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Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

### **Saying Good-bye to a Teacher**

Preschoolers form strong relationships with their teachers, and saying good-bye to someone who is very important is a meaningful moment in a child's life. We would like to share our discussion of this topic in response to a question we received about a 4-year-old child who was about to say good-bye to his teacher.

**Q.** My 4-year-old son Daniel will be leaving his beloved preschool teacher in a few months. Any thoughts about helping him with this transition?

**A.** You are sensitive to think about making this goodbye a good goodbye. You can help Daniel by discussing it with him and helping him say goodbye to his teacher in a satisfactory way.

**Why goodbyes are important:** Life is filled with leave-takings that come in many forms. Some are temporary, such as leaving mother or father to go to school or ending a visit with grandmother. Others are more permanent, such as losing a treasured toy or the death of a pet.

Goodbyes bring up feelings that vary, depending on the meaning of the particular loss to the child. Children are not just sad. Sometimes they also are angry or anxious -- all natural reactions to having to say goodbye. Because life is filled with goodbyes, children must develop mental muscles to cope with them in an emotionally healthy manner.

**Preschool teachers' shifting roles:** Teachers play special roles for children. Teachers of children younger than 4 teach and also provide substitute parenting. The 4-year-old class is a time of transition. Teachers are becoming more like teachers of older children and less like substitute

parents. Children are expected to mostly manage their needs, tasks and relationships. Understanding the meaning of Daniel's relationship with his teacher will help you be more attuned to his reactions.

**Teachers can change:** People worry about the unknown and whether they will be up to the next challenge. You can ask him, if he does not bring it up, whether he wonders how things will be in kindergarten. Reassure him that his next teacher also will help him, remind him of his growth during the current year and that he will continue to grow, and introduce him physically to his next surroundings (perhaps during the final weeks of the school year) to provide confidence that his loss is fully manageable. In that sense, teachers can be replaced.

**This teacher cannot be replaced:** People are not interchangeable, however. No one will ever be Mrs. Smith, who was there for Daniel at particular times, in particular ways, and with whom he shared special times. No one will ever smile quite like her. And although Daniel may be able to return to visit, the ongoing, working relationship is gone forever.

This is sad, and it is natural for Daniel to be a bit angry about the inevitabilities of life that he wishes were not so. Therefore, as you accentuate the positive — Daniel's capabilities, growth, the fine teacher awaiting him — it also is important to acknowledge that Mrs. Smith cannot be replaced, his loss hurts, and you are there for him with a hug.

Daniel's inevitable times of discontent about life are opportunities. Childhood is when a child learns not just the ABCs of reading, but also the ABCs of tolerating, bearing and moving beyond difficult emotions. Saying goodbye to a teacher provides the opportunity for children to deal with emotions that are real, meaningful and, unless there are special circumstances, within their capacity to master.

Some children make it clear that they will miss their teacher. Others go on as if it is no big deal, or even irrelevant. Don't be fooled if Daniel acts unfazed. Most often, children who act unconcerned are wary of their feelings and need your help to question their self-protections. Be tactful and gentle if Daniel is that kind of child. Just raise the idea occasionally that Daniel and Mrs. Smith have done so much together, she is such a kind person, and it is hard to say

goodbye to someone like that. Daniel might well protest, and if he does, just let it be. You have planted a seed, and you can continue to plant such seeds from time to time. Well-planted seeds will germinate — slowly.

**Saying goodbye:** Telling someone, “Thank you, I will miss you,” is a way that children -- and adults -- can feel better about their mixture of feelings when saying goodbye to someone who has done much for them. And it is a decent thing to do.

Although a few children might express such sentiments in words, children more commonly are able to express their appreciation in a gift. Gifts can be tricky, though. A gift must be meaningful to Daniel for it to truly help him with this transition. This might mean that instead of something you buy in the store, or cookies that you (and even Daniel) bake, the gift might be something he draws or even a treasure or cool bug that he finds in the backyard. Of course, cookies that he helps bake might be just the thing. It depends on what is meaningful to him in the context of that particular relationship. Trust his judgment.

Try to separate his feelings and needs from your gratitude and other feelings that you have about saying goodbye and the uncertainties of what lies ahead. You might decide, for example, to give a meaningful gift of your own.

Life is filled with transitions, leavings and losses -- and new beginnings. Pay attention to the fullness of your child’s feelings -- his worries as well as his confidence and dreams -- his losses and his new opportunities, and you will help introduce your child to a way of understanding himself and the world that will stand him in good stead.