



SESAME STREET PARENTS



Get Set for School!

- Soothing the Bye-bye Blues
- Sneak Preview of Preschool
- Lovin' Lunch Box Treats

Two Words
Smart Parents
Never Forget

Raising Your Child
to Be Street-Savvy
(and Trusting Too)





WHEN SUZANNE WEIDLE OF FAIRVIEW, PENNSYLVANIA, took her then three-year-old son, Johnny, to his first day of preschool, the transition went remarkably well. Johnny happily got out of the car and marched into the school. The next day, however, she had to pry his arms from around her waist to get him to let go. On each school day that followed, Weidle drove her son to school with a knot in her stomach, worrying about the struggle she inevitably faced. One morning the situation hit rock bottom: As Weidle walked around the car to open the door, Johnny wiggled out of his car seat and bolted into the parking lot. She quickly caught him, but it was grueling to convince the youngster to go inside that day. For the next few weeks, until the three-year-old adjusted to the

says Dr. Vrana. "Being out of sight or reach of the person who takes care of them—usually Mom or Dad—causes a young child the most distress." And it's tough for a parent too, because you may have your own pangs of pain about saying good-bye to your child. Yet you also know that learning to separate is an inevitable and important developmental task for children to master. So how can you help your child and yourself ease your way into better bye-byes? Seeing separation through your child's eyes is a good start.

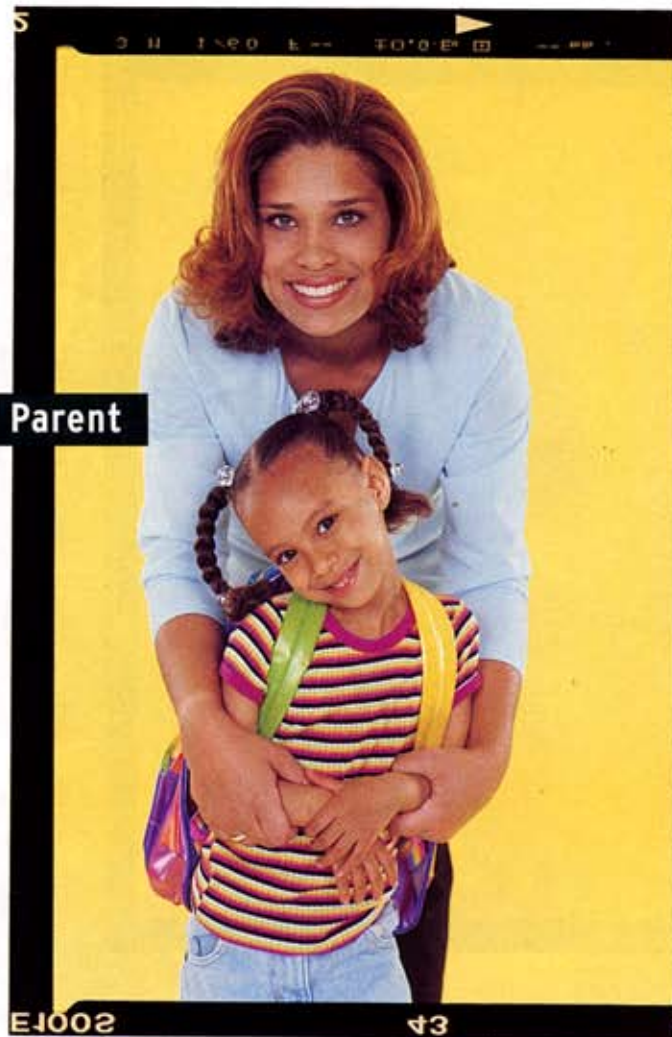
Better Bye-byes

Great ways to calm the back-to-school jitters (yours as well as your child's)

separation, the young mother woke up suffering from just as much anxiety about the morning drop-off as her son did.

Weidle was experiencing what most parents of preschoolers confront sooner or later: the pain of separation. In fact, separation is the most frequent cause of anxiety in preschool children, according to a research survey conducted by Scott Vrana, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology and director of the Purdue Anxiety Clinic at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana.

"Preschoolers fear a variety of things, like the dark and certain animals, but nothing else affects as many children as separation,"



Think About What's Behind the Fear

To work toward resolving separation anxiety, you must first understand where it comes from. Generally, children latch on to predictable events and people. The sense of security this gives them helps them to happily explore new surroundings. But if they think that Mom or Dad or their other regular caregiver may soon be hitting the road, anxiety takes hold. "This reaction first happens when a baby is between six and nine months old," says Dr. Vrana. "From

By Caren Osten Gerszberg Photographs by Linda Farwell

then on, he fears nothing more than being separated from his parents." By age two a child is able to keep an image of you in his mind during your absence. This eases his anxiety, but he has yet to overcome an inner fear of his separateness from you, a worry about whether he can make it on his own.

