

## Easing Home-to-School Transitions

These handouts are designed to help parents and their children transition from home to school. A child may express sadness or anger when his or her parent leaves, and often the child's difficulties are prolonged by a parent who is unprepared by the intensity of the child's reaction. Providing parents in advance with this information about this step in becoming independent can make it easier for them to accept and respond to a child's strong emotions.

The following pages include handouts you can send to parents at the beginning of the school year. These include:

- a letter to parents about separation
- a two-page handout to parents describing how to make the transition to school easier for their children
- a letter to parents about home visits

Dear Parent,

The start of school is an emotional time, full of anticipation of new friends, hopes for playful learning, and fears about your child's adjustment. Whether your child is returning to preschool or coming for the first time, he or she may experience separation anxiety. This is a feeling of fear and discomfort about being separated from familiar people. Separation anxiety is a normal reaction that most people feel at one time or another. Adults experience it when they leave home and things are not the same. Unfamiliar stores, new and different ways of speaking, and foods that seem "foreign" can all make us feel uncomfortable and anxious — no wonder McDonald's is the same from coast to coast!

Even E.T. (a movie character from outer space) suffered from separation anxiety. Despite the efforts of his newfound friends, E.T. still yearned to go home. E.T., however, had an advantage over most preschoolers. Although he was as frantic and upset as a three-year-old, he had unusual electronic skills to cope with his homesickness (E.T. phoned home with a coat hanger, an umbrella, and an old record player). But young children have no such communication skills and their efforts at expressing their distress can be confusing and painful to watch and interpret.

Each child expresses these feelings about leaving parents in a slightly different way. Some children may protest right away, crying loudly at school or complaining at home. Some may complain of aches, pains, or illnesses. Others may have difficulty weeks after school has begun, when the initial excitement has worn off. Some children may show anger toward the new adults or children in their life.

It may help to remember that separating from home and becoming attached to new surroundings are vital parts of becoming independent. Children need our understanding and support as they make these steps. Enclosed is a list of suggestions that you can use to support your child during this transition. We hope you will find these strategies helpful and useful.

Sincerely,

The teachers at \_\_\_\_\_ Early Childhood Center

## Making a Separation Plan

Leaving parents at the beginning of the school day can be difficult for any child, no matter how loved and secure the child feels. Here are some ideas you can use to make this transition smoother for you and your child:

■ **Help your child anticipate what will happen each day of school.** If your child is returning for a second or third year in the program, let him or her know that there will be new children as well as some old friends in the group. Create a “separation ritual or plan” to follow with your child each day as you drop him or her off. Keep your plan simple (e.g., a story together followed by a wave at the window or a few minutes together at the breakfast table). The teachers will be glad to help you decide on a ritual, if necessary.

■ **Be consistent about following your plan.** If your child is having a particularly difficult time, adding “one more story” at the last minute will not ease these feelings; in fact, your child’s sadness or anxiety may become stronger.

■ **If difficulties continue, reassess your plan with the teachers.** Ask the teachers for suggestions and support — they have been through this many times with other children. Ask them what they do to support your child after you have left, making sure that your child’s feelings are being fully acknowledged. Ask them what activities happen right after you leave so you can go over this with your child at home. (If you are still worried about your child after you leave, you can always call the school from your workplace to see how your child is doing.)

■ **Acknowledge your child’s feelings yourself, both as you leave (if there are strong emotions) and at home when you discuss it.** “Acknowledge feelings” means to make simple statements that label the feelings. For example, say “It’s really hard when we have to say good-bye at school. You feel really sad when I leave” or “It makes you mad when I leave you at day care.” As you talk to your child, use a soft, calm voice and touch your child gently, to communicate that you understand.

(continued on next page)

### **Making a Separation Plan (cont.)**

Pause and wait for your child's response. It is important to show you accept your child's feelings, even if his or her outbursts are upsetting to you. This acceptance will let your child know it is okay to have strong feelings about your leaving. With your encouragement, your child will fully express feelings of sadness or anger — this usually helps children “let go” of the feelings and begin to adjust to the new friends and environment.

■ **If your child is not upset, avoid pressuring him or her to be sad that you are going.** Instead, know that your child cares very deeply about you and that you can take pride in your child's independence.

■ **Know that your child cannot begin to cope with your leaving until you actually leave.** After your last good-bye, it is important that you leave without further ado. Children become confident that they are okay only after they have experienced their own ability to carry on without you in the new setting.

■ **Above all, show confidence in your child's ability to adjust by saying good-bye as planned.** Do not sneak away while your child is distracted. This will make your child distrustful of the whole separation process.

Following these simple suggestions will ease this daily transition for most parents and children. If you need more help with separation problems, please feel free to talk with the teachers. We will help in any way we can.

Dear Parent,

We are very excited about your child's arrival on the first day of school. We want to make sure this transition to school goes very smoothly for your child. We would like to make a home visit on\_\_\_\_\_. This visit is an informal occasion that we hope will give your child time to get to know his or her new teachers in the safety and comfort of your home. It also is a good time to ask any additional questions that you may have about our program.

Children react in different ways to this visit; some become very excited, some are very shy and quiet, some even run and hide! Whatever happens is okay with us. Just seeing us in your home will communicate our interest in your child and may help your child feel more comfortable at school.

During this visit, we may try to discuss with your child the choice of a "symbol" or special picture that he or she would like to have used at school as an identification mark. Symbols are often pictures of favorite objects or activities. This symbol will be drawn by the teachers next to his or her name on artwork and where personal belongings are stored. "Picture reading" of symbols supports growth toward reading and will also help other children recognize your child's materials.

We look forward to seeing you soon!

Sincerely,

The teachers at \_\_\_\_\_ Early Childhood Center