SEPARATION  

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Supporting Children in Their Preschool Transitions

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Preparing for Separation

Above all, families need to feel comfortable about leaving their children. Aware, well-trained early childhood teachers can help both parents and children by devising separation procedures that fit everyone’s needs and the particular environment. Details will vary from setting to setting. But an understanding of helpful practices benefits everyone. Everything teachers do must create a predictable, consistent environment for children and should inspire confidence in the parent when told with professional conviction, “Good-bye. Don’t worry. We’ll take good care of your child.”

Anticipate, anticipate, anticipate
One teacher reminds us:

“We have to prepare children for all kinds of things—like other crying children. My own first day of school, I remember a classmate crying hysterically; I wondered what he knew about this school that I didn’t. The more children know about the first day of school, the better.”
Both teachers and families need to anticipate what they likely will be encountering and ready themselves—for frazzled adults, upset children, and all the other typical stresses of a separation transition. With time, knowledge, and collaboration, teachers, children, and families can adjust to changing circumstances.

**Arrange for family and teachers to talk**

Parents and programs *both* must work to prepare children for a major change such as starting preschool—that is a given. But what parents can do is limited if the program is totally foreign to them.

Whether in the form of a workshop, social get-together, orientation tour, or family conference, a program needs to communicate with families about its policies and practices, preferably doing it in the company of other families. Parents may feel apprehensive, even panicky, at the prospect of leaving their child at preschool for the first time. They usually are reassured by talking to other parents and finding out they are not alone in feeling sad about saying good-bye. Digesting that message and dealing with those feelings is better done then, in the group, than at the classroom door the first day, when parents’ tears are already beginning to spill over.

Whatever the format, teachers should explain the program and its policies, but should not do all the talking. Opening up discussion for everyone to share experiences lets teachers and parents get a sense of each other. This is the first step to a mutually trusting relationship and a lively classroom community. If teachers and parents share no common language, the program wants to find a way to meet parents’ communication needs. For example, a sensitive bilingual college student—ideally from a nearby teacher education program—could help out.
One possible meeting structure would have teachers and parents sit together in a circle. Each person might describe a memory of confronting something unfamiliar—a new job, a first day at school, a party of strangers. (Participation is not mandatory; anyone may pass.) The discussion leader might ask, “What did you do to make yourself more comfortable? What did others do for you?” After discussing what makes adults comfortable, the conversation could move naturally to the group thinking of ways to adapt those ideas for young children.

Every early childhood program should have a separation policy (more on that in the next chapter), and distribute it on paper, as well as online, for families to take home and read at their leisure. (None of us can absorb highly loaded material in a single reading.) However, distributing a written policy is not a substitute for a well-designed, well-timed face-to-face meeting. Even after the meeting, teachers should touch base with families frequently, to reduce the chance of misunderstandings later.

The program should make sure families get any handouts or official documents in a language they can read, or that someone in their home community can read for them. Honoring a family’s home language is always welcoming. As parents and their children approach a major separation event such as starting preschool, a special effort in this is crucial.

Ideally, any meeting should be sure to include all family members who will be responsible for dropping the child off at the program, as well as those who will be responsible for helping the child get ready in the morning. Programs can’t assume only mothers will come. Invite everyone, especially fathers; and specifically think ahead about ways to make the men as well as the women comfortable. Think, too, about ways to make the visiting adults comfortable in the early childhood setting.
Sometimes, for example, it is disconcerting for adults to sit in child-sized chairs; it would be considerate to have standard chairs on hand.

A workshop, conference, or meeting has an important information function. But it has an interpersonal function, too. Rapport with teachers decreases parental anxiety, and vice versa. Establishing “reciprocal relationships” (NAEYC 1997) takes time, but families and teachers getting to know each other is where they start. If at this early occasion teachers demonstrate their willingness to learn from parents, and they begin to forge an alliance on children’s behalf, the meeting will have achieved a most important purpose.

Have the teacher visit the family

Many programs have the teacher visit each entering child’s home to begin establishing rapport with parents and child in an environment they find reassuring and familiar. During this early contact with the family, a teacher can begin finding out about the individual child—his or her idiosyncrasies, favorite foods, napping habits, beloved toys. Some teachers like to snap a photograph of themselves with the child to hang up in the classroom before the child arrives. Also, children can see for themselves that their parents and teacher are forming a relationship. This can support and encourage them in beginning to form their own relationship with their teacher. So begins an important emotional triangle. If it is a positive, trusting, respectful, consistent one, this three-way relationship of parent-teacher-child fosters in that young child feelings of security in classroom settings, for both present and future.

