

Adjusting to a New Preschool



By Dr. Diana Bermudez © 2022
www.amarecenter.com

It is natural for some children to dislike and reject a new preschool. They may express it verbally and non-verbally (crying, nervous ticks, toileting accidents, aggressive behavior, unusual shyness, etc.). This is more common for children who have a “cautious temperament,” characterized by adjusting slowly to changes and approaching new environments slowly. A child’s anxiety will be particularly when experiencing other major changes at the same time (moving to a new home/town, divorce of the parents, death of a love person or pet, arrival of a sibling, potty training). In addition, a certain preschool environment may not fit the individual needs of a given child. Adults can support children with their adjustment to a new preschool in many ways.

1. Coaching the Child to Express Emotions

Challenging behaviors can be a children’s way of expressing strong emotions non-verbally. Even when they have words, they may not express emotions with words because emotions are complex or not accepted by the culture/family around them. However, they do not have enough self-regulation to control their own behavior at this age. An important way to prevent undesired behaviors at this age is by encouraging expressing emotions either with words, through play or making art.

2. Offering Empathy

If your child shows challenging behaviors while getting ready for preschool or during drop off, recognize their feelings verbally for 2-3 minutes with physical affection and empathic statements, such as, “I see that you are not happy about being here, and I am sorry. I know it is difficult for you. I will miss you soon and I will be thinking of you.” After providing this loving reassurance, slowly help the child to playing with an interesting toy, friend or teacher.

3. Adjusting Your Own Response

Your child's response to a new preschool may not be as quick as you hoped it would be, or as smooth as it is for other children. If your child's behavior is not meeting your expectations, you might be experiencing and showing disappointment, anxiety, protection, or frustration (even if only with gestures). Children can perceive their parents' emotions non-verbally. Your emotions are natural, but also make your child more emotional at a time when he/she needs patience and reassurance. Calming down your own emotions and seeking your own support are key elements for supporting your child productively.

4. Farewell Rituals

Having a routine or ritual for drop off helps children to have predictability and security. A farewell ritual can be any form of saying good bye, such as a unique handshake or song. A beautiful ritual is described in the book "The Kissing Hand" by Audrey Penn. Read the book with your child at home to validate anxiety about going to daycare/preschool and assure them that they will be happy eventually. Use the ritual of saying goodbye at drop off with a kiss on the hand, the way the book describes it. Ask the teacher to remind your child that the kiss is in their hand when they feel sad during the day. The book is available on Amazon.

I strongly recommend making the farewell ritual brief (3-5 minutes), which allows enough time to express love and support to the child. Longer farewells may give the child the opportunity to demonstrate strong emotions, with the benign intention of convincing the father to stay or not to leave them in the preschool. In turn, the child's display of strong emotions make it difficult for the parent not to show their own emotions.

5. Special Mission with Teacher

Request that the teacher give the child a stuffed animal or doll at the end of the day, with the special mission of taking care of him at home and returning it the next day. He can pretend to feed it and put it to sleep at home. This can create the satisfaction of taking care of the little animal/doll, and the anticipation of returning to preschool to share with teacher what he/she did with the animal/doll at home.

6. Consider Therapeutic Help

If your child has not made progress in a couple of months after attending preschool consistently, he/she may benefit from the help of a play therapist or art therapist specialized in early childhood.

