

# Separation Anxiety

## Back to School

**By Georgia Bowen**

The start up of school is a challenging time of year for the whole family. We all, children, parents and teachers alike, are in the process of building up our energy for the year to come but we haven't reached our peak performance yet. Gone are the lazy days of summer. When my family returns from our summer holiday at the end of August it's not long before we are lusting over the Travel Section in the newspaper. You can imagine what it feels like to a child facing the day ahead after a summer of less demanding schedules and relaxed expectations.

At The Creative Preschool we receive many calls from current and graduate families who are going through difficult transitions and are hoping for some reassurance and advice. Hopefully the following ideas will give you some help:

### **It is important to acknowledge your child's feelings.**

Even if you think voicing your children's concerns will make the problem bigger and give them permission to rebel, it actually makes the problem smaller. Children feel that their concerns have been heard and they don't have to escalate their behaviour to be sure they've gotten their message across.

### **Easing Separation Anxiety**

- Show confidence in your child's ability to adjust to new situations.
- Never state your own doubts or worries when your child might overhear.
- Acknowledge your child's feelings by saying, "Sometimes it's difficult to do new things, but I know you can do this. I trust the teachers to take good care of you and keep you safe."
- If your child cries, you can say, "I know you're crying because you love Mommy/Daddy and it's hard to say goodbye. Sometimes I cry because I love you and it's hard for me too. I will always pick you up and take you back home when school is over."
- Briefly state what you will be doing while your child is at school and exactly when you will return to pick him/her up.
- Be positive in mind, body language, facial expression and spirit!! If you look concerned your child will become concerned.
- After you have said goodbye and stated what you will be doing, go out the door without hesitation and the teachers will help your child one-to-one as needed. Some children react right away, others react later.

It can also be helpful to do a bit of dramatic play to act out the process. You can act out or use dolls to act out leaving home, getting in the car, driving down the street, arriving at school, walking up the stairs, saying hello to the

teachers, kissing mommy or daddy goodbye, playtime, song time, snack time, story time, outdoor time and kissing mommy or daddy when they come back to go home etc.... This helps the child to visualize the routine and feel more in control.

Some families find posting a schedule on the fridge using drawings to illustrate the child's schedule is very helpful. Again, this makes your child's day very concrete and helps give a sense of control to the day.

Dealing with separation is a rite of passage and something that just needs to be done. We can't do it for our children - even though we try. Children go through this adjustment in varying levels of emotion and lengths of time. We all know that this is difficult for parents to go through. It seems to peak, and then you're through. Many parents come in saying that maybe it's too soon and they should wait, and then right around the corner their child is fine.

Children being able to label their feelings of "feeling sad", is wonderful. Developing a vocabulary of feelings that can be expressed with their parents' acknowledgement is terrific. Children are entitled to their feelings, positive and negative, and we adults don't have to make it better. Our role is to become non-judgmental sounding boards and encourage our children to express themselves and come up with ways to make it better. We need to show our trust and faith in our child and teachers and ourselves that we can all get through this and that it will be for the best.

### **Young Explorers and After School Club**

Sometimes the kindergarten and school age children express that their day is too long and question whether they have to go to school or other activities that day. Remember, they are building up their energy, adjusting to school and they are testing how much control they have. Parents find themselves bargaining and making promises just to get their child out of the house and on their way. It's very true that your initial separation in the morning is the big one. We teachers salute parents who have this difficult job motivating their children to go to school when they and you are going through so many emotions. Once you get your child to school the worst part is usually over. Of course children are individuals and they will adjust their own way, but try to be confident and positive and not show any hesitation or doubt.

### **Our Advice**

You can acknowledge their feelings, sympathize and then say, "I know it feels like a long day to you now, but I also know that you enjoy your day once you get started and I know you can do this." If your very intelligent and sophisticated children see room to maneuver and bargain - they will.

### **Some things are non-negotiable**

Going to school or attending programs that you have registered your child for should be non-negotiable. You can negotiate how they will get ready in the morning, will they get dressed first or make their bed first or eat first. You

can negotiate what you will do at the end of the day. You can negotiate and give a sense of control to children without taking away from important things that should be learned early on are non-negotiable.

### **Parent-Teacher Collaborative Discussions**

When we advise parents about their children, we are always truthful, never sugar-coated and always as a collaborative effort. We always try to hold these discussions at times when your child is not listening. If we do not discuss your child immediately, it is probably because it is a demanding moment in the school, or your child is present and we would prefer to speak with you privately for your child's sake. If you ever want to discuss your child's progress with the teachers, please arrange to do so. Once we have allowed the children time to settle in we will be glad to schedule parent-teacher sessions around 8:30 am or 3:30 pm. Please email or telephone if you have concerns or questions and our supervisor, Jennifer, will relay your questions to the classroom teachers who will return your call later in the day or as soon as possible.