

First-day jitters: starting preschool

By Isadora Fox, *Parents.com*, January 2008 (Originally published in *American Baby* magazine, August 2005)

Going to preschool is a big rite of passage. Here, tips to make it go smoothly.

Preparing Ahead for the Transition

Take a moment and summon up how you felt on your first day of middle school. The building was huge, teeming with strange faces and voices. You were scared to death you were going to get lost on the way to homeroom -- or ostracized about your squeaky new sneakers. For your 3-year-old, the first day of preschool feels pretty much the same -- minus the hormones, of course. But in many ways, it can be even tougher.

Young children often struggle with change. Leaving the comforting rituals of life at home for a new set of people and rules can be scary. "That's why it's important to treat going to preschool as a process rather than just a date on your calendar when your child goes to school," says Alisa Clark Ackerman, who has taught at several preschools in New York City. "Take several weeks before the first day to ease him into this new adventure." Here's how.

1. Take the Grand Tour

The more familiar your child is with the new place, the easier the transition will be. Before school starts, take your child around the room and point out the different activities he'll do each day. You might also want to show him where his cubby will be and spend some time on the playground.

During the tour, point out a specific activity you know he'll enjoy, such as playing with musical instruments, and tell him the name of the school," recommends Ackerman. "Over the first week or so leading up to preschool, prepare him for the first day by saying, 'Next week you'll go to Elm Street Preschool and play with the tambourine,'" she says.

2. Meet and Greet

Many preschools host an open house, where parents, teachers, and children can get to know each other. There will likely be many parents vying for the teacher's attention, but make sure you get a chance to chat with her when your child is within earshot. "If you show your child that the teacher is someone you like and trust, he'll have an easier time forming an attachment to her," says Ackerman.

Give your child some time with the teacher, too; many preschools offer a home visit before class begins, so take advantage of the time to help your new student acquaint himself with this new adult in his life. "It's also helpful for your child to know his teachers' names," says Sally Tannen, director of the Parenting Center at the 92nd Street Y in New York City, which has its own preschool. "Before his first day, remind him that he met them and what they were like," she says.

Getting Comfortable with Change

3. Play the Day Away

Seeing familiar faces in his class will up your child's comfort level. You'll get a class list during the summer, "so plan playdates with some other classmates before the big day," says Amy Flynn, director of the Bank Street Family Center at the Bank Street College of Education in New York City, which trains teachers from around the country. "Also, ask about setting up a buddy system; you and another class family have each other as contacts for playdates and support before school begins."

4. Act It Out

Flynn recommends doing some pretend play with stuffed animals or other toys to help your child adjust to the idea that he'll be leaving you, but you'll come back -- his teddy bear goes to school with some other furry friends, Mommy Teddy leaves and returns after he's sung a song and had a snack, for example. Flynn also recommends sussing out how nervous your child is and addressing his concerns. "You don't want to ask him if he's scared too many times -- that might make him even more fearful," says Flynn. "But if he seems anxious in the days preceding school, reassure him that he'll be okay and that you're nearby if he needs you," says Flynn.

5. Create a Goodbye Ritual

"Decide how many hugs you'll give each other, or how many books you'll read before you leave each day," says Flynn. "Never sneak out when your child is engaged in an activity -- on the first day or any other," says Flynn. You don't want him to think that the important adults in his life just disappear.

First-Day Q's and Recommended Reading

Preschool FAQ

Q. My child really wants to take his blanket to preschool. Is that okay?

A. Yes. "Having a transitional object on hand can make being away from Mom and Dad a lot easier," says Tannen. If your child doesn't have a lovey, Tannen recommends helping him choose something that he can take to make him feel secure.

Q. Can my child suck on his pacifier at preschool?

A. Probably not. Your child will need to carry on conversations with his teachers and classmates. He can't do that with a pacifier in his mouth. However, you don't want to make his preschool start any more stressful than it already is. Get your child off the pacifier long before he starts school, or do it when he's adjusted to his new regimen. In the meantime, talk to the teacher about when it's okay for your child to have his pacifier (during rest time, for example) and when it's not (during circle time).

Q. How long can I stay if my child gets upset during drop-off?

A. "Most schools have a transition plan," says Tannen. "It's good to linger the first week to give your child a sense of security." The first day, a parent stays for a designated amount of time, and very gradually reduces that time as the first week progresses.

Books for Your Little Jitterbug

"Books that describe what happens at school, as well as validate a child's feelings, can help quell jitters," says Tannen. They provide your child with a sort of dry run of school in the comfort of home, where he feels safe. Here are several titles recommended by Tannen and The Bank Street College of Education's Committee on Children's Books:

- *When Will Sarah Come?* by Elizabeth Fitzgerald Howard, photos by Nina Crews (Greenwillow, 1999). A preschool boy waits for his big sister to return from school so they can play together.
- *Oh My Baby, Little One* by Kathi Appelt, Jane Dyer (Harcourt Brace, 2000). A mother bird describes her work day to her preschooler, showing him that even though she is at work and he's at school, they still love each other.
- *Don't Go!* by Janet Breskin Zalben (Clarion, 2000). Daniel, a young elephant, is starting school. His mom packs his bag and Daniel's stuffed dog, and they experience the ritual of the first day of school together. The book includes a checklist for the first day.
- *Owen* by Kevin Henkes (Greenwillow, 1993). Owen loves his baby blanket, fondly named Fuzzy. But kindergarten is coming up, and his parents wonder if Fuzzy should go along. Ultimately, Owen's mother finds the perfect plan to keep everyone happy and secure.

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