

Guiding Your Child's Emotional Journey: Welcome to Kindergarten!

Presented by the Centre of Excellence for Behavior Management (CEBM)



The Kindergarten Transition Brings Big Weather

Core Concept: Children are not little adults. They experience the world entirely differently.

Starting school is a massive milestone. It is completely normal for this transition to trigger big, unpredictable emotions that shift quickly. To help them navigate this new world, we first have to understand how their minds actually work.



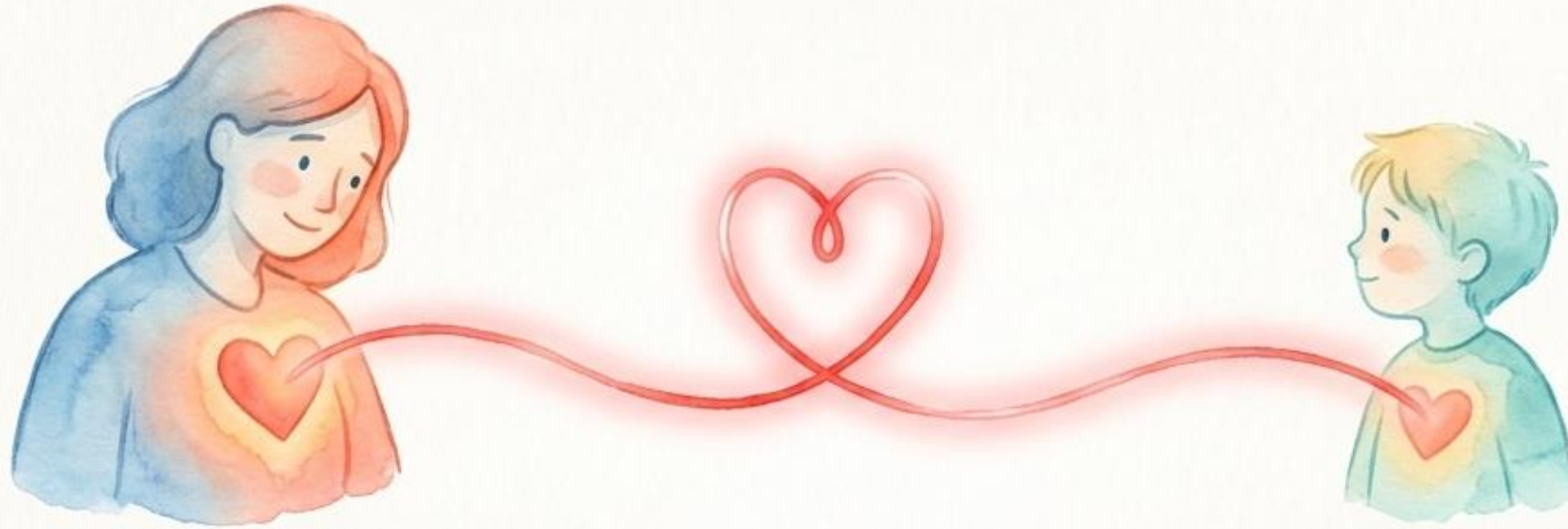
The Core Challenge: Separation

For young children, the hunger for contact and connection trumps all other needs.

Entering school means facing a fear of separation that can feel overwhelming, and sometimes paralyzing. Their capacity to stay attached while apart is not yet fully developed.



Nature's Solution: The Invisible String



Children do not need to “get used to” separation. They need tools to hold onto connection while you are apart.

The answer to separation anxiety is **MORE** attachment, not less. Even when they cannot see you, they need to **feel connected** to you by an invisible string of love.



Bridging the Distance

Simple bridges for the school day

Provide your child with objects and ideas to hold onto until you reunite.



Physical Bridges

Draw matching hearts on both of your palms.

Wear the same color clothing for the day.

Slip a small, comforting object (like a smooth stone) in their pocket.



Visual Bridges

Place a family photo inside their lunchbox.

Write a tiny love note on their snack wrapper.



Imagined Bridges

Blow a "secret kiss" into their pocket to save for later.

Talk about the specific activity you will do together after school.



The Paradigm Flip

Nature's solution to not being able to handle separation is MORE ATTACHMENT, not less.

Children do not need to learn how to handle separation. They need to develop the ability to hold on when they are apart.



Big feelings in little bodies

Kindergarten is a time of immense growth—and immense, rapidly changing emotions. The word “emotion” literally means “to be agitated and moved.”

