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Center for Early Childhood

Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Is My Child Ready for Kindergarten?

A parent asked for our assistance with helping their child with her transition to kindergarten. We share our answer below.

Q. Our daughter Jill is about to begin kindergarten. She seems excited and a little nervous. How can we help her transition to kindergarten?

A. The start of Jill's elementary school career is filled with opportunities to support her emotional and social growth. While it is important to share in and support Jill's happy anticipation, we ask you to keep in mind that every new beginning is a departure and separation from old routines, expectations, environments and people. Building the capacity to separate well requires ongoing assistance throughout childhood. Your support of Jill's separation at this juncture will be the most effective way to encourage her growth through this upcoming transition.

Learning to separate: Jill will assume more responsibility as a "big kindergartener," and will do things for herself that she had previously relied upon others to do for her. She will be taking a big step towards autonomy and away from childhood dependencies. You and her teacher believe that she can make it, but every new kindergartner wonders: "Will I be able to do what a kindergartner needs to do? Will I be able to be a 'big' boy or girl?"

Jill's smooth transition to school will include her being able to part from you without undue, overt distress. Her capacity to separate will also include her emotional ability to have her mind fully "at school" rather than "back home" with her parents, so that she can become pleasurably involved in learning tasks and social opportunities. 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 isolation.

Finding the middle ground: There are many ways that you can support Jill's upcoming separation, although some may not be possible at every school. We base our guidance on the principle that children grow most from challenges that encourage them to rise to a higher level, but those challenges must be realistic, especially in the child's mind. We'll call this: finding the middle ground.

Preparation is key: Preparing Jill for what lies ahead is an important way to find the middle ground. Preparation will reduce Jill's worries about the many tasks that she will have to manage and allow her to be a more active participant in the transition. Perhaps you and Jill can visit the school grounds or classroom, meet her teacher or chat with a current kindergartner. Talk with Jill about whatever you can learn about her upcoming daily routines. Try to include Jill in the task of choosing school supplies and clothes.

Encourage discussion with Jill about her ideas and questions about kindergarten. You may need to initiate the discussion of some topics because Jill may be too nervous to bring up her concerns or may not know to anticipate certain worries. Take each one of her concerns seriously, 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. 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 or to grow as a reader.

Jill will have a more successful transition to kindergarten if you provide extra support during the first few weeks of school. Perhaps she will be traveling to school on a school bus. If so, and if it is possible for you, we recommend that you delay the use of the bus until you feel that she is feeling emotionally comfortable in her class. A goodbye at the bus stop will not sustain Jill as much as a goodbye at the school door, at the classroom door or, best of all, in the classroom itself!

When school begins: Jill will be helped by reminders of her loving relationship with her parents. A favorite stuffed animal or family picture in her cubby or backpack can provide a link with home that will help keep your message of support alive. A snack or lunch from home would be good, and one that you specially prepared would be ideal!

Jill's trust of her teacher to provide a safe and comfortable environment will be an especially important source of support for her kindergarten transition. Her progress toward developing this positive relationship with her teacher will be assisted by her sense of your comfort with her teacher. If, as kindergarten begins, you can meet her teacher or even spend some time in the classroom, you will be in the position to assure Jill on the basis of your experience that her teacher is kind and will teach her everything that she needs to learn.

Continue to talk with Jill about her kindergarten experience. Specific questions may be useful: "What did you do at circle time today?" "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?" You may learn that Jill is unsure about how to initiate a kindergarten friendship or how to tell her teacher about her toileting needs. Provide guidance, and keep in mind that the most important goal of the discussion is to engage her participation in problem solving. There may or may not be a ready solution, but there is value in Jill learning that mommy and daddy cannot solve every problem, and that the combination of her self-reliance and your help is the best way for her to approach and grow from the challenges before her.

You can best help Jill to grow emotionally when you acknowledge all aspects of her experience — her happiness, confidence and excitement, as well as her feelings of anxiety, loss and self-doubt. Your willingness to support Jill's transition will enable her to make the good beginning that will set the stage for years of school success.