

Are You Ready for Preschool?

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By Lana Button

You survived a nine-month pregnancy, 20 hours of labour, years on no sleep and toddler tantrums. So...the start of preschool? You can handle it.

You've prepared your child by talking up all the excitement waiting for him; his new dinosaur knapsack is packed. But what about you? How will you feel when your job, as a parent is to walk away for the first time?

As a preschool teacher, I've witnessed more than 18 years of dramatic farewell scenes: shell-shocked parents unable to give their upset preschooler a confident send-off because they are suddenly emotional themselves. Letting go is a powerful thing. So prepare yourself.

Beware little ears. Don't confess your preschool jitters to your friend if Jimmy is beside you watching *Dora*. Keep preschool discussions with your child-and around him-positive, light and simple.

Have a Plan. And let him in on it. "Mommy's taking you to school. You'll have lots of fun. I'll be back when school is over."

Know the rules. You probably received a policy manual at registration. Read it. It outlines the program, routine and policies. You'll know if she needs indoor shoes, or a labeled cup for snack. Don't promise she can carry Mr. Blanky around, and then find out it's against the rules.

Prepare for the Kiss-and Fly. The big day! You both march confidently into school. The teacher greets you at the door. Then it hits you like a bag of hammers: "This is my baby's classroom. And I'm not invited." It's like arriving too soon at the departure gate with security telling you to move it. You consider hanging around for a minute. Don't! Your job is to send the message to your child that school is a safe, fun place. By standing there looking doubtful, you set his radar off: "There's something to be scared of."

And the Oscar goes to... Here's where your high school acting career comes in handy. Breathe. Smile. And say in a calm, confident tone, "Have lots of fun. I love you. I'll be back when school is over."

Beware the Velcro trap. One kiss. One hug. Then walk. Do not get snagged in a Velcro grip as your daughter decides she'd rather go home and watch *The Wiggles*. Stay calm. Her teacher will take her (not unlike removing a kitten from a wooly sweater) and

comfort her. Keep walking. I mean it. Mentally block out the crying with a well-practiced mantra such as, “She’s in a safe place.”

Do not play Let’s Make a Deal. This is no time to bargain, so don’t promise a Strawberry Shortcake doll if she stops crying, and don’t cancel Christmas if she doesn’t. And remember, by lingering you make it worse, sending the message: “I cry, Mommy stays; I cry harder, Mommy stays longer.”

Watch those claws. They expect you to leave your hysterical baby while some other adult comforts her? Back off Mama Bear, and trust the teacher. Believe me; we are very good at hugging, reassuring and distracting. The faster your child realizes her teacher is caring and trustworthy the faster she’ll adjust to her new preschool. I promise she will always love you best.

Hold the waterworks. Unless you bring your own mom, no one’s comforting you. Sorry. You can drop the tough act in the parking lot; there’ll probably be a whole group of you. Go have coffee and pass the tissues. Chances are that before the foam cools on your latte; your son will have stopped crying and started tackling his first puzzle.

Don’t count of clinginess. Your daughter might be one of those kids who bounds into school without a backwards glance, let alone a kiss goodbye. Guess what? This may break your heart. Remind yourself that an easy transition is a blessing.

Keep your end of the bargain. When school is dismissed, be there to greet your little scholar, not stuck in a Starbucks’ line up. It’s crucial. Minutes can feel like an eternity to an anxious child-especially when he sees all the other mommies and daddies collecting their charges.

Give it time. Your child may reenact the dramatic farewell scene for a while; three to five weeks of regular attendance is a typical adjustment period.

Your rookie preschooler is entering a new stage of development. And like most stages, it often starts out rocky. Need a reminder? Just reconnect with a new parent with that, “I’m so tired I’m throw-up sick’ look, or one who’s desperate for a toddler to give up the bottle. Trust me, in a few weeks your child’s preschool class will be a room full of happy adjusted children. And your child will be one of them.