

Dear Parents,

While you were busy last week, getting your children ready for the first day of school, my staff and I were busy too. Aside from setting up our classrooms and making sure our building is ready and inviting, the entire staff became CPR and first aid certified. In addition, we have been busy taking classes, participating in seminars and attending a conference that was held at our school. Over 400 early childhood educators from Nassau and Suffolk County joined together to learn and share. One of the highlights of the conference was a lecture given to us by Nancy Schulman and Ellen Burnham, authors of *Practical Wisdom for Parents*. While I do own several copies of the book that I am willing to lend out, I am also aware of all our busy schedules. With that in mind, I have decided to take some of the information in the book and share it with you every week or two. As we begin the school year, I present to you:

In the beginning.....separation and easing the way

Each year, on the first day of school, I stand by the Winnie the Pooh door greeting new parents and children as they step into the hallway of the nursery school for the first time. The expressions on the children's faces run the gamut of emotions, everything from anxious and confused to happy and excited. The faces on the parents are equally expressive. It's not unusual to see parents with knitted brows, tears in their eyes, or encouraging smiles. When it comes time to go inside the classroom, there are those children who burst into tears and cling to parents, those who walk right in without as much a good-bye, and those who bravely grasp a toy and hold onto it for dear life, bottom lip trembling.

Every child is a unique individual and will respond to separation in his or own way. There is no right way to separate. The following are some of the basic styles of separation and how parents can help to smooth that transition.

* **The Child Who Doesn't look Back**

* *Child -response:* This child is eager to jump right in and embrace the new experience. He may hardly look back at his parent or say good-bye, leaving his parents feeling bereft and rejected.

* *Parent response:* Say good-bye but don't insist on your child saying good-bye as you might interfere with his momentum. Try to take pleasure in your child's excitement about this new experience. Look forward to spending time together later in the day and don't be surprised if your child has a delayed reaction somewhere down the road.

* **The Child Who Cries**

* *Child Response:* This child bursts into tears when a parent tries to leave. There are usually two types of criers-loud and quiet. The loud crying lets everyone know how he is feeling but it doesn't mean he is in greater discomfort than the child who is crying softly in the corner. Some children cry at the moment of saying good-bye and some children cry intermittently throughout the day.

* *Parent Response:* Try not to look worried or you will communicate your anxiety to your child. Remember that young children don't have the language or emotional maturity to

- * understand their own feelings. Crying is their way of expressing sadness or fear. Many parents are uncomfortable about leaving a crying child, but it's important to understand that this is a normal expression of a child's feelings. Remind your child about the fun activities, children, and teachers at school. Acknowledge that it's hard to say good-bye and remind them that you'll be back later. Tell your child that the teacher is there to take care of him and that she will help to make him feel better. Don't prolong the good-bye. After you leave, the teacher will be able to comfort and distract your child, and it is important that your child begins to trust her to comfort him. It is very likely that he will stop crying soon after you leave but you can always ask someone at school to call you later to reassure you.

- * **The Brave One**

- * *Child Response:* This child has his shoulders back and his head down, he won't be able to make eye contact and will engage in a ritualistic activity each morning (kneading the play dough or playing imaginatively with his favorite truck) Often he will be unable to muster a good-bye to his parent as it demands too much of him.

- * *Parent Response:* Many children won't respond to you when you say good-bye. Some parents find this upsetting. It doesn't mean that your child didn't hear you, it's just that he is working very hard to hold himself together, and it's probably too difficult at that moment to respond. Make sure you say good-bye to your child, but don't pressure him to say good-bye. Expect that he may fall apart as soon as he sees you at the end of the day. Make sure you give him some undivided attention and plan some relaxing and calm time together after school.

The Delayed Reactor:

- * *Child Response:* The child walks into school and seems fine for days or weeks. One day he looks around the room and begins to wail, "Where's my mommy?" This child was so interested in all the new experiences that he didn't realize his parent had left.

