

# TIPS FOR HELPING YOUR CHILD ADJUST TO SCHOOL

- 1. Facilitate your child's bonding with the teacher.** Kids need to transfer their attachment focus to their teacher to be ready to learn. If you notice that your child doesn't feel good about his teacher, contact her immediately. Just explain that he doesn't seem to have settled in yet, and you hope she can make a special effort to reach out to him so he feels at home. Any experienced teacher will understand and pay extra attention to him for a bit. Many teachers assign the child a special job, so they feel connected and like they have a role to play each day.
- 2. Facilitate bonding with the other kids.** Kids need to feel bonded with at least one other child. Ask the teacher if she's noticed who your child is hanging with. Ask your child which kids he'd like to invite over to play. If he isn't comfortable with how the other child would respond to a playdate invitation, you can always invite the mom with her kid for ice cream after school, or the entire family for Friday night dinner. You don't need anything fancier than pasta, and by the end of the meal, the kids will be racing around the house like long lost buddies. And who knows? Maybe you and the parents will hit it off.
- 3. Give your child a way to hold onto you during the day.** For many kids, the biggest challenge is saying goodbye to you. Develop a parting ritual, such as a hug and a saying: *"I love you, you love me, have a great day and I'll see you at 3!"* Most kids like a laminated picture of the family in their pencil box. Many also like a token for their pocket, such as a paper heart with a love note, or a pebble you found on the beach together.
- 4. Calm her fears.** Most school anxiety is caused by worries that adults might find silly, such as the fear that you'll die or disappear while she's at school. Point out that naturally people who love each other don't like parting, but she'll have fun, you'll be absolutely fine, the school can always contact you, and your love is always with her even when you aren't. End every conversation with the reassurance *"You know I ALWAYS come back"* so she can repeat this mantra to herself if she worries.
- 5. Help your child laugh out his anxieties so he doesn't have to cry.** Giggling is your child's way of venting anxiety, and any child who is having a tough school adjustment is feeling anxious -- fearful -- inside. Give him as many opportunities to giggle as possible. If you can spend some time every morning playing a chase game in your house, or whatever gets him giggling, you'll find that his separation from you at school goes more smoothly. (NOT tickling, since that may even build up stress hormones.) Some games that help kids with separation:

**"Please Don't Leave Me."** When you have been reading to him and he starts to get off your lap, pull him back to you and tell him how much you love holding him, and please don't go away from you ever and you want to hold him always. Keep your voice light and playful rather than needy so he feels free to pull away, and keep scooping him back to you and begging him to stay. The point of this is to heal that fear inside him about how much he needed and wanted you when you left him, by letting him be the one to "leave." Again, go for giggles.

**The Bye Bye Game.** It's a simple version of Hide and Seek that triggers just enough separation anxiety to get him giggling. Say "Let's play Bye-bye." Start to leave -- but not through a door, as if you're really going. Instead, open the closet door. But then act like you're the one who is scared to separate, and jump back to your child and cling. Say "I missed you! Ok, let me try that again." and start to leave again. Again, come back and grab him before you are even out of sight, which should get him giggling, especially if you play-act being silly and excessively worried. Keep playing this, letting him yell or you yell, as long as he is giggling, to surface his anxieties about your leaving him.

**6. Stay connected.** Start your child's day with a five minute snuggle in bed or on the couch, just loving her. Make sure that every day after school when you're reunited, you have special time with your big girl to hear all about her day. Make sure to schedule in a long snuggle after lights-out to increase her sense of security.

**7. Be alert for signs about why your child is worried.** Most of the time, kids do fine after a few weeks. But occasionally, their unhappiness indicates a more serious issue: he's being bullied, or can't see the blackboard, or doesn't understand anything and is afraid to speak up. Ask calm questions about his day, listen deeply, and reflect what he tells you so he'll keep talking. Start conversations by reading books about school together; your librarian can be helpful. Offer your own positive school stories ("*I was so nervous the first week I couldn't even use the bathroom at school but then I met my best friend Maria and I loved first grade*") and the assurance that he'll feel right at home soon. If you sense a bigger issue that you can't unearth, it's time to call the teacher.

**8. Ease the transition.** If your child gets teary when you say goodbye, use your goodbye routine and reassure her that she'll be fine and you'll be waiting at the end of the day. If she continues to have a hard time separating, see if the teacher can give her a special job every morning to ease the transition.

**9. Make sure you're a few minutes early to pick your child up.** Not seeing you immediately will exacerbate any anxieties.

**10. Downplay the time younger kids spend with you at home.** If a younger sibling is at home with you, be sure your older child knows how boring it is at home and how much the younger sib wishes she could go to big kids' school.

**11. Create a calm household routine with early bedtimes and peaceful mornings.** If you have to wake your kids in the morning, they aren't getting enough sleep. Kids who aren't well-rested don't have the internal resources to cope with goodbyes, much less the rigors of the school day. And get yourself to bed early too, so you can deal calmly with the morning rush and get everyone off to a happy start.