



What Parents Ask

By Susan Sears Smith and Monika Filková



Question: Our child just started preschool and she cries every time we leave her there. Why does she do that? What should we do about it?

Children of this age are struggling with transition between home and other settings. This is a challenge because the school environment is so new to them and they don't know what to expect. They don't know anyone and they don't know what will happen when their parents leave them alone in this setting. This is stressful to them, just as it would be for anyone in an unfamiliar place. Crying is one way to relieve this stress.

Because children are not able to read a schedule and tell time by the clock, they know when events will occur only through consistent routine: events happening in the same order on a number of occasions. For example, after resting time, children get ready to go home. The child begins to relax and to focus on other activities once she is able to anticipate what will happen next.

Sometimes a child cries because she has not yet attached to another person in the room – a child, or more often, a teacher. Little by little, the child gets to know the adults and other children and feels comfortable with them. Or a new child cries because she is not able to focus on the activities or does not know what to do upon arrival at school.

Children may also cry because they have not yet developed the trust that their parents will return. When we think about it, the child has been totally dependent on these adults for all survival needs since birth, so the fear of abandonment is genuine. Who will fulfill the child's needs if the parents aren't there?

Tips for Separating

What are the dynamics of separation and why is it difficult for some children? In general, children who are securely attached will separate with confidence if adults trust in their ability to do so. Children are born with an innate ability to adapt to new situations, although they might need time. According to Dr. Maria Montessori, physician and educator, the child has a different relationship to his environment than we do. Adults admire their environment; they can remember it and think about it, but the child absorbs it. What the child sees and experiences becomes a part of his or her soul. So, new children may cry in the beginning, but usually it doesn't last long.

Although a cry can mean that a child is in pain or is unhappy, a cry at separation is a healthy sign. It is usually a cry in protest at how uncomfortable change can feel. Some children's cries are loud, angry and almost indignant. Teachers of toddlers at the International Montessori School of Prague (IMSP) were interviewed and explained that they allow a child to cry for a short period of time. Then a teacher would direct the child's attention to purposeful activities, such as watching a bird outside a window, changing shoes, washing hands, and joining the other children.

If, for any reason, the parent worries that the child does not have the ability to separate and be on her own, the child will

internalize this anxiety, feel insecure and doubt her ability to succeed. Parents can help the child by placing the child in a school that they trust and telling the child how happy they are that the child will be there. A parent can support the activity of the school by being a sort of cheering section. Talk to the child about what she did at school. Let your child know how fortunate she is to go to school.

IMSP teachers advise that if one parent feels more confident about the separation than the other parent, the more confident parent should bring the child to school. The message to the child should always be: "This school is a great place for you and you will have fun here!"

The parent who is less confident may be dealing with personal issues, perhaps feeling a sense of sorrow at the separation. This sorrow is the parent's personal issue to sort out privately. It is not helpful to tell the child how much the parent will miss him or to prolong the departure. A quick and confident goodbye with a promise to return when school is over is the most positive message you can leave with a young child.

Many schools will make a mid-morning check-in call if the parent must know how the child is faring. But most children adjust well and daily calls from the teachers are not necessary.

Parents may be afraid that their child is not ready for school. But if the child can participate in the activities, he is ready. Other parents feel threatened that another adult will take precedence in the child's affections. Actually, research done by Dr. Alice Sterling Honig, Professor Emeritus of Child Development at Syracuse University of New York, indicates that children benefit by having relationships with adults other than parents.

Some parents feel confused when the child has been going to school for a few weeks and still cries at drop off. Being patient and positive will help. There is no set length of time for this transition, but generally if the child is at school for five days a week, the crying usually stops in three weeks or less. If the child attends the program for fewer days per week, the adjustment may take up to eight weeks. Both parents and child need to build trust with the situation and the new relationship through day-after-day experience.

Finally, good communication between parent and teachers will make a child's transition more successful, and teachers work hard to build strong relationships with the parents. This requires attention from both sides. Parents should connect with the teacher on a regular basis using phone and e-mail, making sure that they request all the information they need in order to support their children in good pre-school environments.

Susan Sears Smith, M.A. in Education with a Montessori Specialty, is an IWAP member and an Early Childhood Educator at the International Montessori School of Prague.

Monika Filková is an Early Childhood Educator at the International Montessori School of Prague.