

Separation: The Beginning of Letting Go

By Melody Patton, MBA

As you walk your child into school for the very first time, you may think, "How is this possible? I can't believe she is old enough to go to school! It seems as if just yesterday. . .," and your thoughts drift back to the day your newborn arrived. You remember cradling her, admiring the peach fuzz on her cheek, marveling at her long eyelashes, and taking in the sweet smell of her skin. She seemed so perfect and yet so helpless. You couldn't imagine that one day this baby would not need you.

Dropping your child off at school in the fall, whether it's the first day of school ever, the first day at a new school, or the first day at a school the child has attended previously, can be incredibly emotional or even frightening to both you and your child. You may worry, "What if he cries all day?" "What if she misses me?" "Will the teachers love him?" However, your child needs your support and encouragement to learn to separate. When she took her first steps, you held out your arms, smiling and urging her to walk toward you. If he fell, you encouraged him to get back up and try again. The same is true with separating!

Prepare yourself in advance, mentally and emotionally. There will be other occasions in which you will be "letting go" of your child—the first time she has a sleepover at a friend's house, the first time he rides his bike somewhere without you, or the time she gets her driver's license—and it will be helpful to have a strategy to support this lifelong process. Recognize that this is a big step for you:

Reassure yourself and be confident in your decision.

Prepare your child as well. Attend any orientation events the school offers. Take your child to activities that familiarize him with the school or teachers. When your child is new to any environment, it can take time to become comfortable. Be upbeat and positive when talking to her about school. Young children are very intuitive and easily pick up on your worries or concerns, even if you are not voicing them.

Come up with a consistent good-bye routine that you can follow every day, such as a hug, a kiss, and "Have a good day at school. I will be back to get you after lunch (or nap, etc.)." This gives your child something specific to look forward to. "I know Mommy (or Daddy) always comes back after I eat lunch." She can take comfort in the routine of the day, knowing when you will return.

The child should walk in on his own. Remember that Montessori advised that if the child can walk, allow him to walk. A child who is walking in on her own is deciding to go to school. Once she has walked in, you must leave. It is not helpful to linger, even if your child is showing signs of distress. Walking away after saying good-bye communicates that you trust he will be okay without you. As you walk away, you could say once more, "I love you. I will be back after lunch."

Teachers should support you through this process, first by greeting the child. "Good morning, Marla. It is good to see you at school today!" A

teacher may take a reluctant child by the hand. At this point, it is his or her job to take over. If the child is distressed, the teacher will comfort him or find a favorite activity with which to engage her. If and when your child shows signs of concern about your return, the teacher can remind him, "Remember, Mommy/Daddy always comes back at carpool time."

When parent and teacher partner together to help a child separate, it often only takes a few days for him to begin walking in confidently. If it takes longer, contact your child's teacher to talk about how to make the separation more comfortable for everyone.

The first day of school is just the beginning of your child's journey toward becoming an independent, confident, and capable adult. Just think—one day you will be taking him to college!

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