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Starting School: Four Strategies for Helping with Separation Anxiety and Settling In

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First day at school pictures seem to fill family photo albums. These images capture the significance of the 'going-back-to-school' ritual, a celebration of a key milestone in a child's life. Despite excitement, there is usually apprehension in both kids and parents but if we are to help them we need to consider this transition through their emotions. The biggest factor driving much of their reaction and experience is separation anxiety. Children are creatures of attachment and when separated from those they are connected to, the alarm system in their brain starts to make a lot of noise. They can become anxious and scared because the people they lean against, feel secure, and are at home with, are disappearing and leaving them behind. It is a compliment to your relationship when a child misses you – in fact – it was actually nature's intention. Fortunately, there are many ways to help reduce a child's separation anxiety and help them adjust to their new school surroundings.

1. Become a Match-Maker

As parents we entrust our children to people who are educated, have good facilities, and interesting curriculum but what matters most is whether the teacher has our child's heart. The whole idea behind gradual entry into school for young children has less to do with touring the facilities and more about fostering relationships with the adults in charge. Our kids care little about credentials and more about whether they can trust someone to take care of them. The research consistently demonstrates that if a child does not rest in a teacher's care and feel at home they will struggle to learn from them.

When we lived in villages of attachment, children were cared for by people they already knew. Today we do not have the luxury of these prior relationships. We must cultivate these relationships and busy ourselves with introductions and matchmaking between teacher and child. We can do this in a number of ways, from pointing out similarities to helping them smile and connect with one another. Research from educational psychology demonstrates that a strong attachment to one's teacher actually enhances school success, is related to higher grades, better emotional regulation and a willingness to take on challenges. Matchmaking to other children in an effort to have them settle into their new surroundings will only court peer attachment rather than the strong adult attachments they need to rely on.

2. Bridge the Gap

The second strategy is to help the child hold onto you when you are separated. This could include giving them a locket, a picture of you, a note in the lunchbox – anything that conveys to them you are still there even though apart. When saying goodbye to the child focus on the return and what you will do when you see them again. You may remind them that you will make cookies after school or read a story together or simply just give them a big hug. In saying good-bye to your child you want to make it easy for them to leave you and this means helping them realize all the ways you are still connected.

3. Deepen Your Attachment

Deepening the relationship with our children provides them with a secure base from which to spring forth into their new surroundings and adjust. The deeper the attachment with parents, the more they are able to withstand separation because they have more ways to keep a parent close, from being the same, feeling significant to them, to a sense of love and being known. The goal is not to practice at separation but rather to deepen the attachment so that the distance between you is bridged by your deeper relationship. Attachment research demonstrates

how the expression of delight, enjoyment and warmth builds strong relationships. Building and protecting our attachments with children whether that be collecting them in the morning or sharing secrets before bedtime can go far in helping them feel connected and cared for despite the separations they face.

4. Watch and Wait

As parents we remain watchful from our sideline position, waiting for things to unfold and for our children to settle into school. Signs to pay attention to include elevated levels of anxiety, frustration, an overreliance on peers, a dislike for their teacher, and a numbing of emotions where they no longer talk about what distresses them. These signs warrant a closer examination of how a child is weathering the transition to school and the challenges they are facing.

Change and new beginnings are part of life. September school transitions quickly turn in to waving goodbye to a university bound young teen. Helping our children by matchmaking, bridging the separation, and deepening our relationship may seem small in the grand scheme of things but is a big deal in their world. The goal is to guide them through their transition while they feel attached to us and to their teachers. When they can take for granted the adults in their life will take care of them, they will be free to focus on what it is that they need to do most – to play, to learn, and to grow.



Dr. Deborah MacNamara is a counsellor and founder Kid's Best Bet, Counselling and Family Resource Centre, on faculty at the Neufeld Institute, and author of *Rest, Play, Grow: Making Sense of Preschoolers (or anyone who acts like one)*. She works with parents, educators, child-care and mental health professionals in making sense of kids from the inside out. See www.macnamara.ca or

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