

# Ease First-Day Jitters

Expert advice for soothing your child's biggest worries about the upcoming year.

By Karen Snyder Duke and Wendy Toth  
"I don't want to be away from you for so long!"

**The Fear:** "I don't want to be away from you for so long!"

**The Fix:** Start by acknowledging your child's concern at drop-off time. You might try saying, "I know you're scared to be without me," and then explain when you'll be back by telling him which activity he can plan to see you after, such as music or science class (the teacher can let you know what the end-of-day schedule will be). "This is much easier for a kid to understand than a time of day," says Barbara Micucci, a school counselor at Caley Elementary School, in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania. If he still has a teary goodbye, refrain from mentioning it again later on. (Don't say, "Did you cry for a long time after Mommy left?") Instead, ask him to tell you about one fun thing he did that day. Even if his tears were on your mind, he likely forgot them hours ago.

**"I'm too scared to ride on a bus all by myself."**

**The Fear:** "I'm too scared to ride on a bus all by myself."

**The Fix:** If your school doesn't offer an orientation ride, take your child on a quick public bus trip, suggests Liz Blek, president of the National Kindergarten Alliance and a teacher at Montevideo Elementary School, in Mission Viejo, California. Help her practice saying hello to the driver, finding a seat, and getting off at a stop. Be sure to discuss how the school bus will be similar and different. It may also help to pair her up with an older kid in the neighborhood, says Blek.

**"What if the teacher is scary or acts really mean?"**

**The Fear:** "What if the teacher is scary or acts really mean?"

**The Fix:** First, "explain to your child that the teacher is there to help him learn," says Sonna Schupak, a kindergarten and first-grade teacher at the Early Childhood Center of Sarah Lawrence College, in Bronxville, New York. Remind him that his teacher's classroom rules are probably the same as the ones at home -- like don't interrupt when others are talking and use an indoor voice. To alleviate his fear of the unknown, set up a time to visit the classroom and meet his teacher before school starts, Schupak suggests. If your little one is game, snap a photo of the two of them to hang on the fridge at home -- it'll make the teacher less intimidating on the first day.

**"I've heard there's lots of work in kindergarten. Will I get to have any fun?"**

**The Fear:** "I've heard there's lots of work in kindergarten. Will I get to have any fun?"

**The Fix:** The teacher can tell you exactly how much time your child will spend each day on subjects like reading and math, as well as on less structured activities such as P.E. and **free play**. Reassure your child that she'll get to do all those things by talking her through her schedule. "She probably won't have a good concept of how long 30 minutes is, so compare it with something she already knows, like one episode of SpongeBob," says Mark P. Goldstein, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and adjunct professor at The Chicago School of Professional **Psychology**. Frame the schedule in a positive way by saying, "You'll get to have a nice long art class, and you'll still have some time to go to the library," he suggests. And don't forget to point out all the fun things your child will still have time for after school, like playing with neighbors in the backyard or reading a book with Dad before bed.

**"That building is so big. I'm afraid I'll get lost!"**

**The Fear:** "That building is so big. I'm afraid I'll get lost!"

**The Fix:** Find out if you can visit the school a few weeks before your child's first day. Check out some fun areas like the gym and art room to make the building seem less overwhelming, and practice walking the common routes your child will be using. "Role-play together and talk through what to do if he gets lost. Remind him that he's not alone and he can always ask a teacher or another student for directions," says Robin Goodman, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in New York City. Also point out that he'll never have to be alone because he'll go everywhere with a buddy.

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