

THE FIRST GOODBYE

EXPERTS OFFER ADVICE ON HOW TO MAKE THE FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL EASIER

The big day has finally arrived. You've dressed your 3-year-old in his new school clothes, packed his backpack, fed him a nourishing breakfast and escorted him to his first day of school—a virtual wonderland of new toys to play with and new children eager to be his friend. Surely, he'll wave goodbye happily and you'll be on your way in no time at all.

But what if your happy, well-adjusted child locks your thigh in a vice grip and, through choking sobs, pleads with you not to leave him? Or your previously independent daughter buries her face in your skirt, refusing even to make eye contact with her new teacher?

What did you do wrong?

Probably nothing, according to Louise Bates Ames, co-founder and associate director of the Gesell Institute of Human Development in New Haven, Conn. Bates Ames says about fifty percent of all children have problems separating from their parents on the first day of school.

However, there are steps you can take to ease the pain.

"The less preparation you do, the better," Bates Ames says. "Talk about it in a very natural way. Say to your child, 'Isn't it nice that you'll be going to school like so and so?'" The chances are fifty-fifty that they'll accept it

She cautions against such platitudes as "You won't be afraid" or "You won't even miss me," explaining that such statements can trigger anxieties the child might not otherwise have felt. Books about the first day of school may have the same effect, she says.

Some schools will allow a parent and child to visit and explore together before the term begins. You can tell your child, "This is your new school. I'll stay with you today, but the next time you come, you'll play with the other children while I go (home, shopping and so on)." A feeling of familiarity with the surroundings will help when the time comes for you to leave.

Familiar faces may prove comforting as well. Carol Weston, author of "From Here to Maternity: Confessions of a First-Time Mother", suggests getting a copy of the class list and arranging play dates with future classmates.

"You want your child to feel that she's going from one safe haven to another," said Weston, whose daughter Elizabeth started nursery school in New York. "Elizabeth had two or three play dates before school started and it really helped. It's also a great time for mothers who may be feeling isolated—they're usually just as eager as you are to get together."

Often, it isn't just the child who has problems separating. "The mother is just as likely to turn pale and clutch," Bates Ames says. "Part of it is pulling yourself together."

Weston remembers that she was ready to remain with her daughter throughout the morning on the first day of school, but Elizabeth's teacher kept giving her subtle hints to leave the room. She suggests that parents familiarize themselves with the school's policy ahead of time. Some allow parents to remain

in the classroom briefly, while others prefer for parents to stay in a separate room or go outside in the hall while the child is getting acclimated.

It's probably best not to linger too long on the first day of school. "I think it's better to go," says Dr. David Elkind, professor of child study at the Tufts University in Medford, Mass. "If you prolong leaving, the child feels he has control over the situation. Reassure him, but be firm about leaving."

Elkind cautions that if the parent vacillates or appears worried, the child will take that behavior as a cue that there is, indeed, something to be concerned about. "Parents should be firm in their own minds that they're going to leave," Elkind says.