

So Many Goodbyes

Ways to ease the transition between home and groups for young children

by Janet Brown McCracken

“GOODBYE...” Remember when *you* faced a new situation? You didn’t know the people, how to find the room, the schedule, maybe what to wear, or what was expected of you. Talk about feeling uncomfortable and anxious! It took time for you to feel at ease.

Now think how overwhelming new situations must be for young children who have far less experience in dealing with the unknown! When your child is about to enter a group program, whether it is full-time child care, a part-day program, or kindergarten, you and your child will find it hard to adjust to saying goodbye each day. This brochure will show how your family and the program staff can work together to smooth the transitions in your new lifestyle.

Prepare yourself for transitions

Good feelings are contagious! If you are genuinely enthusiastic about any upcoming change, your child will look forward to it, too. So your first step in adjusting to saying goodbye to your child each day is to be sure you are comfortable with your decision to enroll your child in a group program and with the quality of the program. Parents who feel satisfied about their work and about their child care arrangements are more comfortable about parenting.

It may help, too, to talk with other parents who have successfully managed a similar transition. It’s not easy to leave your child with someone else for long periods of time!

In a high quality program, you can count on staff members to help your family during this important time. They know that every parent, and every child, adjusts differently and needs time to feel at home in a new situation. Therefore, dealing with separation will in essence be *the curriculum* for the first few days, or even weeks, that your child is in the program.

Another good way to prepare yourself is to know how children usually react to separation. If you know what to expect, you can prepare yourself and your child to deal with this important task.

For example, your very young baby may not seem to notice when you leave. Most infants up to age 6 or 8 months make a smooth transition to another adult. Leaving may be harder for you than for your baby!

*Children need to be confident that they can count on you
to come back, and to come back when you said you would.*

If your child is between the ages of 5 months and 3 years, she or he may scream, cry, or cling when you say goodbye. This behavior, called *separation anxiety*, can cause you some difficult days. The bright side, however, is that *separation anxiety marks a big step in your baby’s development*: Your child has already learned to care about you and is aware that she or he is separate from you! Children this age still need more experience to be sure they can trust you to

come back.

You can expect older children to take their cues from you. If you look upon the new arrangement as the best for everyone in your family, and they know what to expect (see the next section), children from ages 2 through 6 generally adapt quite well.

From birth, your children grow closer to you and more independent at the same time. This new separation is one of many growing experiences you will share. How you handle the situation can set the stage for how well your child adjusts to other challenges in life. Be sure your actions and words are a good example!

Good feelings are contagious!

Prepare your child

When children are young, every experience is a new learning opportunity. During the first few months, your baby is learning—to rely upon you as a loving parent . . . to recognize your voice and face . . . to realize that you go out of sight and then come back. Many things you do, even playing games like Peek-A-Boo! Help your child see how to handle everyday challenges, such as how to say “goodbye” and “welcome back” to you.

If you have a baby, someone else probably has already cared for your child once in a while. Using occasional substitute care is an excellent way for you and your child to begin to learn how to say goodbye. You may find you enjoy each others company more when you return. Talk with your baby and share your enthusiasm for the other people who will care for her or him. Even if the baby doesn’t understand the words, your voice and face will convey your love.

Young children, just like adults, always feel more comfortable if they know what to expect. A few days to anticipate a change in caregiver or setting will be sufficient for infants and toddlers, while preschoolers may appreciate a week or two to get ready. Kindergarten or primary-grade children may ask about starting a new school or grade months in advance. Help your child place changes in the context of familiar events, saying for instance, “Remember how the pool opens for the summer and then closes when the days get cool? When the pool closes, it will be time for kindergarten.”

Toddlers and older children will benefit from many chances to talk about the new arrangements. At least drive or walk past the building. Better yet, visit the room in advance so your child can learn the way around. The visit may be less overwhelming if the teacher or caregiver is there to greet you without other children present (a good program for young children bustles with activity!). If you can, take a few pictures so your child can show others what the new school looks like. Use these pictures to start a memory book with your child to save interesting and important mementos.

Reading Books with your child is a great way to introduce any experience. Children see how other children in group programs have the same feelings of uncertainty. Books will help your child feel confident that new friends and caregivers will do many interesting things together.

