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Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Getting Ready to Start Kindergarten

The start of a child's elementary school career is filled with opportunities for parents and teachers to support their emotional and social growth. While it is important to share in and support a child's happy anticipation, parents should remember that every new beginning is also a separation from old routines, expectations, environments, and people. Being able to function independently and confidently, and being able to separate successfully, are two sides of the same coin. Building the capacity to separate well requires ongoing assistance throughout childhood. Parental support of their child's separation at the time of entering elementary school is the most effective way to encourage a child's confidence and growth through the transition.

The importance of learning to separate: Children will assume more responsibility as they become "big kindergarteners," and will do things for themselves that they had previously relied upon others to do for them. In so doing, children will be taking a big step towards autonomy and away from childhood dependencies. Although parents and teachers believe that they can make it, every new kindergartener wonders: "Will I be able to do what a kindergartener needs to do? Will I be able to be a big boy or girl?"

Children's smooth transition to school will include being able to leave their parent without excessive overt distress. Children's capacity to separate will also include the emotional ability to have their mind fully "at school" rather than "back home" with parents. The emotional ability to be fully at school enables children to become pleurably involved in learning tasks and social opportunities.

The emotional mastery of separation and school success are intertwined. In fact, children who have not mastered the emotional aspects of separation may develop school problems, such as distractibility, behavioral disturbances,

and social isolation.

Finding the middle ground: Parents can support their child's upcoming separation in many ways, although it may not be possible to implement all ways of helping at every school. We base our recommendations on the principle that children grow most when they are confronted with challenges that are neither very easy for them to manage, nor more than they can reasonably be expected to accomplish. We'll call this principle: Finding the middle ground.

The role of preparation: Preparing children for what lies ahead is an important tool for helping find the middle ground. Preparation for kindergarten reduces a child's excessive worries about the many tasks ahead, and allows the child the opportunity to more actively participate in the transition. Perhaps a parent and child can visit the school grounds or classroom together, meet the child's teacher, or chat with a current kindergartener. Parents can talk with their child about the upcoming daily routines, and include their child in choosing school supplies and clothes.

Parents should elicit their child's ideas and questions about kindergarten. Parents should explain the positives in their child's new adventure, such as the opportunity to make new friends or to grow as a reader. Since a child may be too nervous to bring up concerns or may not know to anticipate certain worries, parents may need to initiate the discussion of some topics.

Children's concerns deserve to be taken with respect, even if they seem trivial or amusing. For example, many children worry about how to find the bathroom or how to ask permission to "go". Parents can provide simple information, correct misconceptions, and explain that the other children will also have concerns.

Extra support during the first few weeks of school assists a child's kindergarten transition. Perhaps a child will be traveling to school on a school bus. If so, and if possible, we recommend that the use of the bus be delayed until parents feels that their child is becoming emotionally comfortable in the classroom. A goodbye at the bus stop will not sustain a child as much as a goodbye at the school door, at the classroom door or, best of all, in the classroom itself.

When school begins: Reminders of their loving relationship with their parents enables a child to feel more comfortable and secure at school. A favorite stuffed animal or family picture in a child's cubby or backpack can provide a link with home that will help keep the parental message of support alive. A snack or lunch from home would be good, and one that a child's parents specially prepared would be ideal!

A child's ability to trust their teacher to provide a safe and comfortable environment will be an especially important source of support for the kindergarten transition. Their progress toward developing this positive relationship with their teacher will be assisted by their sense of their parents' comfort with their teacher. If, as kindergarten begins, parents can meet their child's teacher or even spend some time in the classroom, they can convincingly assure their child on the basis of their experience that the teacher is kind and will teach them well.

Parents should continue to talk with their children about their kindergarten experience even after they settle in. Specific questions may be useful: "What did you do at circle time today?" or, "Have you learned the names of the other children at your table?" or, "Have you been able to go to the bathroom when you need to use it?" Parents may learn that their children are unsure about how to initiate a kindergarten friendship or tell their teacher about toileting needs. Parents should provide guidance, keeping in mind that the most important goal of the discussion is to support children's participation in problem solving. There may not be a quick solution, but there is value in children learning that the combination of their self-reliance and parental help enables them to gradually meet and grow from challenges.

Parents can best help children to grow emotionally when they acknowledge *all* aspects of children's experience – their happiness, confidence, and excitement, as well as their feelings of anxiety, loss, and self-doubt. Parents' willingness to support children's transition in this way will enable each child to make the good beginning that will set the stage for years of future school success.