

## The First Preschool Hurdle: SEPARATION

All kids and parents have feelings about being separated from each other. These feelings are normal but are often uncomfortable, so no one wants to deal with them. Teachers know different families have different feelings about separation, and all are okay. We know how to help both children and parents deal with these feelings, so ask for help if you or your child are struggling with this.

How to help your child: Allow your child to express how she is feeling. (This doesn't mean you have to do anything about those feelings, such as stay home from school. If you as a parent are not trusting the situation she is in, talk with your child's teacher until you feel better.) Know that dealing with these feelings, especially for children, takes some time. And if you take the time, it will help your child in future separations she will have to face, and you will learn some techniques to help her.

Here's how we help children deal with these feelings at school:

- First we accept that the child is having these feelings and encourage him to express that.
- We empathize with him so he will know it's okay to feel this way.
- We empower him by offering several active ways to do something about the way he feels. He might write a letter (see "If You Get A Letter..."); cry as long as he wants to (with lots of teacher comforting, usually on the teacher's lap); he might also hold a transitional object (blanket, stuffed animal) from home; draw a picture of whomever he is missing; make a phone call to his parent; or we might ask you to send a picture from home of the missed parent or an article of clothing from the parent that the child can keep at school
- We don't rush him through these feelings; rather we trust the developmental process --that he will master the sense of being separated and move onto another stage when he is ready.

What parents sometimes worry about with our techniques:

- That we are drawing too much attention to feelings and thus will make it worse.  
*During the preschool years, children are developing a sense of self. The feelings they experience are an expression of that self, so when we listen to the feelings, we are validating who that child is. When the child feels heard, she can usually move on to finding interesting things to do at school.*
- That we encourage dependency.  
*The children at our school are young and dependent on us to meet their needs. We try to do this by accepting their feelings and empowering them to do something about them. They have to practice being independent. Usually children begin to master these separation feelings and move on to enjoy school.*
- That they are "bad" parents and therefore their children are suffering emotional problems. They feel guilty about wanting to leave.  
*Once again, anxiety upon separating is normal and part of the developmental process. If your child misses you, you have done a good job of bonding with him! If he doesn't miss you it may be*

*because you have a very social child whose desire to be with others overrides feelings of separation, or he is busy coping with the new situation and will experience separation feelings later in the year.*

- That their child experiences separation anxiety only at SYC and not any other places they take him.

*There are two possibilities: (1) Other places discourage the expression of feelings because they don't know how to handle them or would rather not be bothered by them.*

*(2) School is different from home in many ways. The number of children and adults may cause anxiety in children. The requirements for behavior at school are different than in a home setting. Children have to learn to wait for teacher attention, or for a turn. At SYC we gently help children to express their feelings about this and then to cope as they learn how to be at school.*

...Jan Waters, SYC Director Emeritus