



## **SEPARATION: HOW TO BEGIN PREPARING YOUR CHILD FOR THE TRANSITION INTO PRESCHOOL**

The Kehillat Israel Early Childhood Center's "Separation Policy" is undoubtedly one of the most important aspects of our program. Starting school is a significant milestone in your family's life and can be a source of positive growth for everyone involved – children, parents, and staff.

The term *attachment* has special meaning -- it is not the same as *dependence*. Although the two terms are often used interchangeably, they are significantly different. According to Dr. John Bowlby, a leading theorist on separation, *dependence*, which refers to an infant's state of helplessness, is at its maximum at birth and decreases steadily until maturity is reached. Conversely, *attachment* refers to a child's behavior which results in maintaining closeness to a trusted person who the child perceives as better able to cope. Attachment is altogether absent at birth and is not evident until the infant is about six-months-old. Bowlby describes both dependency and attachment as conditions to be cherished. During separation and the transition to school, it is attachment behavior that we see, not dependency. It is the teachers' goal to establish a bond with your child so that he or she may cope without the presence of his or her parent, but rather on his or her own with trusted teachers to turn to when needed.

Young children entering school are between two Psychosocial Stages of development as theorized by Erik Erickson – the Trust vs. Mistrust stage and the Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt stage. It is imperative that parents, through their behavior, establish trust with their children. The fear of being left is felt most intensely in young children. Some researchers conclude that until children are about three-years-old they cannot retain a stable inner mental image of their parents. A young child beginning school must learn to trust that you as a parent will come back for them. In addition, teachers must earn the child's trust by establishing a bond.

Children during the preschool years strive for autonomy. Once they begin to trust that their parents will return for them, and that their teachers will take care of them, they can begin to explore their

environment autonomously. Establishing trust with the teachers enables children to become more comfortable with the temporary separation from his or her parents.

Children need to allow themselves to miss their absent loved one -- to feel sad, lonely, and angry, and express those feelings. Frequently, young children use their parent's body or clothing to hide behind when entering an unfamiliar setting such as school. This behavior should be considered attachment behavior and appreciated, not discouraged for being dependent behavior. Attachment behavior, translated into language, might be expressed something like this: "I know that you are my parent. I know that I need you to take care of me. I am afraid that if you leave me, I won't be able to take care of myself. It makes me sad and angry that you want to go away. I feel frightened. So in order not to feel this way, I need to keep you here. I do this by crying, holding on to you, following you, and pulling on you."

At about age three, separation reactions take a different form than they did when the child was younger. Most children at this age have developed a clear sense of themselves as individuals attached to, but distinctly separate from, their parents. Another reason that they may handle separation differently than a younger child is that they have developed cognitively to the point of being able to "mentally know" that their parents exists even if they cannot see them. The ability to tolerate the stress of separation and the ability to adjust to strange new situations will vary greatly from child to child.

At Kehillat Israel's Early Childhood Center, we view separation as an important part of our curriculum, rather than a single event. Separation is never viewed as a problem, but as a process. Our belief is that separation reactions in children are valid and expected. The understanding of this process and its inclusion as a significant element of our program will help your child develop a strong sense of him/herself as an individual able to feel sad, angry, and frightened, and develop the ability to cope with these feelings without being overwhelmed. Your child will use these skills in many different separation experiences throughout his or her life.

As previously stated, when a child enters preschool, both the child and the family face issues of separation and independence. Parents can make the transition from home a little easier if they talk to their child about what to expect, and be patiently reassuring. Exactly what you say and when you say it depends on your knowledge of your child. Some children adjust better if they have a great deal of advance warning; others function better with less notice. The following are some suggestions to prepare your child for this transition:

## **WHAT YOU CAN BEGIN DOING NOW**

Specific activities can help children express their feelings about separation and cope with their emotions. Right now is a wonderful time to encourage your child to do some things by and for him/herself. Self-help skills give your child a sense of control and will prepare him or her for a classroom where teachers will have many children to help at one time. You can begin doing this by letting your child do some things on his or her own. These may include going to the bathroom, dressing or undressing, and pouring juice. Whatever you choose, it is important to let your child try to do it on his or her own and to give lots of encouragement.

Now is also a good time to start developing a set way of saying “goodbye” to your child. “Goodbyes” are important because they mark the separation for both parents and child. Some children enjoy a hug and kiss, while others prefer a wave at the door. Starting a routine now will make saying “goodbye” in the classroom a little easier. Encourage your child to participate fully in saying “goodbye.” Hugging, kissing, crying, waving, and saying “I’ll miss you!” are all ways of bringing feelings out in the open. Once in the open, these feelings are easier to deal with.

You can begin preparing your child approximately two weeks before school starts. If your child has been to school already, you can remind him or her of their favorite activity at school. You might say, “There will be lots of paints there!” or “Remember how you liked to play with the sand and water on the big yard?” Let your child know about snack and lunch routines, and reassure him or her that the classroom has bathrooms and a special place to put his or her lunchbox and other things (the children’s cubbies).

Another preparatory method is to mention the name of someone your child knows who will be in the same class. This can be comforting to your child and take away some of the mystery of who the other children will be. If your child does not know anyone particular in the class, you can tell your child that there will be many other children his or her age. You should also mention your child’s teachers’ names.

