

Question: My child recently began child care and is having a hard time adjusting. She screams and cries when I leave, and it is heartbreaking! How can I help her become more comfortable?

The things that happen during daily life are often the best opportunities to help promote life skills in your child. You can help your child manage stress by promoting the life skill of Taking on Challenges.

Taking on Challenges: Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

1

Remember this is a normal part of your child's development.

Toddlers typically have a hard time with changes, like saying goodbye to a parent in a new environment. While these tearful transitions can be difficult for both of you, they are actually signs that you and your child have a secure and healthy attachment. As she gets older, your child will have more experience being away from you and will have more control over how she reacts.

Megan Gunnar of the University of Minnesota, one of the foremost authorities on stress and coping in children, found that children who have adult in their lives who they learn to trust to care for them can weather stormier situations. She says,

[S]tress is when challenge overwhelms your capacity to manage it. With a trusting relationship with a parent who's been there for you and [who's] accessible, you're not overwhelmed.

2

Give reassuring messages.

You can help your child manage the stress of beginning child care when you:

- Acknowledge her feelings in the situation: "It's so hard to say goodbye in the morning."
- Use clear and specific language to reassure your child that you will be back. This can be difficult for very young children to understand. Say things like: "After you take your nap, I will come back and get you. I know you can do it."
- Praise your child's efforts. Let her know you recognize how hard she is working: "I know you were sad to say goodbye this morning, but you stayed the whole day at school! I knew you could do it!" or "It looked like you were having fun with your friends when I came to get you at school."

3 Build on your child's strengths and ask questions.

Rather than focusing on the difficulties your child is having, try to support your child's strengths. Be a detective and observe your child closely and figure out what helps her manage best.

- Does your child have a blanket, favorite toy or stuffed animal? See if this helps your child transition to the child care environment.
- Does it help your child to have family photos to look at throughout the day?
- Choose books about separation and going to school. You can even create a personal book for your child with pictures to show the schedule of her day.
- Use playtime to practice saying goodbye and hello with games like peekaboo or pretending to talk on the phone. Let your child take on the role of the parent going to work.

When you support your child by showing her strategies to manage stress, you are helping her move toward Taking on Challenges on her own.

In an experiment, Joseph Campos of the University of California at Berkeley found that when a parent looks fearful, a young child will not try something new; but if the parent smiles or shows that trying something new is okay, the child is more likely to venture out. Adults' nonverbal reactions determine how young children react in uncertain situations.

4 Be aware of your feelings and what you are conveying.

If you feel worried and stressed about dropping your child off in the morning, it is likely that she will sense this. Be intentional about what you want to convey since your child will pick up on what you say (and don't say). Show confidence in her abilities to cope with the separation.

- Make sure to give your child lots of hugs and smiles before you go.
- Encourage your child verbally: "You can do it!"
- Reassure your child that her teachers will keep her safe.

5 Develop a routine.

When you follow a consistent and predictable routine to say goodbye to your child, she feels a sense of control and security. Make a plan with your child for the morning and talk about it so she knows what to expect. For example:

- "We will read one book and sing one song, and then it will be time for me to say goodbye." See how this plan works. If it doesn't, try something new.

Although it's hard, it is best to leave once you have said goodbye and not to linger. When the transition is prolonged, it is often more difficult for both you and your child.

Robert Pianta of the University of Virginia describes the importance of the relationship between teacher and child:

A lot of people talk about the relationship between kids and a teacher as [providing] a secure base for exploring the world. A good teacher-child relationship is going to offer the child the opportunity to stretch and risk a little bit socially, emotionally, or in learning something hard and new. It's going to provide just the kind of support that the child needs to be able to master what's being offered.

6 Support your child's relationship with her teachers.

Some child care programs for young children select one person to be the primary teacher—the person whose job it is to form that “secure base” that Robert Pianta writes about—that person who can help your child feel safe and through this relationship move out to explore. Whether or not your program uses this strategy, you can promote these supportive relationships when you:

- Help your daughter anticipate seeing her teachers. Before you arrive, talk about the teachers: “What do you think your teacher is going to say when she (or he) sees you? Do you think she (or he) will be surprised that you are wearing a new shirt?”
- Spend a little time with the teacher and your daughter before you leave. Share something wonderful that your daughter did at home with the teacher and hear about what she did at child care. Your warm relationship with the teacher can serve as a comforting bridge for your child to form her own relationship.
- Help the teacher know what helps your daughter most in making a transition to child care. Tell the teacher if your daughter would like to listen to a story or sing a favorite song. Appreciate the teacher's efforts to help your child.
- Talk about the teacher(s) when you are at home. “I talked to your teacher and she (or he) told me that you played in the sand. Was that fun?” You can take pictures with your phone of your daughter in child care to remind her of her experiences there.