

## Off to a Good Start-Beginning Daycare or School

Starting daycare or school is a major life transition for young children. Change, even when it is a positive change can be stressful. In many cases this may be the first time a child is away from the secure and loving arms of their family. Both the child and parents may experience anxiety about the new experience. There are specific measures that parents can take to ease anxiety and make the first days happy ones.

- **Recognize your own feelings**-Your child is sensitive to your emotional state and attitudes. If you are apprehensive about the school or program or how your child will adjust, you may unwillingly convey this to your child. Also be sure to always talk to the child about this new experience as a positive and exciting thing. Avoid apologizing to the child about enrolling them in a daycare program or sending them to school.
- **Recognize your child's temperament**- You know your child better than anyone else. Let your knowledge about your child's personality and temperament guide how you approach this new transition. If your child is naturally somewhat shy and slow to warm up, then you will know that you may need to take extra time in introducing your child to a new environment and new people.
- **Prepare your child in advance**- Your child will have less anxiety if they know what to expect and are familiar with the program and teachers. Bring the child along when you tour a program or school. Try to visit at least once where you can remain with the child as they explore the new surroundings. Start to establish the new routine a few days in advance, perhaps by altering the child's bedtime and/or morning rituals. A dry run of how the child will get to the school or program maybe helpful. Acquaint your child with adults they can approach for help such as crossing guard's bus drivers and teachers.
- **Make the first day a first week**- One of the most successful strategies for alleviating first day jitters is to make the break slowly. If at possible, start your child's experience slowly. Maybe only an hour the first day, two hours the next, until the child is comfortable remaining the full day.
- **Reinforce a sense of trust with your child**- Young children's separation anxiety is often closely tied to fears of abandonment. It is important that they will know that you will be returning for them at a designated time. With an older child you can even point out on the clock when you will return or give them a concrete milestone such as, "I will be back for you right after lunch time". It may also be helpful to discuss with your child where you will be and what you will be doing during the time of separation. In any case remind your child that you will indeed return.
- **Leave something behind**- Sometimes called transactional objects; blankies, teddys and other objects of comfort can help a child feel secure. Many parents find that an object that helps the child remember the parent is of great benefit. These "remembrance" objects may include photos or an object of the parents clothing.
- **Communicate with the caregiver or teacher**- They are your greatest ally in making the separation a smooth and calm experience. Be sure to let them know if you have any specific concerns and needs. Don't be afraid to specifically request their assistance or guidance. Some will stand back until you directly say, "I am leaving now and I need you to help Todd."
- **Say Good-bye**- You may wish to warn that child that you will be leaving in five minutes, or that after the story you will be going to work. When it is time

to go, say good-bye and go. Continued extensions to the separation seem to only add to anxiety and make the separation more difficult. It is never suggested to "sneak" out. Regardless of how upset the child is, sneaking out only adds to their anxiety, increases fear of abandonment, and breaks down the child's sense of trust.

Remember the first days of school or daycare, like any major life change is a gradual process. Soon it will become a positive and exciting part of your child's daily routine.

### **Possible\* Items to Bring the First Day**

- backpack or bookbag
- lunchbox
- current physical exam and inoculations record
- emergency contact information
- change of clothes
- extra bedding for daycare children
- school supplies (crayons, pencils, notebooks)

\*Check with the childcare or school program for their recommendations requirements.