## **HOME VISITS**

Every child who is starting in the Early Childhood Center for the first time will receive a home visit. Your child’s teachers will contact you to arrange a time that is convenient for you. They will spend approximately twenty minutes with your child and approximately twenty minutes with you. The purpose and

goal of the home visit is to allow your child to meet his or her teachers in an environment that is comfortable. If the teachers have the opportunity to be in your child's room, play with his or her favorite toy, meet your pet, etc., it will allow them to not be strangers on the first day of school. It will also help during the separation process when your child misses home, and the teacher can relate to home by saying, "Remember when I came to your house and we were playing with your dog in the backyard? Wasn't that fun?" The teacher will then be able to segway from an experience that they have shared prior to school, in school.

## **THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL**

On the first day of school, before you and your child leave home, talk to him or her about what will happen that day. You can say something like, "Today you get to start school. Mommy and Daddy will stay with you." By this time, you will have met with your child's teachers and you will know a bit about the day's schedule so you can tell your child about it.

Each parent and child will have the opportunity to make a special transition plan. Because every child has different needs, each transition plan will be different. It is recommended that during the first few weeks, you make yourself available to your child at school. During this time, parents are asked to sit along the sidelines and settle in. Feel free to bring along books to read or other work you may want to do during this time. Even if you do not have any work, it is helpful for you to appear as if you are "busy" doing your "work," so that your child can focus on his or her "work," the work of play.

Children, typically, will want to show their parents all the new and exciting things they have discovered in their new school environment. You can go with your child for a short while, but it is helpful for you to return to your place as it seems appropriate. If your child is having difficulty leaving you, bring him or her over to a teacher and say, "Let's see what your teacher is doing!" Then wait until your child's teacher has established a connection with your child before returning to your seat.

During these first few days, parents will leave at different times. You will work together with your child's teachers to decide when it is the best time for you to leave. At first, parents will leave for a short period of time. You will tell your child that you are going to the bathroom and will be back in about five minutes. It is imperative that you stay just outside the classroom and return when you say that you will. This helps to build a foundation of trust with your child. Again, your child needs to know that you will come back when you say you will. Some children take only a few days to feel comfortable, while others may take a longer time. Some children will seem comfortable in the first days and then realize a week later that they

really want you to stay. One way is not better than the other; there are simply different plans for different children. Remember, separation is a process.

***Parents should never sneak out or leave without telling their child,*** even if you think it might be easier for both you and your child. This will counteract any work you have done to build a foundation of trust with your child. If you are suddenly gone, your child may feel abandoned. Involving your child in the decision about when to leave gives your child a sense of control which will help in the process of feeling autonomous.

Just as it is important to let your child know that you are leaving, it is important to let him or her know that you will be back. Since young children have not yet mastered the abstract concept of time, it will be helpful to associate your return with the last thing your child will be doing in class before you pick him or her up. (Your child's teachers will tell you the class schedule.) You can say, for example, "I will pick you up after story time!" If someone other than you will be picking your child up, it is very important to let your child know: "Grandpa will pick you up after story time."

If your child has a special attachment to a blanket or any other object, please allow your child to bring it to school. A transitional object can provide your child with a source of comfort during his or her separation from you and adjustment from home to school. A picture of the family taped into your child's lunchbox also brings a reminder of home and serves as a bridge from home to school.

## **THROUGHOUT THE TRANSITION PROCESS**

Separation brings up a lot of different feelings. By providing your child with some opportunities to express his or her feelings, you can begin to help your child feel more comfortable. Some children are quite articulate while others are not as specific about how they are feeling. Books about beginning school give children the opportunity to focus on someone else and begin to talk about their feelings in a safe context.

Children react in a variety of ways to separations. Some children may become more aggressive while other children become clingy. Some children who have just begun using the toilet may begin to have accidents. All of these are common reactions and should be expected from young children who are struggling to master one of their toughest challenges yet, separation.

It is normal for both parents and children to feel some anxiety leaving each other. By providing clear, concrete information, you can help reassure your child and yourself, during the transition process. Remember to take care of yourself during this time as well. It is not easy to leave your child with others. Sometimes, if the separation process seems easier than you expected, parents can have feelings of

jealousy, rejection, and loss. These feelings are normal and are shared by most parents leaving their child for the first time. If you need to, talk with someone about how you are feeling. It is helpful for your child's teachers to know how the process is affecting you. Communicate with them often. In addition, the Director is always here to discuss the process with you and help you through it.

Our separation policy is flexible and individualized. Parents and teachers work as partners. Again, our view is that separation is a process, not a rigid step-by-step procedure. We regard separation as an opportunity for your child's growth. Helping children achieve a successful separation and adjustment, both physically and emotionally, is our goal. Knowing that each child will have a different timetable of adjustment, depending on their age, previous experience with separation, and individual reaction to change, allows children to separate when they are ready; thus becoming competent, capable, and self-assured.

When children are able to master their separation feelings at school entry, they have achieved a giant step in their growth. A good beginning, as well as a continuing adjustment to school, requires open communication between parents and teachers. We are honored to be a part of this significant milestone in your family's life!