If your child is experiencing intense feelings, tears, and sudden shifts in mood, this is completely normal. They are navigating a new world.





Emotions push us around

To experience emotion literally means to be stirred up and to be moved. It happens to us.

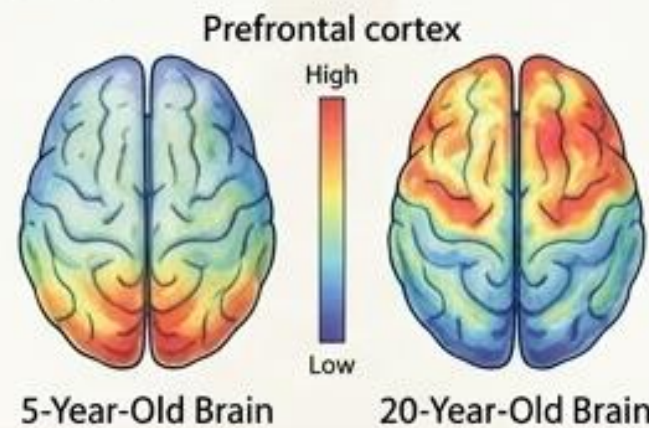
For young children, these emotions are BIG, and they shift with dizzying speed. With massive daily events like starting school, drop-offs, and transitions, these storms are a guaranteed part of the forecast.

Inside the Kindergarten Brain

The Adult Mind



Adults have a fully developed prefrontal cortex. We can filter our emotions, weigh long-term consequences, and experience “mixed feelings” (cognitive dissonance).



The 4/5-Year-Old Mind



The K4/K5 brain is immature and lacks a filter. They register only ONE thought and ONE feeling at a time. All conflicting impulses are momentarily eclipsed.

Takeaway Note: Nature's Design: This single-track mind makes it easy for young children to find their dominant feeling and experience it fully, without confusing signals.

The Miniature Adult Myth vs. The Developing Brain Reality

The Adult Assumption

They should calm down when I explain it logically.

They are having mixed feelings about going to school.

They need to learn how to handle separation independently.

The Biological Reality

The pre-frontal cortex is immature. Emotions cannot be effectively filtered or slowed down yet.

They do not experience cognitive dissonance. They process exactly ONE thought or emotion at a time.

A hunger for connection takes precedence over any other need. They rely on adults to process the world.

The Suppressed Emotion Trap

Emotion literally means “to be stirred up and to be moved.” **Emotions happen to us; they push us around. All impulses a child feels must be expressed.**



The Danger:

When we try to suppress emotions or categorize them as “bad” (inducing guilt or shame), the internal pressure builds. Suppressed emotions inevitably come out as challenging, disruptive behaviors.

Our Goal: Accept, normalize, and make room for emotions to be safely released.

When the storm hits: Co-Regulation

Emotional maturity doesn't happen alone. Before a child can manage their own emotions, they must borrow your calm.

When their storm...



...meets your calm...



...co-regulation occurs.



Accompany their big emotions. Name their feelings without labeling them as “good” or “bad,” and serve as their anchor.

The Equation of Co-Regulation



Regulated Adult

+



Regulated Child

=



Regulated Child



Regulated Adult

+



Dysregulated Child

=



Regulated Child



Dysregulated Adult

+



Regulated Child

=



Dysregulated Child



Dysregulated Adult

+



Dysregulated Child

=



Dysregulated Child

Play as the Emotional Pressure Valve

Play is the natural release valve for the kindergarten brain. It allows emotions to flow through safely and lets children try out different identities without real-world consequences.

The Parent's Role

- Create time and space for unstructured play.
- Provide sensory materials (dim lighting, soft textures, calming nature scenes).
- Offer tools to discover body sensations (sensory boxes, dress-up).
- The Golden Rule: No need to get involved or direct the activity. Let play do its work.



The Roots of Confidence

True confidence doesn't come from external praise. It grows naturally from deep, secure roots.

When a child feels a profound sense of belonging (feeling welcomed and included) and significance (feeling valued and that they matter), they naturally bloom into confident, self-accepting individuals.



5 Everyday Acts of Connection

Small drops of connection fill their emotional cup and build their sense of significance.



Put your phone away when they are speaking to you.



Welcome them warmly and with joy after every separation.



Let them lead a play session without any specific goal.



Acknowledge their emotions without rushing to 'fix' them.



Remind them that it is entirely normal to make mistakes.



