

Ways to ease the transition between home and groups for young children

By Janet Brown McCracken

Prepare yourself for transitions

Good feelings are contagious! If you are genuinely enthusiastic about any upcoming change, your child will look forward to it, too. So your first step in adjusting to saying goodbye to your child each day is to be sure you are comfortable with your decision to enroll your child in a group program and with the quality of the program. Parents who feel satisfied about their work and about their child care arrangements are more comfortable about parenting.

When children are young, every experience is a new learning opportunity. During the first few months, your baby is learning – to rely upon you as a loving parent... to recognize your voice and face... to realize that you go out of sight and then come back. Many things you do, even playing games like Peek-A-Boo!, help your child see how to handle everyday challenges, such as how to say “goodbye” and “welcome back” to you.

Young children, just like adults, always feel more comfortable if they know what to expect. A few days to anticipate a change in caregiver or setting will be sufficient for infants and toddlers, while preschoolers may appreciate a week or two to get ready. Kindergarten or primary-grade children may ask about starting a new school or grade months in advance. Help your child place changes in the context of familiar events, saying for instance, “Remember how the pool opens for the summer and then closes when the days get cool? When the pool closes, it will be time for kindergarten.”

Toddlers and older children will benefit from many chances to talk about the new arrangements. If you can, take a few pictures so your child can show others what the new school looks like.

Reading books with your child is a great way to introduce any experience. Children see how other children in group programs have the same feeling of uncertainty. Books will help your child feel confident that new friends and care givers will do many interesting things together.

Take time for transitions

Remember how you feel when you enter a room filled with strangers already engaged in lively conversation? Try to get to the child care site early on the first few days to help your child settle in and get involved in play before the throng arrives.

Each day when you arrive, take your time to see that your child gets settled comfortably. This is no time to rush. Start to establish some arrival routines: sign in together, put belongings in your child’s cubby, or wave goodbye from a special window. You may want to remind your child of something that she or he wanted to “show” or “tell” to new friends

Saying goodbye

When it is time for you to go—even if your child is very young, your toddler is intently involved, or you have said goodbye to your preschooler every day for 5 years – no matter how tempting it might be to slip out unnoticed, *you will violate your child’s trust if you leave without saying good-bye*. Be sure to tell your toddler or older child when you will be back. “I will pick you up right after you have your afternoon snack.” Again, peg your return to an activity that the child will know.

Always say goodbye with a kiss, a hug and a wave. Be firm but friendly about leaving. If your child whines or clings, prolonging the goodbye will only make it harder for yourself and for your child.

Once you have gone through your goodbye routine a few times, your child will get to know what to expect and the goodbyes will be less difficult. After a few days, check with your child’s teacher; you will probably find that any dismay on your child’s part ends fairly soon after you leave. Your child will pick up on your confidence about having chosen a good place for her or him to be while you are away.