Some families find the idea of a teacher coming to their home intimidating or intrusive. Perhaps they worry their child will not behave “properly”—and he might not. A slow-to-warm-up child might choose to stay
in her room. An attention-seeker might provoke a tussle with a sibling or refuse parental requests. But a teacher gains understanding from whatever happens. With experience, she can reassure the family, “It’s okay” … “I’ve seen it all before” … “This behavior will most likely pass.”

Other concerns could include exposing the family dynamic, or even the appearance of the home or neighborhood. Should a family feel really uncomfortable having the teacher visit, they can meet in a mutually convenient, neutral setting. It could be the preschool, but a local coffee shop, park, or library might be more appropriate. A place the child likes to go might be exactly the right choice for everyone.

Sound early childhood practice requires programs to pay their teachers to meet individually with families before the year begins. But for overworked teachers and cash-strapped programs, such a visit is not always possible. As a substitute, the teacher can write a letter to each family and include something special just for that child. One idea is a short welcoming note and photograph “so you’ll recognize me on your first day.” Then, even though the child has not met the new teacher in person, the letter and the photo are something tangible to excitedly show relatives and friends: “See, my teacher even wrote me a letter, and look how she signed her name, and she sent me a sticker on the envelope!”

Modern technology offers other options when a visit to the family isn’t feasible. If families have access to the Internet, the program could create its own password-protected website. Then in a mailing to each family, the teacher could invite the child to visit the site to see her posted picture and message. From there the child could even send the teacher an email, which she could answer. Or the teacher can email the family directly with her message and photo.

Preparation for Separation
Have the child visit the classroom

We might expect an anxious adult to stay calm entering a room full of strange people. But we certainly can’t expect it of young children entering a new program, when they don’t yet have the social and emotional skills to be intrepid. This makes an advance visit by the child to the classroom essential. No matter how inconvenient parents find scheduling a time for the child to visit, good practice requires it. Some programs go so far as making a visit mandatory—if a family can’t conform to this basic requirement, then maybe the program isn’t the right one for the family.

But it shouldn’t come to that. Parents who are tuned in to the significance of a separation transition need to plan for it, just as they plan for other major emotional events in their family life. In an ideal world, their employers would plan for it, too, like they do when employees need time off for the flu or a funeral. Ideally, employers would expect parents to miss work while they ease their children into preschool (or other major change in setting), in recognition of the transition’s importance as well as its stresses. Although a necessary developmental milestone, such a separation can be temporarily wrenching for family and child.

We—meaning our societal, collective “we”—need to educate not only parents but also employers to give priority to these crucial advance visits. Some employers, however, won’t give an inch. That leaves the program to figure out new ways to meet families’ needs, as in this example:

“Our center serves low-income working families, mostly single parents, but we do insist on a school visit. Yes, it presents problems, but parents find a way to work it out. We schedule it at 7:00 a.m. or at 6:00 p.m. or on a Saturday, if necessary. We pay our staff for this extra time. The visit lasts one hour. No leaving [earlier]. Though this policy sounds inflexible, it supports children’s best interests, and in the end helps the family, too.”
What makes an advance visit so vitally important? From a visit, parents can absorb enough details to be able to answer children’s later questions and to continue little by little their preparation between the visit and the first day. It’s another occasion for parents and teacher to forge a partnership on behalf of the child and to address concerns before any issues develop. Parents can meet other families with children in the program, too.

For the children, having even a short preview of the physical space gives them images to think about at home. Children see where their teachers will greet them and where their parents will say good-bye, where the bathrooms are, and where they will eat their snack. They get a chance to meet their teacher and maybe even other children in the program. A mini-day of one or two open-ended activities when the child can briefly drop in and out would give families a small sense of what typically happens at the program and a chance to end the visit on a reassuring note at the pickup location. All things going well, it’s a chance to get children excited about going off to preschool!

A visit can be just one parent and child alone, or as much as half the class as a group. But any visit should always include the opportunity for individual interaction between family and teacher. To extend the preview experience, teachers can lend or suggest books about going to preschool, and about separation issues generally, that parents can read at home with their children. (See the list of books for children in the Bibliography.) Parents and children might want to videotape themselves at school. Making the tape and watching it later at home is a chance for the family to talk about what’s going to happen. Photographs taken during the visit are both a reminder for the child of this adventure and an opportunity to show everyone at home “my new school.” Other ideas include children drawing what they saw on their visit and playing “Preschool.”

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