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## Six Tips to Prepare Your Child for Preschool

by Kristi Gaylord

Adjusting to preschool is one of the greatest challenges a young child must meet.



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Getting him through the school door and you out of it with a minimum of tears shed is often heart-wrenching and stressful. As a parent, it's your job to prepare your children for the transition from the home to a school environment, but even experienced moms and dads can encounter difficulties when their child is having a hard time.

Here are six tips to ease your child's fears and help him embrace the fun and excitement of the preschool experience.

### Allow Your Child Time to Adjust

Child behavioral experts and preschool teachers recommend that parents allow their child to work through their emotions. Stacy Olszewski, Director and Owner of the State of Illinois Child Development Center, says, "The degree to which children experience separation anxiety differs from child to child. The most essential objective with all children is to allow them to experience their feelings." Give your child constant reassurance that he will be okay, that his teacher will take great care of him, and most importantly, that you will return to pick him up at the end of the school day. When your child learns to deal with his fears about preschool, he'll have an easier time adjusting to stressful and uncertain situations in the future.

### Stay Upbeat

Paul Banas' son had a difficult time adjusting to preschool. "As a caring, modern dad, I thought agreeing with my child that preschool is scary would show him I understood how he was feeling. Instead, it confirmed that he had something to be scared about," said the founder of [GreatDad.com](http://GreatDad.com) and father of two.

To manage your child's fears about preschool, it's essential to remain positive about the preschool experience. Acquaint yourself with your child's teacher and the parents of current preschoolers before the first day, so you can appear poised and comfortable in front of your child when the big day arrives. Talk about preschool and all the fun things he'll do there in excited and animated terms. Most importantly, make sure you're confident in your choice to send your child to preschool. Even a three- or four-year-old can sense insecurities in his parents, so if you feel apprehensive about sending your child to preschool, he will feel apprehensive about staying there.

Paul Banas' son began to love preschool once Paul switched his approach. "Always be upbeat with your kids," he says. "They are looking to you for cues on how to feel."

### No Long Goodbyes

Leaving your baby at school for the first time is enough to make the strongest parent reach for the tissues. But it's essential to keep the goodbyes short and sweet so your child doesn't sense any apprehension or fears you might have about leaving him. Prepare your preschooler for what will happen before the first day. Tell him that you'll walk him to the door, give him a hug, and then you'll leave. Promise him that you will return to take him home. Then, follow this routine every day. Kids thrive on predictability and order, and when you follow a pattern your child will feel less anxious about what comes next.

### Do Your Prep Work

To make the first few days of preschool separation anxiety easier on your child, start preparing well in advance. Drive by the preschool in the weeks leading up to the first day, ask the preschool director if you and your child can sit in on a class in session, and familiarize yourself with the preschool's daily schedule (for example, circle time, followed by outdoor play, and then snack time) and talk about it frequently with your child. Read books about preschool and conquering challenges. *Llama Llama Misses Mama* by Anne Dewdney tells the story of a fearful llama's first day of preschool, and how he eventually overcomes his separation anxiety and learns to love school. *Archibald's Swiss Cheese Mountain* by Carole Lieberman follows a little mouse in pursuit of a big piece of cheese and the confidence and independence he achieves by overcoming obstacles while away from home for the first time.

### Work on Social and Emotional Learning

While some parents focus on the academic aspects of preschool preparedness, many experts believe parents should work on their children's social and emotional development instead. "So much of their success in school will depend on their attitude, their ability to function in a more group-focused environment...their ability to work and interact with other children," says Corinne Gregory, President and Founder of SocialSmarts, a national public and private school program that teaches young children social skills. She recommends that parents arrange play dates for their preschoolers to create positive interactions with other children, participate in multi-person games with their child to demonstrate the importance of taking turns and sharing, or complete a project together to show the value of teamwork.

Dr. Marshall Duke, clinical psychologist and co-author of *Starting Kids Off Right* agrees. "Create opportunities at home to practice waiting, taking turns, and sharing. Unless your preschooler is a twin, most kids do not have to share things at home with other kids their own age. This is a skill every child needs to learn."

### Practice Makes Perfect

Finally, establish a morning routine and stick with it. Set out his clothes and pack his bag the night before, and then perform the same morning tasks each day in the same order. Young children find comfort in rituals, and staying organized and on-time can prevent a rushed goodbye once you arrive at school. Colleen MacDonald of Olympia, Washington, who has a daughter in preschool, practiced getting her daughter ready a few weeks before the year began. "When we were all ready, we would go out and do something special together, or stay home and make cookies or do a craft," she says. This will help your child create positive associations with preschool once it starts.

Preparing your child for preschool may seem like a daunting task, but by working with your child a few weeks in advance of the first day, you can smooth his transition into this exciting new time in his life.

*Kristi Gaylord is a freelance writer and a member of the Root & Sprout team. She's also a mother to a two-year-old daughter and four-month-old twins. You can find her blogging at <http://www.interruptedwanderlust.blogspot.com/>.*

*image courtesy Anissa Thompson*

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