

How to Manage Preschool Separation Anxiety

By Amanda Rock

It's the stuff broken hearts are made of. You, dropping off your little one at preschool with a pit in your stomach, knowing what's coming next. Your preschooler working himself into a fit, kicking, screaming and crying, not wanting you to leave him alone in this strange place. Preschool separation anxiety -- you know it can't go on forever, but it sure feels like it lasts a lifetime. The good news is that there is an end in sight. Employ these strategies to get rid of preschool separation anxiety, help your child relax and, believe it or not, learn to look forward to going to preschool every day.

Time Required: As long as it takes

Here's How:

1. **Say goodbye.** The simplest of the steps, it's also the hardest to do. But do it you must. Give your child a hug and a kiss, tell her you'll be back soon and then walk out the door. Don't delay, don't give her "one more minute," don't linger, hoping that she'll miraculously start smiling and laughing, happy to go and play with her preschool chums. You've brought her to preschool and now it's time to let her get to the business of being a preschooler.
2. **Trust your child's teacher.** Preschool teachers, even newly-minted ones, know kids. They've done this before and have many ways and methods in their bag of tricks to help calm your little one down. From redirecting to a new activity to simply giving your child a hug and offering comfort, preschool teachers are masters at knowing what works and what doesn't when it comes to making kids happy. You chose this preschool for a reason, let the staff prove that your instincts and research was well-founded.
3. **Establish a good-bye routine.** Preschoolers crave routine. By giving your child something he can count on, he's likely to go to school that much more willingly. So come up with a couple of things that you do each time you say goodbye. Maybe it's a secret handshake or a special high-five. Maybe you kiss her chin or tweak her nose. Whatever it is, make it something special between the two of you and make sure you do it every single time.
4. **Confront the problem head-on.** Bribing your child to stay in school may work -- temporarily. Sneaking out might make you feel better because you don't have to witness a meltdown. But the best way to cope with preschool separation anxiety is to just deal with it. The reality is, that within minutes of their parents' exit, most kids happily settle down and forget what all the fuss was about. And within days (sometimes weeks), the tearful goodbyes end. This is something the two of you must work through the right way -- together.
5. **Try a change.** It's a reality of parenthood. Kids often behave better for people other than their parents. If there's a relative, friend or neighbor that's game, let them handle the dropping off for a few days and see if there is a change in your child's behavior.
6. **Enlist the help of home.** The most important message to send your child is that you love them very much and that you are thinking of them often. Together, pick out something that your child can bring to school with them that reminds them of home -- a small stuffed animal, a photo, even a smiley face drawn on their hand. It just needs to be something they can look at that will conjure up thoughts of you that also offers comfort. (Keep it reasonable -- smaller than a breadbox and nothing that makes noise.)
7. **Never let them see you sweat.** Don't let your child see that their preschool separation anxiety is getting to you. Of course this is hard on you, but you must never let your child see that. Smile, talk about how much fun she's going to have and then once you are out the door, call a friend to vent and cry.
8. **Don't be late for pick up.** It's easy to get lose track of time when you have a few hours to yourself, whether you are running errands, working or simply taking some time to relax.

But no matter who is picking your child up, whether it is you or someone else, make sure you are there on time -- early even. If you are late, it can cause your child even more anxiety and make dropping her off the next time that much harder.

9. **Get the teacher involved.** You probably have plenty of questions and could use some wise words from someone who has done this before. Your child's preschool teacher is likely an expert in preschool separation anxiety and probably has a lot to offer in terms of dealing with your child specifically. Make an appointment when you can talk to her, if possible without your child present. And while it's tempting to try to corner her during drop-off and/or pick-up time, it's best to wait until she has time to focus solely on you, allowing her to gather her thoughts and prepare herself.
10. **Be prepared for regression.** Just when you think you finally have preschool separation anxiety under control, along comes a school vacation or an illness that keeps your child home for a few days and -- tah-dah! -- it's back again. This is perfectly normal. While upsetting, it's likely just to last a day or two and your child should go back to his cheerful self at drop-off time quickly.
11. **Give your child something to look forward to.** Most *grown-ups* aren't thrilled with the idea of being left in a roomful of people they don't know. If it's possible, put some friendly faces in the crowd by scheduling playdates with some of your child's classmates. If your child arrives at preschool and sees someone they recognize, they may be more likely to settle down and relax.
12. **Be honest.** Talk to your child about what they are feeling and why. Ask them what makes them so upset about you dropping them off at preschool. Share a story about a time that you may have felt scared or nervous about something and how you dealt with it. Talk about why you want your child to go to preschool and how much fun they are going to have while they were there. Don't minimize their fears or concerns -- address them while assuring them that you will always be there to pick them up once school is over for the day.
13. **Help your child do his homework.** Before preschool even starts, talk to your child about the whole process, preparing her for what she can expect to happen. Do site visits, go on bus rides and even read a few books about what preschool will be like and what she will do there. Knowledge is power and the more information your child has, the more empowered she's likely to feel.

Tips:

1. Don't drag out saying goodbye and don't sneak out either. Keep it simple -- one kiss, one hug and out the door you head. And never bring your child home with you.
2. Keep your own emotions in check. Kids are surprisingly adept at picking up on what we grown-ups are feeling, even if we are trying to hide it.
3. Discuss what is going on with your child's teacher, but not during drop-off or pick-up time. Make an appointment to discuss the matter privately.
4. See if you can get another relative or friend to bring your child to school to see if a change in routine makes a difference.
5. Be prepared for your child to regress a bit after vacations, after he's been out sick or if something eventful is going on at home, like the birth of a sibling.

What You Need

- A small reminder of home, like a photo or stuffed animal
- Patience
- A strong support system in place -- teachers, friends, etc.
- A goodbye routine that you follow each time