A big boost to your child’s sense of comfort is knowing the caregivers or one or two of the other children in the program on day one. If it’s possible to arrange a play date with another child—one-on-one is best—your child will walk in and see a familiar face.

If possible, also take your child to show her where you will be during the day. Children feel more involved when they know what you do while you’re away, too.

*If you invest the time in a smooth transition, you will have
the reward of a more secure child for years to come.*

Create comfortable routines

At last, the long-anticipated day is about to arrive. The night before, you will probably start some new routines. These rituals, like bedtime stories, add predictability and are comforting in unfamiliar situations. They add continuity to each passing day. Adults use rituals in much the same way, such as having a cup of coffee before joining a meeting.

Ask your child to help lay out school clothes or pack lunch. Maybe your child would like to take a favorite pacifier or stuffed animal along for comfort. Include a picture of your family. Good programs hang family photos at children's eye level or by the changing table. Pictures and objects give children a real sense of continuity and belonging. A note with your child's lunch is always welcome, too.

On the first day, allow plenty of time—far more than you think you will need—for getting ready, out the door, and to the program. If you are feeling stressed, it will be contagious. As you walk or ride together on that first day, talk or sing. Casually discuss what you will do together after you are reunited. Commuting can be a special time to share ideas, play games, or observe changes in your surroundings. It won't be long until you will be able to say, "The flowers in front of that building are just about ready to bloom. Remember when they were being planted?" The commute, too, becomes part of the ritual and can ease the transition from home to school and back again.

Take time for transitions

Remember how you feel when you enter a room filled with strangers already engaged in lively conversation? Try to get to the child care site early on the first few days to help your child settle in and get involved in play before the throng arrives.

In a good program you can expect the caregiver to greet you and your child warmly and cheerfully each day upon arrival. Early childhood professionals know children are interesting, likable people, and every family is respected.

Child care providers who understand the importance of the separation process may invite you to stay with your child the first day, or possibly even the first week or two for decreasing amounts of time. Your reassuring presence in this new situation is essential, especially

- if your baby is exhibiting stranger anxiety
- if your child has had little experience in being cared for by others
- if your child speaks a language other than that spoken by the caregiver
- if your child has had a previous traumatic separation experiences

If you invest the time in a smooth transition and calm separation now, you will have the reward of a more secure child for years to come.

Each day when you arrive, take your time to see that your child gets settled comfortably. This is no time to rush. Start to establish some arrival routines: sign in together, put belongings in your child's cubby, or wave goodbye from a special window. You may want to remind your child of something that she or he wanted to "show" or "tell" to new friends.

Saying goodbye

When it is time for you to go—even if your baby is very young, your toddler is intently involved, or you have said goodbye to your preschooler every day for 5 years—no matter how tempting it might be to slip out unnoticed, *you will violate your child's trust if you leave without saying goodbye*. Be sure to tell your toddler or older child when you will be back. “I’ll pick you up to go home right after you have your afternoon snack.” Then be sure to do just that. Again, peg your return to an activity that the child will know.

Always say goodbye with a kiss, a hug, and a wave. Be firm but friendly about leaving. If your child whines or clings, prolonging the goodbye will only make it harder for yourself and for your child. Good teachers and caregivers are always alert to make sure that children say goodbye and then get involved in an interesting activity. They may offer comforting words to the child, such as “I know it’s hard to say goodbye.” Ridicule, such as “Only babies cry,” will not help your child learn how to deal constructively with this or any other difficult situation.

Once you have gone through your goodbye routine a few times, your child will get to know what to expect and the goodbyes will be less difficult. After a few days, check with your child’s teacher; you will probably find that any dismay on your child’s part ends fairly soon after you leave. Your child will pick up on your confidence about having chosen a good place for him or her to be while you are away.

Teachers help with transitions

Teachers or caregivers in a good program will create many links between your family and school. They will probably welcome a call from you during those first days. Just be sure you find out when it is convenient to call them—they cannot leave a group of children unattended. The provider may offer to call you to give you reassurance that your child is doing fine.