The “6-a-Day” Connection Habit

Collecting your child.

This means actively harnessing their natural attachment instinct by engaging their eyes, ears, and attention in a pleasing way. This is especially vital if you have competing attachments like like screens or peers.

Aim to actively “collect” your child 6 times a day to pull them securely back into relationship with you.



Greet them with warmth and delight first thing in the morning.



Read a book together.



Listen with full attention (put the phone down).



Play with the family pet together.



Share a specific memory or photo of them.



Offer kind words after an emotional upset.

Daily Gestures of Significance



Let them
make a
decision.

(Give them autonomy
over small things like
what shirt to wear).



Play their
favorite
music at
mealtime.

(A simple act that says
"You matter to me").



Ensure they
know
mistakes are
okay.

(Convey that everyone
makes mistakes and
it's safe to fail).

The Power of YET

Introduce this vital
mindset shift. Help your
child visualize that with
practice, they will
accomplish what is hard
right now.

Example: "You can't tie
your shoes... YET."

Building the Attachment Village: A Daily Rhythm

We accompany their emotional development through a deliberate, three-part daily rhythm:

1. Collect

Harnessing the attachment instinct before the day begins.

2. Bridge

Providing tools to hold on during the daytime separation.

3. Release

Creating safe spaces for accumulated emotions to flow out.

Pillar 1: Collect & Cultivate (Morning)

To collect someone means trying to harness the natural attachment instinct that moves us close to each other.

Ask yourself: What or who has collected their eyes, ears, and attention?



Greet with warmth and delight
first thing in the morning.



Sit and cuddle before
any transition.



Focus on sameness
between you.



Listen with full attention
before they leave for school.

Pillar 2: Bridge the Gap (School)

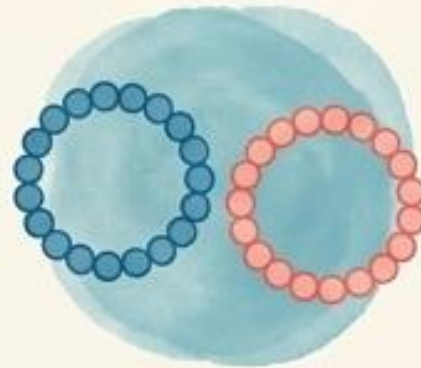
Give them something to hold onto that represents your connection.
Draw attention to the next point of connection instead of the separation.



The Invisible String:
Tell them there are strings connecting you all day.



The Kissing Hand:
A drawn heart on the palm to press when they feel lonely.



Matching:
Wear matching bracelets or the same color shirt.



The Locket/Note:
A picture in their lunchbox or a note in their pocket.

Pillar 3: The Release Valve (Afternoon)

When emotions are suppressed during a long day at school, they come out as challenging behaviors. Emotions must be released.

Play is the release valve. It allows emotions to flow through safely.

Create time and space for unstructured play.

Provide tools for sensory release (music, outdoors, sensory boxes, movement).

Your Role: No need to get involved or direct it; let play do its thing.



The Enduring Anchor



When a child feels better, they do better.

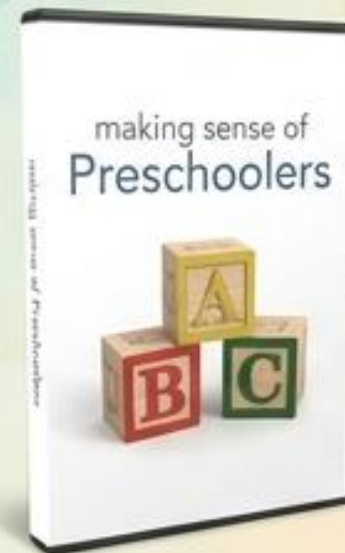
You do not need to fix every storm, and you cannot rush their brain's development. Your only job is to be the calm harbor where they drop their anchor, borrow your calm, and feel known.

Building Your Village

You do not have to navigate this transition alone. We have curated a library of tools based on the neurodevelopmental approach of Dr. Gordon Neufeld.



Read: Rest Play Grow
(Making Sense of
Preschoolers)



Watch: Making Sense
of Preschoolers
DVD series



Explore: Our K4-K5
reading lists for social
and emotional
development



Access the K4-K5 Toolkit Today

Download daily gesture cards, parent editorials, printable emotion wheels, and expert guidance to support your child's emotional growth.



Visit:

cebmfr.ca/develtppement-emotionnel