

Notes Home

Separation at the Little School

Some of you who are reading this are old hands at separation at the Little School and some of you are doing it for the very first time. Just remember that every child is different and each group has a different experience, but it is helpful, I think, to be reminded that separation affects everybody, child and adult alike and not just in the first school experience but in every school year and even in every separation. It affects everyone and everyone gets through it.

These first few weeks of school can be a confusing time for both parents and teachers. We face two goals simultaneously that seem utterly contradictory. Parents want to leave the classroom and teachers want you to go so that they can carry on the business of a normal school day. At the same time, we expect you to stay as long as your child needs you to, always remembering that “needs” is different from “wants.”

It is our job, together, to figure out the best way to meet both goals in the best possible way for each child. Perhaps it will help to talk a little bit about what separation means, why it can be so difficult, and to describe some of the behavior we so often observe in the children as they begin school.

Separation or separation anxiety isn't something experienced once and never again. Beginnings, endings or goodbyes continue to arouse strong emotion in most of us throughout our lives. But young children have no context for their feelings, no way to understand them. A baby does not understand that things or people have an independent existence. What they can't see does not exist. Twos and even some young threes can't always retain a mental picture of the absent parent. Children's sense of time can be entirely irrational. Five minutes may truly seem like forever. The words “a half hour” don't translate to a meaningful length of time in a child's mind. When parents leave, a child may feel abandoned. They are not 100% sure that you will return. Such fear will inspire different behavior in different children.

Notes Home

Your child's response to school will depend on many things. It will depend on his personality, her place in the family, on whether or not he's been left with a caregiver or had other group experiences. Some children will look forward to school. Others may dread it at first. For some, arrival will be the hardest time and for others a tantrum may occur when it is time to leave. Your child may wet the bed or have nightmares. Some children may seem like zombies and others may get so wired that you'd like to cage them. Even the most even-tempered and easygoing child is reacting to the school experience.

In the past few years, we have seen a whole range of responses to the beginning of school. For many, even most, the first two weeks seem uneventful. However, the experience is a complicated one for all children. Some may show this more dramatically than others.

Remember: it's not just the idea of school, but the complexities of family relations, personality, temperament, experience, that affect the way the child adapts. Most children really want to come to school and it is this desire that finally helps them happily make the necessary adjustment. Most of us deal best with challenges of any kind when someone we trust can support us through them. You are that trusted person in your child's life.

And try to remember, too, that we are not judging you or your child. We go through this process with families every year and we can help you through it this year.

Kate