



*Lucy Daniels*  
***Center for Early Childhood***

Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

**Preparing for Preschool**

We have recently provided advice to the mother of a 3-year-old child who is about to begin preschool. We would like to share this advice.

Q: My 3-year-old daughter, Jill, begins her first school experience, a three-day-a-week morning program, in the fall. How can I get her ready?

A: Good beginnings are important: Until now, Jill has relied upon parent(s) and other trusted individuals. Now she will be asked to function independently. She will have support from nurturing teachers, but they will be limited in their knowledge of and availability to Jill. Furthermore, the routines, frustrations and expectations of classrooms will require new levels of competency. Jill will be reaching deeply into her back pocket for confidence and strength.

Managing transitions: Beginning school is a transition with capital letters. Lucy Daniels Center educators and clinicians suggest parents manage by: preparing children; promoting children's activity; understanding children's perspectives and needs; and managing your own reactions.

Preparing children: Changes are stressful because they are unfamiliar. Preparation increases familiarity and thereby decreases stress. Here are some ways to help prepare your 3-year-old:

- Visit the school. If possible, meander about the playground, walk in the building and visit her classroom.
- Share a photo of the new teacher(s), perhaps from the school's website. It is terrific when a child, accompanied by a parent, can meet a teacher in the classroom – just the three of you. Jill will see her teacher's investment in learning about her interests and favorite snacks, and will know that she is being left in the hands of a nurturing person who is getting to know her and Mommy or Daddy.
- Perhaps you can get a copy of class schedule and explain that "you will have play/work time, snack time where you sit with your classmates at tables, and circle time where you sit as a group with the teacher and learn." Perhaps you can play out some of these activities.

Promoting children's activity: Children manage challenge better if they play an active part in addressing the situation. Here are a few ideas:

- Make a list together about what to expect (how many children, boys/girls, cubbies, bathrooms, saying good-bye to Mommy/Daddy, what to do about missing or lonely feelings).
- Encourage Jill to choose items such as backpacks or lunchboxes.
- Find out if blankets or cuddlies are allowed in the classroom and, if so, encourage Jill to think about which comfort object(s) she might want.

Understanding children's perspective and needs: Jill will have ideas about this strange new undertaking. She might have some unexpected concerns such as, "What if I need to go to the bathroom or don't like the snack?" Her ideas will be an amalgam of her immature cognition, imagination, hopes and experiences. She will undoubtedly have some sense that she will be expected to manage without you. You will be helpful to Jill if you encourage her to share her thoughts. We recommend you respond to her concerns by:

- Correcting factual misconceptions.
- Balancing an acceptance of the concern, confidence that she can handle these feelings, and optimism that she will find a way to work them out.
- Engaging her in finding solutions to her concerns.

The following vignette illustrates this approach: Three-year-old Justin, about to begin preschool, worriedly told his mother that he wouldn't have friends. Rather than simply reassuring him that he would make friends, his mother replied, "I understand. It is hard to make new friends. But you are learning to be a good friend, and you will find ways to make friends at school. Sometimes you can make friends by playing a fun game with someone. Can you think of anything that you might like to play?"

In all likelihood, Justin understood that his mother believed his concerns were reasonable, he could continue to have those concerns, but he could also handle his worries and gradually find ways to solve them.

Managing your own reactions: You, too, are facing a huge transition. Undoubtedly proud of Jill's growing abilities, you are also leaving the special parent-child intimacy of the earliest years and allowing a stranger to become an important figure in your child's life. This is difficult and painful. You must find a middle ground between excessively holding on and prematurely checking out. Self-awareness and self-acceptance, and support from family and friends, will enable you to support your child through your own growth.

Jill will benefit from your careful attention and support as she leaves the family womb. Your support for her first flight will provide a sustaining model as she continues to stretch her wings in the coming decades.