



Easing the Anxiety Out of Separation in Preschool

The following is a question that we received from a parent, and our answer to that question:

Q. Carla, my 4-year-old daughter, is always reluctant to let me go, whether she is with a babysitter, at a friend's home or starting a new school year. How can I help her prepare for starting an upcoming preschool program?

A. Preparation is the key to helping your child become more confident about functioning on her own. More generally, preparing children for what lies ahead is essential to helping them develop emotional strengths and coping skills. Why is preparation so important?

Adults may not always notice it, but we are constantly preparing mentally for what lies ahead. We are more successful when we anticipate and make plans for it. We may visualize a scene, organize a task, quickly imagine a possible interaction or gather our emotions. This process is so familiar and automatic that we usually don't think twice about it.

Preparing for separation: Carla will develop this essential ability through your helping her prepare. Here are some ways that you can model and offer preparation:

- Find ways to talk about the upcoming year, weeks in advance and often. Sometimes, children don't want to talk about future events about which they are nervous. Children have many ways of burying their heads in the sand through ignoring or active protest.

If Carla is avoiding discussion, rely on your creativity and tact.

Addressing the topic head on will probably be unproductive. Try putting out feelers. For example, you might say, "Carla, see that woman over there with the long dark hair? She reminds me of Mrs. Smith, your teacher next year." Or, at dinner, Dad might say to you, "I wonder if there will be circle times in Carla's class next year?" You could reply, "Yes, I am sure there will be, just like last year."

Carla will appreciate you sensitively giving her the space to join — or not join — a conversation about a touchy topic. As she absorbs both the comforting information and the way in which you handle her worries, she will learn the value of information and also how to carefully protect and cushion herself, a crucial part of the capacity to separate.

- You have a more straightforward task if Carla is a child who brings up her questions or concerns or is receptive to you doing so. Take each one of her concerns seriously, even if it seems trivial or amusing. For example, many children worry about how to find the bathroom or how to ask permission to go.

Provide simple information, correct misconceptions and explain that all of her classmates will have concerns. Emphasize the positives in her new adventure, such as her opportunity to make new friends.

- Perhaps Carla will need a new backpack or other item for preschool. Help her envision what lies ahead through the process of selecting a backpack. You can encourage her to think about what will go in the backpack, where she will put it in the morning, and what she might put in it during the day (such as artwork to show mommy and daddy!).

She will learn about the rhythm of her day and how the backpack can help stitch together home and school. Young children do not leave their families behind when they enter a classroom.

- Carla will benefit from being familiar with her new environment, particularly if she is going to a new school. Visits to the playground would be helpful. If feasible, visit the classroom, but only if it is already decorated to look like the classroom that she will enter.

- Carla's teacher is, of course, the most important part of Carla's new school experience. Carla may be wondering if her teacher will understand her, be there when she needs her, even let her go to the bathroom when she asks.
- Although it may be impractical, Carla's entry into her new classroom would be strongly supported through a visit from you and Carla with her teacher, ideally in the classroom. This opportunity to develop a beginning relationship will help Carla feel that she will be in the hands of someone who is caring, whom she knows and who knows her.
- You might ask Carla to think with you about what she would like her teacher(s) to know about her on the first day (or during the preparatory visit). Perhaps it is important to Carla that her teachers know that she likes gymnastics and strawberries, has a younger brother, has just visited Grandmother, or any of the myriad possibilities that would help her feel that her teacher is in contact with what she needs to feel connected and emotionally safe.
- Reminders of her loving relationship with her parents will help Carla while at school. You can plan together which reminders of her family she would like to have at school. Perhaps she would prefer a favorite stuffed animal or a family picture to keep in her cubby. Be sure, of course, that these plans are consistent with the classroom rules.
- Does Carla seem to flourish in her friendships? If so, perhaps you could invite a child from her class for a visit to encourage a friendship that might provide some initial support.

Your daughter is her own unique person, and you will find ways to prepare her that are just right for her. Remember that children are most likely to build "mental muscles" from situations where they successfully manage an emotional challenge. Helping prepare for her upcoming school year will both enable her to become stronger and more confident about separations and build her capacity to successfully manage the various emotional challenges she will confront over the years.