

Between Teachers & Parents

“Don’t Leave Me Here!”

Helping the child who is having a hard time separating
by Adele M. Brodtkin, Ph.D.

THE TEACHER’S STORY

On a sparkling morning, I waited eagerly for my new group of threes. I had clues about what to expect from each child because I had met each of them during individual school and home visits. I had also asked parents to provide me with any additional information that they thought I should know. However, there is usually at least one surprise. This year the unexpected came from a child named Laurie. She had explored the classroom eagerly on a visit last spring, and again yesterday. Laurie also met me at her home just a few days ago. During those meetings, I had been impressed with her poise for a 3-year-old with no previous group experience. With her parents beaming in the background, Laurie had talked freely about her experiences and her favorite books and toys. And just yesterday, her parents said she was very much looking forward to school—they were all counting the days.

On this first day of school, the hallway was bustling with the sounds of excited parents and children. As expected, not every child was convinced school was a good place to be. Jimmy clung to his daddy’s pant leg and avoided eye contact with me. Chloe was planted firmly in her mommy’s lap, while Bill and Peter, already good friends, raced to the block corner, leaving their parents behind. Suddenly, Laurie appeared sobbing with her folks looking awfully shocked and worried. “We don’t know what happened,” her mother offered. “Right up to the moment we turned the corner and saw the school, she was thrilled to be coming.”

“I don’t want to go. Please don’t leave me, Mommy. I want to go home,” Laurie begged. Outwardly remaining calm, I encouraged them all to stay. I guided the three of them toward Laurie’s cubby, then suggested they pick out a book or game they could play together. I had to move along to welcome and reassure other families, but that 360 degree turn of Laurie’s stuck with me all day.

Now, almost a week later, she continues to be teary each morning. Many of the other threes have now settled in, but Laurie is still protesting about staying, and insists that her mom not leave her. Am I doing something that causes Laurie to continue to be upset? How should I handle this?

THE PARENT’S STORY

Our daughter has been talking about going to school for almost a year. When we finally chose a program, she was excited. She would talk about school, play school, and was thrilled to visit and welcome her teacher to our home. So we were stunned by her reaction to actually starting school. I work part-time, and Laurie has been staying with my mother during those hours, so being in a group of children is all new to Laurie. Maybe she didn’t really know what was

involved until it happened. Her head was more than ready, but I guess her heart wasn't. We were all so surprised at her reaction, and things haven't gotten much better since that first day. My husband or I stay in the classroom every day, but I don't know how much longer the teacher will allow that. Then there are our work schedules to consider. Did we miss something or make some mistake along the way? I never expected Laurie to be frightened of school. Why is this happening and what can we do about it?

Dr. Brodtkin's Assessment

Each fall, there are a few children who enjoy an almost immediate delight about "being on their own" in school. But it's much more common, even for those who have attended school in the same center, to have mixed feelings about separating from family. Both Laurie's teacher and parents should rest assured that neither of them did anything wrong. There's nothing remarkable or worrisome about Laurie's reaction to starting school "for real." Her behavior is well within the range of expectable responses for children who know that their safety and well-being requires the presence of trusted adults.

What the Teacher Can Do

Whether this program has an official "gradual separation" policy or not, Laurie's situation warrants a relaxed attitude about how long her parents may stay. A trusted adult should be there (though, increasingly on the sidelines) for as long as it takes for Laurie to feel comfortable.

The teacher can deepen Laurie's trust in her by developing a respectful, warm relationship. Without hovering, she should be alert to Laurie's needs, interests, and moods. Laurie should have one-on-one play opportunities with the teacher or teacher assistants in the classroom. During free play, the teacher can also guide Laurie toward a carefully chosen classmate who she thinks would be engaging, supportive, and lots of fun. Working cooperatively with the parents, the teacher should reassure them and listen to what they have to report about Laurie's mood and behavior at home.

When the teacher and parents decide that it's time, Laurie and her parents should part for brief interludes and eventually for a full school day. The teacher can support the parents and child by suggesting such things as a goodbye ritual (two kisses and a hug). The parent can also discreetly peek into the classroom, once outside, to see for herself that her child is doing fine. The teacher should also be available for chats or parent conferences as needed and always reassure the parents that their child's pace of adapting is very normal and not cause for concern. Some children might appear to make an immediate transition seamlessly, only to become panicky a few weeks later. Others may seem to do great saying goodbye to their parents, but then go on a rampage later in the day. There are so many variations on this theme of "how children separate from home and family" that experienced early childhood teachers are aware that they need to be ready for anything.

What the Parent Can Do

The parents should feel assured that they are not abandoning their child and that Laurie has not failed them. Individual differences in styles and rates of separating at the start of school are to be expected and have no connection with school success (or failure) in the years ahead. Some children seem fine for the first few days, and then suddenly become anxious about staying and plead to go home. It's as if they're thinking, "I like it, but I didn't know it would be every day."

Laurie's mom put it correctly—her daughter's head is ready for school; her emotions just have to catch up. For most new preschoolers, separating from home and family is a daunting task. It's not that they absolutely don't want to do it, but there are new adults and noisy, unfamiliar children in a room that seems enormous and worlds away from comfort and safety. Children may ask, "Where is the bathroom?" even when they've been shown. "Where is the door that Mommy will walk through and when?" "What if the teacher doesn't like me?" But then again, there are all those toys and a child or two with a friendly face. If the parents understand all this, and don't feel rattled by their daughter's conflicting feelings, they can relax and just have faith that she will eventually be on her own in school and enjoy it. She simply needs to discover how safe and fun it is. ECT

When to Wonder

- n If weeks go by and Laurie won't leave her parent's side in school
- n If Laurie begins to show signs of stress at home through changes in her sleeping, eating, and toileting patterns
- n If Laurie hasn't made friends even after many weeks in the classroom

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