



Big City Montessori School

Coping with Separation Anxiety at Preschool

Many preschoolers struggle with separation anxiety when they are dropped off at preschool. Preschool is often one of the first experiences that preschoolers have away from their parents or primary caregiver. Some preschoolers will scream or cry when they are dropped off at preschool. This could go on for weeks without any improvement. It does not mean that your preschooler is not enjoying preschool, although it is something to watch if it does not improve over time. It is very common for your preschooler to experience some separation anxiety when you leave.

Preschoolers who struggle with drop offs may be a little bit shy or they may simply be cautious when placed in new situations. It is scary for a preschooler to suddenly experience life away from their primary caregiver. Once they learn to trust their new teacher and get to know the other preschoolers in the class their fears will subside.

How can parents help soothe their children's separation anxiety?

Prepare Yourself

First, you can look within yourself for whatever feelings you have about leaving your child, because he/she will pick up on those feelings. If there's any hesitation or discomfort or doubt — which there often is (you hate to leave your child when he's unhappy about it) - but if you don't feel good about where you're leaving him, or about the fact that you have to leave him, your child's going to feel, "Well, maybe this isn't really a good place or idea." **The first thing you have to do to prepare your child is to prepare yourself.**

Be Confident

If your preschooler is nervous about being left at preschool, it is important for you to show that you are confident that you are leaving them in a safe place. If you are nervous about leaving your preschooler they will sense it and your anxiety will heighten their fear. If you need to, give yourself a few minutes to regroup before leaving the house. Cry about your baby growing up, stress about leaving them somewhere else, do whatever it is you need to do, but do not do it in front of your preschooler.

Smile and greet your preschooler's new teacher with confidence and show your preschooler that you trust that they will be cared for and protected while you are gone. When you hug your preschooler goodbye make sure that you are not locking them in a death grip. Give them a gentle hug and a smile.

Be Consistent

If you do the same thing every time you drop your preschooler off at preschool they will learn to trust the routine. Give your preschooler a quick hug and a kiss, reassure them that you will be back soon to pick them up, and walk out the door. The longer you stay and talk the harder drop offs will be. Your preschooler will see an opportunity to talk you into staying or taking them with you and will act up. Leave it to the preschool environment / teachers to engage your preschooler in an activity. This will encourage your preschooler to trust their preschool teacher and create a healthy bond between them.

Be Prepared for Relapses

Separation anxiety is not limited to the beginning of the school year. Any change in a preschoolers life such as a new sibling, a move, extended illness or absence from their regular attendance from school, or stress at home, can trigger a new string of difficult preschool drop offs. Relapses are not likely to last as long as they did at first but they can be frustrating when you have already been through it. Follow the same technique that you did the first time and eventually your preschooler will regain their confidence.

Stick With It... *Even If It's Difficult*

When all strategies have been exhausted, and you still find yourself with a clinging vine, remember that the crying will only subside once your child learns the invaluable lesson that he can survive without you. Don't make a fuss or punish your child for clinging; firmly encourage and reassure him instead. Holding, embracing, or babying him while telling him to go inside the classroom by himself may confuse him about whether he should stay or go, so be firm. Make sure you're not the one with the separation anxiety.

The Benefits to Your Child

The benefits to you and your child for a successful transition from home to school outweigh the initial discomfort of separating. Confidence in your child's independence lays the foundation for his or her future self-esteem.

When you provide your child with the experience to fly independently, you grant a priceless gift as a parent. This support and confidence coupled with early positive feelings toward school encourages the success of a lifelong learner.