"By age three a child begins to formulate her sense of self," explains James C. Stroud, Ph.D., associate professor of early-childhood education and child psychology at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. Now she is finding out that she can function independently while you're away. "A four- or five-year-old has an even more developed self-concept," adds Dr. Stroud. "She can face new

ing late to pick up your child, for instance, may increase his anxiety. Another mistake is to lie to a child ("I'm just going to the bathroom and will be right back") or to bring him to preschool and to leave unannounced. If you want to test the waters by stepping out for a few minutes, tell your child that you'll be back in a bit and then do come back. "Sneaking out can really upset a child, and the resulting distrust may unnecessarily prolong the separation process," explains Nancy Balaban, Ed.D., codirector of the Infant and Parent Development and Early Intervention Program at the Bank Street Graduate School of Education in New York City.

Equally important, avoid giving in to your child's unhappiness.

"When a child shows anxiety—which is natural—he's telling you that you're the most important person to him and that he wants you there," says Claire Lerner, a child-development specialist at Zero to Three: National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families in Washington, D.C. "If you respond by apologizing, prolonging the leave-taking unnecessarily, or taking him home, you risk reinforcing the notion that he is safe only with you, and you may make it more difficult for him to separate." Give him time, and things should improve. If the anxiety seems particularly severe or lasts more than several weeks, however, consider looking further into the situation [see "When a Child Needs More Help," on page 52].

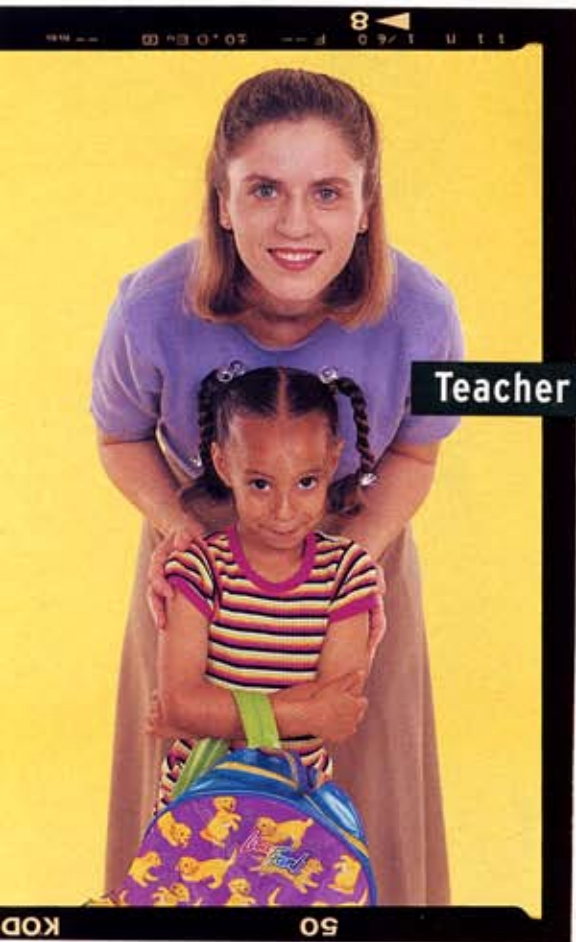
In the meantime, be prepared: The adjustment can be painful for the parent too. These strategies, however, will help you *and* your child weather the storm:

Prepare your preschooler. Talk freely about the start of school. Say something like "Next week you'll be going to a school, where there will be a lot of other kids to play with." If possible, set up a meeting with the teacher ahead of time so that your child is familiar with the person who will be greeting her on a regular basis. Lerner suggests an outing to the school's playground or a picnic on the grounds to build good memories before the big day.

Also, call the preschool director and find out if there will be a meeting at which you can get to know other parents and arrange a couple of pre-preschool playdates. When four-year-old Kyle Larson of Milwaukee started preschool last September, he had already played with some of his future classmates. "Once he had," says his mother, Amy, "I knew he would feel more comfortable separating from me."

Validate your child's feelings. If your child displays obvious sadness when you leave him at school, tell him that it's all right to feel that way. This shows him that you understand what he's going through. "If you say, 'I know it's hard to be apart from me,' he learns that it's OK to miss someone," comments Dr. Balaban. And as for your own distress: "It's perfectly normal for parents to feel anxious, and it's fine to tell your child that you'll miss him too."

