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Between Teacher & Parent

“I Don’t Want to Play”

Helping the child who is having trouble dealing with change

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The Teacher’s Story

“C’mon, Mackenzie, we’re going to bake cookies!” said Sophie, who was tugging at her friend’s sleeve. Other children were already eagerly gathering around me as I assigned jobs. I helped children sift flour and find bowls and cookie sheets. All the while, I was thinking about Mackenzie. Like most 4-year-olds, she usually adores cooking. Why then, was she so uninterested in joining us today? Actually, I wonder why she’s been so distracted lately: biting her nails, fidgeting, and absentmindedly twisting her hair. Later in the day, she pushed a crayon across a paper halfheartedly, and then went back to twisting her hair. I am getting increasingly concerned about this child who used to be so full of zest.

Toward the end of the day, Mackenzie wandered toward the dollhouse in the dramatic play corner. I moved a bit closer and heard her say: “I don’t want to take care of you any more!” to the doll. Then her dad rushed into the classroom.

It was three o’clock and he was in a hurry to bring Mackenzie to family childcare so that he could get back to work. I put it all together! This new afterschool arrangement is what’s upsetting Mackenzie. Her babysitter left last week, just as her mom started a new job with longer hours. Mackenzie must be missing her former caregiver and mom a lot. I wonder if there is some way I can help. Should I bring up what I’ve noticed to her parents?

The Parent’s Story

My wife and I were concerned when we realized that we would have to make new afterschool arrangements for Mackenzie. We were certainly happy about my wife’s promotion and new job, but it also means that she now puts in longer hours. We expected Mackenzie to be upset about the change, but her reaction was surprising. When we told her that she’d be going to childcare with other kids after school, she just shrugged and walked away.

The family care provider we selected is close to Mackenzie’s school as well as my office. I leave work to walk her there at three every day. Around that time, another child is coming in from a different school and a baby and a couple of toddlers are usually just getting up from their naps.

I feel okay about taking my child to such a pleasant place. The caregiver is very kind and her home is cheerful. Everything is relaxed and informal and there are loads of toys for Mackenzie to play with. But Mackenzie’s been very grumpy since she started this new routine. When my wife picks her up, Mackenzie won’t look at her or hold her hand. In fact, she’s more interested in biting her nails. This reaction is not normal for our usually very affectionate daughter.

Yesterday, she just blurted out, “That’s a baby place and they don’t even have good snacks. Why can’t I go home after school?” When I picked her up from school today, she asked, “Why did Laurie (her former caregiver) have to go?” It’s hard to see Mackenzie so unhappy. We don’t know how to respond to her questions or whether or not we should try to stop her nervous nail biting and hair twisting. Could her teacher offer us some insight on what to do?

Dr. Brodtkin’s Assessment

The parent’s and teacher’s suspicions on what might be bothering Mackenzie might very well be correct. Her mom’s longer work hours and the change of care arrangements have probably affected Mackenzie’s mood. The sudden appearance of nervous habits is very likely a reaction to these changes. In addition, starting a new program is always a challenge for a young child. Mackenzie is facing all the issues that go along with separating from someone she cares about as well as starting something new. Although the childcare setting seems fine, it will take her some time to get used to it. She may also be bewildered because family childcare is not school, and not the same as being at home either. Mackenzie needs the patience and understanding of all the adults in her life.

What the Teacher Can Do

Keeping the lines of communication open among all of the adults is crucial. With the parents’ permission, not only should the parents and teacher be in communication, but also the teacher and new caregiver. An ongoing dialogue between all of those who care for Mackenzie will make it easier to help her feel at home.

The teacher can share what she knows about Mackenzie’s interests and habits, as well as her favorite snacks. At school, the teacher can help by showing that she understands the feelings Mackenzie is expressing by incorporating them into imaginary play. Being sensitive to the mood changes of this child will allow her teacher to gently draw her into activities.

While the adults in Mackenzie’s life are advised to not make too much of “annoying habits” like nail biting and hair twisting, a marked increase in such behavior can be suggestive of more internal distress. All of these habits are extremely common among young children. They are tension reducers, and young children are often tense from the normal stresses of growing up and adapting to change. In and of themselves, these habits don’t imply serious trouble, but they can interfere with a child’s enjoyment of life.

What the Parents Can Do

The transition to an afterschool care program would be easier if each parent spent a few afternoons there with Mackenzie. They might encourage her to bring a favorite toy or some special snacks that she really likes. Of course, this could be difficult with the mother’s new job, but the special effort will be worth it.

It may be especially difficult for Mackenzie to accept the new arrangements, as she is likely missing her old caregiver. If the parents invite her for a visit some evening or weekend, Mackenzie will see that the change in routine doesn’t have to mean that she’s lost a dear friend. ECT