During the day, staff in high quality programs are always ready to talk with or comfort your child. Have you noticed that you feel better when you talk with a friend if you are feeling sad? Children also need to share their feelings. Some children make paintings or write stories for their parents. Dramatic play, songs, about families, a walk to see mommy and daddy’s picture next to the mirror, or a brief stop to hear the tape that your family made: all give children a chance to talk about how much they miss you. At the same time, teachers can remind children that “While we are pounding nails, Sarah’s daddy is probably sawing boards for a new house,” or “How might Rasheem’s mother be helping a sick person feel better today?” They may also point out, “Remember, after we play outdoors you can expect your parents to pick you up.”

When you return

At the end of a long day, both you and your child may be running low on energy and patience. Children often safe up the important things for their parents. Promise yourself to put aside the problems of the day and concentrate on being a parent. Both of you need each other after being apart all day.

The first few days it is especially important that you maintain a predictable pick-up schedule. Children need to be confident from the beginning that they can count on you to come back and to come when you said you would.

What can you expect when you pick up your child? Some children rush into your open arms, bursting with stories about the day. Some, even infants, may completely ignore your

presence or refuse to leave. Others may acknowledge that you are there and then return to what they are doing.

However your child reacts, try to be just as firm, in a friendly way, about leaving to go home as you were about leaving in the morning. You may want to help your child make the transition by saying, “When the clock says 5 minutes are up, then we will leave.”

Once again, rituals can set a familiar pattern: pick up your child’s lunch box or soiled clothing, have the child put away any materials, say goodbye to all the children and teachers, and be on your way. Bring a piece of fruit or some tasty crackers to nibble on.

Some children will want to talk about the day, others will not. Listen, but don’t pry. And interpret every report with an open mind! One 5-year-old seriously related how over the weekend her friend Lauren bought a spaceship, went to space wearing one glove, and ate a piece of the moon on the way back.

Children like to hear briefly about your day also. This gives everyone a sense of accomplishment and creates togetherness. Use the commute to ease the transition between work or school and home.

Every day

- **Be consistent** in following daily routines. Always walk into the room with your child, and involve your child in the transition routines upon arrival and departure. How proud children are to hang up their coat or to open the refrigerator door to put their milk inside!

- **Always say goodbye.**

- **Prepare children for any changes** in your routine. “Today we will get to school a little alter than usual. First we need to pick up some papers at an office along the way. You’ll still get there in time for snack.” Even very young children soon recognize patterns. They learn that Elizabeth’s parents always come before Todd’s. If Todd has gone home and Elizabeth still is waiting, she will feel abandoned. If you must be late, call the teacher or caregiver and your child.

What happens after a long holiday, illness, or sometimes even a weekend? Some children quickly fall back into their rituals. Others will need time to return to the relaxed pace you have set.

Soon the daily separations, and the joy of being together again, will become part of the day for all of you. You will have met yet another challenge of parenting, and your child will have learned that the world includes hellos and goodbyes!

“Separation is something we all deal with throughout life, from relatively minor losses, like friends moving away, to the ultimate separation, death. How we handle separations is developed very early in life, literally from our Peek-A-Boo days when we first deal with the disappearance and reappearance of someone we love. How we help children handle separation, then, is of the first importance and is truly lif-shaping.”

(Warren, 1977, p.28)

For further reading

Caring: Supporting children's growth, by Rita M. Warren, 1977. NAEYC #213. \$4.

"Finding the best care for your infant or toddler," by Laura L. Dittmann, 1993. NAEYC #518. Single copies are 50¢ each; 100 copies are \$10.

Separation, edited by Kathe Jervis, 1984. NAEYC #230. \$4.

Starting school: From separation to independence (A guide for early childhood teachers), by Nancy Balaban, 1985. New York: Teachers College Press. \$13.95.

Other NAEYC related resources

Character development: Encouraging self-esteem and self-discipline in infants, toddlers, and two-year-olds, by Polly Greenberg, 1991. NAEYC #175. \$8.

"Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving infants," 1989. NAEYC #547. Single copies are 50¢ each; 100 copies are \$10.

"Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving toddlers," 1989. NAEYC #508. Single copies are 50¢ each; 100 copies are \$10.

"Good teaching practices for older preschoolers and kindergarteners," 1990. NAEYC #522. Single copies are 50¢ each; 100 copies are \$10.

"How to choose a good early childhood program," 1990. NAEYC #525. Single copies are 50¢ each; 100 copies are \$10.

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