



AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

Four Tips to Ease the Transition to Preschool

by Alberto Pellai, MD, PhD, and Barbara Tamborini



Young children go through many, sometimes challenging, developmental phases. The [Big Little Talks](#) series by Alberto Pellai, MD, PhD, and Barbara Tamborini, provide fun stories to ease both parents and children through typical and common life stages using empathic listening and encouraging an understanding of age-appropriate behavior and emotions.

You can purchase the full book with 20% off and free domestic shipping [here](#). Enter code **MPKIDS20** at checkout.

For many kids, starting school is the first time they are separated from their attachment figures—the people who have cared for them for the first few years of their life (parents, grandparents, nannies, etc.) The start of preschool almost always involves a phase of crisis. Some children may break down on the first day of school and refuse to let their attachment figure leave. Others run off to explore, immediately at ease, and say goodbye to attachment figures as if they are dismissing them. Then weeks later, they refuse to go, seemingly out of nowhere. It's as if they are done exploring and now want to return to their previous, familiar life. This excerpt from the Reader's Note in *I Don't Want to Go to School* provides four tips to help ease your young child's transition to preschool.

You know your child well, so try to follow their lead.

Tip #1: Stay Calm

To help a child learn to feel safe, even in the absence of their attachment figure, the parent or caregiver needs to be (or at least appear to be) calm at the moment of separation. Children take their cues from us: if we are upset, they are much more likely to be upset. If we are calm, there's a greater chance they will calm down. Don't, however, compare your child to other children ("see how brave he is?") This is likely to just make them feel inadequate.

Tip #2: Create Excitement

Starting preschool is an important growth event for your child; try to convey this idea to them as well.

WWW.APA.ORG/PUBS/MAGINATION/I-DONT-WANT-TO-GO-TO-SCHOOL

"You are ready to go to school! You will meet new friends, learn new games, and explore a bigger world that's full of great things."

When they come home, ask about their day and what they learned, and listen attentively. If you are excited and interested, it is more likely that they will be as well.

Tip #3: Try a Gradual Transition

When a child begins preschool, they need to remember a lot of new information:

- where to hang up their coat
- what to do if they need to use the bathroom
- who to tell if they don't feel well, etc.

They also find themselves surrounded by lots of unfamiliar kids who are just as disoriented as they are. A gradual transition may help with this information overload. Collaborate with your school and your teachers to figure out the best path to support your child.

Tip#4: Reinforce their autonomy

The primary objective of preschool is to help children feel that they are capable of doing things on their own. The important role of parents and caregivers is to understand the child's basic need for autonomy and avoid trivializing, or worse, ignoring it. For example, let them walk into class instead of carrying them. Let them try dressing and undressing themselves. When your child returns home, it's important to show interest and appreciation for what they did that day and to listen attentively to their thoughts and the skills they are developing.

Check out the other titles in the Big Little Talks series [here](#).

This Article's Author

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