

A SMOOTH START....

Aloha Parents! Congratulations on this new stage in your child's development – a major touchpoint in development – transitioning to daycare/preschool!!

This transition is often marked with two steps forward, one step back, as your child grows and learns in amazing ways – but at the same time, regresses in some behaviors too.

Here is some advice on how to ease this transition from Child Psychologist Joshua Sparrow (Assistant Professor at Harvard Medical School and co-author of Touchpoints 3-6). He's also a former preschool teacher and someone whose work I refer to often and whose books I keep in our office.

Starting preschool is a big step for many young children. What are some of the biggest challenges they face?

1. The most common challenge for most kids is saying goodbye to their parents, or trouble separating. For some children this may be their first time out of the home. Others may have separated before, but are now in a new, possibly more challenging situation.
2. Children who are new to a daycare/preschool group will most often catch more colds in their first few months in the program. This is because young children haven't yet had the chance to build up immunities to the many different cold viruses out there, so each new exposure to germs has the potential to lead to a bout of illness. But, know that repeated run-ins with a runny nose aren't necessarily a bad thing — and, in fact, may even be good. Studies show that frequent colds (and other minor illnesses, like ear infections) boost your child's immune system, making her less susceptible to infection later in life.

How can parents help soothe their children's separation anxiety?

- First, parents can look within for whatever ambivalence they have about leaving their child, because he/she will pick up on those feelings. If there's any hesitation or discomfort or doubt — which there often is; all parents dislike having to leave their child when he's unhappy about it — but remember you made a wise choice. If you give any indication that you don't feel good about where you're leaving him, or about the fact that you have to leave him, your child's going to feel, "Well, maybe this isn't really a good place or idea." ***The first thing you have to do to prepare your child is to prepare yourself.***
- Visit our blog with your child www.KHP808.Blogspot.com – here you can look at pictures of Ka Hana Pono, show your child friends that will be there, they can see Auntie Gel & Uncle Bison – it's a great way to introduce and get your child excited about his/her new play space / school / daycare. Excitedly let your child know he/she will be back there to play with friends and have fun.

- If your schedule allows it, have your child's first week be shorter stays, 8am-1pm picking him/her up before naptime to start off with & then the following week having your child experience a full day (through nap time).
- Show your child that you and their teacher are on the same team . Make sure your child sees the two of you talking and working together — it will make an impression on them. Knowing you two are a "team" builds their trust – and helps him or her feel safe and comfy at school.
- Before your child's first day plan what your morning goodbye will be like and discuss it with your child. Having a plan in place beforehand will decrease everyone's anxiety.
- Follow a routine. Say goodbye in the same way each time. This will help him know what to expect and feel more secure. If a child cries at drop off, parents should remain calm and positive. They should not linger but rather reassure the child that he will be okay and that they will be back soon.
- Don't over-react if the first few days are a little rough. Young children in particular may experience separation anxiety or shyness initially but teachers should be trained to help them adjust.

How else can parents help ease the transition for their preschooler?

- If there's a way of having a playdate with one of the other children who will be attending the preschool, that's great, because then the children can welcome each other when they begin school.
- You could give your child a transitional object, like a favorite blanket or teddy bear they can carry around with them all day; or even a story so the teacher can read it. And give your child lots of reassurance that "Mommy's coming back," or "Daddy's coming back."
- To reinforce the idea, you can play a little game in which something disappears from sight but your child rediscovers it. Roll a ball under the couch and say, "Look, we can't see it. Do you think it's still there? Let's go look." When your child finds the ball, you can say, "See, even though we couldn't see the ball it's still there, just like Mommy when she went to work." What you're doing is reinforcing "object permanence," a concept that comes earlier (by the end of the first year) but can be threatened by the emotional challenge that separation presents.

Some children get emotional when their parents pick them up from preschool. Are these a cause for concern?

- If/When your child is emotional when you pickup, that does not mean that he is not doing well. It tells you that he really missed you and can finally let go and be flooded by the feelings he was trying to fight back during the day.

- The fact that he misses you doesn't mean daycare/preschool is not going to work for him. You can reassure your child and say, "I missed you too, and I'm eager to see you because we love each other and we have fun together."

What are some of the ways preschool helps a child grow?

- For some children this may be the first time they're going into a group setting where the attention by caregivers will be divided among several children. Learning to share the relationship to the teacher will be a major new gain.
- Also, the child will be learning to make friends, share, take turns, and hold back on impulses, areas in which they're still making progress. Preschool will present them with more opportunities to practice these skills.
- They'll also have opportunities to learn about other children's feelings, and to discover the joy of being generous. It's very early, but you'll see examples where the child will say, "Do you want to play with this doll?" That's their little gift, and they're learning the internal pleasure they get out of that.
- Also, at this age kids love the daily routine of preschool. They get excited about mastering the schedule — they know when storytime and snack and lunch and nap happen — and they're really thrilled with themselves.
- Their fantasy play becomes stronger around this age, and there are ways of being more elaborate with their imagination when other children are around.
- They also benefit from their peers in terms of language acquisition, and even motor development. You may start to see them climb up on a slide more readily, for instance.

When children are learning so many new things in preschool, is it likely they may regress in some other areas?

- In general, whenever a child is challenged by a new developmental area, she's likely to temporarily lose ground in an area she's only recently mastered. So at age three, it might be bedwetting, because she may just have learned to stay dry through the night.
- It's very likely there could be more crying, more clinging, more wanting to stick close to parents, and maybe some baby talk. There could be trouble separating at bedtime, and with getting to sleep
- One of the things kids are working on at that age is learning to control their feelings, which in a way, we work on our whole lives.
- Yes, you can expect more crying, more temper tantrums, more irritability, and more impulsiveness.

How do you know whether regression is a sign of something other than a touchpoint, in this case the transition to preschool? When do these behaviors signal something more serious?

- Certainly the regression should not last more than a few weeks, at the most if your child attends part-time; a couple of weeks if your child attends five days a week.
- And it shouldn't be pervasive throughout the day, for days and days.
- So although new preschoolers may be talking some baby talk, or they may wet the bed or have more trouble separating to go to sleep, you shouldn't see less of other normal functioning at other times of the day.
- And they shouldn't lose interest in playing, for example, or having playdates with other kids.

Once regressive behaviors — like trouble separating — subside and the child appears to have successfully made the transition to preschool, can parents expect those behaviors to occasionally return?

- Yes. For example, if you go away on a vacation or the preschool closes for a break, your child may experience another, shorter adjustment period.
- If a teacher or someone the child is close to leaves the school, you may see these behaviors again.
- Then there are other things of course that can cause these regressive behaviors, like developmental touchpoints, or the birth of a new sibling, or a stressful time in the parent's life.
- When you think about it, we all regress throughout our entire lives, whenever we do something new and challenging like move, or switch jobs, or get married. There will be things the child is working on, too.

