely and she is more likely to make a quicker and more positive adaptation. "I know you don't want daddy to leave. It's a new place and you are feeling afraid. I totally understand. You will feel less afraid the more time you spend here and see how great it is--that's why we chose it for you. Your job is to play and learn here with the other kids. My job is to do my work. I can't wait to pick you up and hear all about your day." (It's a good idea to find out from the teacher what the last activity will be before pick-up time so you can let your child know exactly what to expect: "After you have music, Daddy will be back to pick you up.")

Tune in to your own feelings about separating from your child, so you can manage them: It is natural to feel anxious about separating from your child, especially if this is your first born and it is his first experience going to school. But acting on this worry can increase a child's distress (and thus yours, too) and make the separation even harder. I have heard many a parent unwittingly pass on anxiety in the way they say goodbye, for example : "*Oh Sweetie, I promise mommy will come back as soon as possible*", said in a tense tone of

voice. This communicates that maybe the school isn't such a good, safe place and thus your child needs to be rescued from it soon.

Further, resist looking back, hovering, or returning to the classroom after you say goodbye. This again communicates that you are worried about your child—that you don't trust he will be okay and has the capacity to cope. This erodes versus builds his confidence that he can handle this new challenge. (Research shows that the longer the goodbye routine, and the more parents hover or keep returning for one last hug, the longer it takes the child to eventually calm and adapt.) As long as you keep re-engaging when your child begs you not to leave, your child's focus and energy remains on trying to connect with you versus adapting to the classroom. In many of the schools I work in the teacher will take over to help the parent leave. She will comfort the child (gently peeling him from the parent if necessary) and guide him to join the classroom activity or give him the space he needs until he is ready to participate.

The take home: talk to your partner or friends about any feelings you might be struggling with around separating from your child—which are totally understandable. Just avoid projecting them onto your child.

Have faith that with support from you and her teachers/caregivers, your child can and will adapt. Through the 15+ years I have been working in schools, I have seen many families pull their kids out of wonderful programs because they had a hard time transitioning. The child's natural stress caused the parents so much discomfort they couldn't tolerate it. They worried that their child just couldn't do it. There are certainly some situations where there is a challenge in a child's developmental that makes participating in even a quality, loving, group care setting too stressful and inappropriate; for example, kids who have very low thresholds for sensory input may be so overwhelmed by the sound and activity-level in a classroom that they can't feel calm and adapt. But for most children, it is a gift to provide them the opportunity to experience that they can muscle through a challenge and successfully adapt to a new situation.

It helps them feel less afraid and more confident about tackling other challenges they face in the future.

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