- * *Parent Response:* Don't panic! Nothing is wrong, and your child didn't suddenly decide that he doesn't like school. He is simply having a delayed reaction to the separation from you. Talk to him about his friends, his teachers, and the things he likes to do. Speak to the teacher so that she can give him some extra attention, and work with her to develop a good-bye ritual. These rituals need to be kept simple, and short however.

- * **The Solitary Child**

- * *Child Response:* This child prefers to spend time alone rather than playing with the other children. He adapts by exploring independently and sends a strong hands-off message to the teachers. He needs time to acclimate and to connect with teachers and children. He'll form relationships in his own time.

- * *Parent Response:* Be patient. It will take time for the teacher and the other children to get to know your child. You can help by communicating with the teacher about your child's likes and dislikes and by setting up one-on-one play dates with children in his class. Respect your child's need to take things slowly as he establishes relationships with teachers and children.

* **The Observer**

- * *Child Response:* This child may not participate in activities but needs to observe and take it all in before feeling comfortable enough to engage with teachers, children and activities.
- * *Parent Response:* Read books about school with your child. Play “school” with him when at home. Mention the names of the children and the teachers often. Learn what is going on in the classroom so you can speak about school in meaningful ways. Talk to the teacher about what makes your child comfortable. Remember that your child is learning as he is observing.

A few more helpful hints....

1. Turn off your cell phone and focus on your child.
2. Keep separation brief. By prolonging the good-bye when your child is upset you are only prolonging the agony.
3. Don't ask permission to leave. When we hear a parent say to a child, I'm leaving now, okay?, DO YOU REALLY THINK IT IS OKAY???
4. Develop a goodbye ritual, but make it brief.
5. Bring something small from home. Some children are comforted by bringing something from home to help them transition.
6. Be on time for arrival so that the teacher can give him the attention he needs when he arrives.
7. Try not to carry your child into school. The child is much less likely to cling to you if you are not holding him.
8. Avoid coming to school with both parents. It can be overwhelming for your child to say good-bye to not just one but both of you.
9. Let your child know where you are going to be. It's helpful to have a mental picture of where you will be or what you will be doing while he is in school. Be clear and reliable.
10. Be aware that your child is listening to everything you are saying and the tone in which you are saying. If you say to a teacher, “Oh boy, you are going to have your hands full today.”. It is a virtual guarantee that your child will fulfill that expectation. Children do not understand sarcasm.
11. Give your child a mantra to repeat. “Mommy always comes back” or Mommy comes back after story time.
12. Trust your child. Remember that children will find their own way of comforting themselves when they are dealing with newness. Do not feel guilty. School is fun and your child will enjoy his time there. Be confident.
13. Know that your child can do this.

Enjoy the first week of school. Remember, my office is always open. My home is your home!

Fondly,

Cheryl

Recommended Books for Children about Beginning School

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| 1. Oh My Baby, Little One | Kathi Appelt |
| 2. Clifford's First School Day | Norman Bridwell |
| 3. D.W.'s Guide to Preschool | Marc Brown |
| 4. Going to School | Anne Civardi |
| 5. Will I Have a Friend | Miriam Cohen |
| 6. You Go Away | Dorothey Corey |
| 7. My First Day at Nursery School | Becky Edwards |
| 8. Corduroy Goes to School | Don Freeman |
| 9. Curious Kids Go to Preschool | Ingrid Gordon |
| 10. Bernard Goes to School | Joan Elizabeth Goodman |
| 11. I am not Going to School Today | Robie H. Harris |
| 12. Wemberly Worried | Kevin Henkes |
| 13. Spot Goes to School | Jonathan London |
| 14. Sumi's First Day of School Ever | Soyung Pak |
| 15. The Kissing Hand | Audrey Penn |
| 16. First Day | Joan Rankin |
| 17. I Love You All Day Long | Francesca Rusackas |
| 18. Mouse's First Day of School | Lauren Thompson |
| 19. Mama Always Comes Home | Karma Wilson |
| 20. Don't Go | Jane Breskin Zalban |