Go with the flow, but set limits. If you know that your child is the type who will cry for a few minutes and then be fine, explain to



When talking to the teacher, remember that your youngster is listening. Positive words tell your child that you're leaving her in good hands.

situations better because by now she has had some experience of being left with other people."

No matter the age, a child who fears separation will go to great lengths to prolong a good-bye or to avoid it altogether. For instance, a two- or three-year-old will cry, throw himself on the floor, or cling to you for dear life. A four- or five-year-old is better able to express himself verbally, so although he may cry, he is more likely to withdraw or make heart-wrenching pleas such as "Daddy, don't leave me!" or "Please take me with you!" Dr. Stroud adds that some children struggling with separation anxiety may experience mood swings or regress in behavior, such as toilet skills.

How Not to Make It Worse

"Although parents typically don't cause separation anxiety," says Dr. Vrana, "their reactions play a pivotal role." Consistently arriv-



Your child's favorite toy, blanket, or stuffed animal will give her something to hold on to while you are gone.

him that you must leave, and make a quick exit. (You can even stick around outside and peek in to be sure he's all right.) But if your child usually needs you nearby to help negotiate difficult transitions, stay for a short while and help him get acclimated. "Make sure you set a time limit so that your child knows you will eventually be leaving," advises Lerner. "Tell him, for instance, 'I will stay until circle time' or 'I'll be here until the egg timer beeps.'"

Tote along a cherished possession. Consider bringing your child's favorite toy, blanket, or stuffed animal. She may feel more relaxed if she can hold it while you're gone.

"When my daughter, Jordana, started preschool at age three, I gave her a watch that I normally wore," says Laurie Greenberg of New York City. "I told her to look at it whenever she missed me." A photo of you or your family in your child's cubby may also do the trick.


Befriend the teacher or caregiver. Establishing warm relations with your child's teacher will also aid in the adjustment process. When you're conversing with the teacher, remember that your child will be watching and listening to your interaction. Positive words will send him the message that you're leaving him in good hands.

Establish rituals that your child can depend on. Claire Lerner and her then 2½-year-old son, Sam, recorded their voices while reading their favorite books. They would listen to the tapes during the car ride to school. Sam would also take the cassettes with him to listen to in the classroom when he became anxious. Kate Friedman of Mamaroneck, New York, shared a different ritual with her daughter Drew. On the way to school she would talk about her own plans ("Today, I'm going to drop off a dress

at the dry cleaner and then pick up milk for you at the store"). Such rituals let your child know that you're still thinking of her and that you exist while the two of you are separated, notes Lerner.

Call in or pop by. "If you find that your concern about your child's reaction is affecting your day, call the school or pay a midday visit to see how he's doing," suggests Dr. Balaban. Some schools and day-care centers have video cameras set up so that parents can observe what's happening in the classroom without disturbing the children. Some teachers also let parents spend time at the preschool or day-care center. Friedman spent several weeks at her three-year-old daughter's preschool before she felt comfortable leaving her there. "It took a while, but the teachers and I let Drew adjust at her own pace," she recalls. "Because of this, Drew never felt pushed. When she was ready to let me go, she told me it was OK."

Despite these strategies, you may still encounter some rough spots in separating from your child. Take comfort in the fact that most preschoolers adjust to their new environment within two or three weeks, says Dr. Stroud. The once strange surroundings gradually become familiar and inviting, and the kids start to look forward to seeing their teachers and pals.

Best of all, explains Lerner, your child adapts because you've given her a secure base from which she can go out into the world. She's seen firsthand that you do indeed come back, and that she can rely on others, make new friends, and have a blast. Now your next big problem may be how to get her to leave school! 

Caren Osten Gerszberg, a freelance writer living in Larchmont, New York, is feeling less anxious about separating this month from her two-year-old daughter Emily.

When a Child Needs More Help

If you find after several weeks that your child still experiences great difficulty with separation, you may want to take a closer look. Ask your child's teacher or day-care provider these questions about her behavior:

- Does she interact with other children, and if so, how?
- Is she withdrawn or weepy most of the time?
- Does she engage in or enjoy any of the activities?

A skilled preschool teacher or day-care provider should be able to help you pinpoint the problem. "Some kids simply need more time and are not as ready as you think," says Claire Lerner of the Zero to Three center in Washington, D.C.

It may also be the case that outside influences are affecting a child. "Any situation that adds stress to a child's life will cause him to crave the most secure environment he knows, which is usually the one he has with Mom and Dad," explains Dr. Scott Vrana of Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. If a child's life is disrupted by a divorce or the death of a grandparent, for instance, she may worry that other people will leave her. When all else fails, consider trying a different day-care center or postponing your child's entry into preschool. Some children are temperamentally more sensitive to separation and may need additional parental help to handle this developmental hurdle.

