

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Mixed Feelings about Returning to School

THE ANTICIPATION OF SCHOOL STARTING affects grown-ups as well as children. One mostly-stay-at-home father told me how excited he is about his preschooler starting school. This enthusiastic father explained that his happiness about school was anticipating the joy that his son would experience being part of a classroom with other children. He said, "It has nothing to do with wanting him to be away from home." He would miss the stage when their world revolved around being home together but could also imagine all the expansion school would bring.

Shortly after that, I heard a different perspective, from the mother of a fourth-grader. "I can't wait for my son to get back to school. He calls me three times a day at work when he's home with the babysitter. He's a little nervous about going into a new grade so he's become clingy. It's so out of character for him."

Beginning a new school year reminds us that people's feelings vary at different stages of development, and sometimes the best thing we can do is talk about them. It's alright to be happy and a little sad about your child starting a new grade. Kindergarten parents often have the hardest transition. They are no longer invited to follow their children into the classroom and stand around chatting with the teacher. For most parents, beginning kindergarten is a significant rite of passage. Don't feel bad if you cry in the hall. As one mother said, "Now it's kindergarten; next it will be a car."

I still remember a stay-at-home father crying in the preschool yard when his daughter went off to play independently. "She won't need me anymore," he said through his tears. I was so happy he could express those transitory feelings that suddenly replaced worrying about how she would adjust. Of course, the other side of these natural feelings is that you are creating a bigger "family" for your child—more people to have loving relationships with and to trust.

It's normal for children to have mixed feelings about beginning a new year. For our new preschoolers, it involves entering into a magical new world but learning to leave one's parent behind. Eventually, the preschool class becomes like a second home. In elementary school, children may be overflowing with excitement about seeing friends. On the other hand, they may also be wondering about relating to a new teacher or how they will meet the expectations of a new grade. No matter how welcoming the school or how supportive the teachers, change usually brings some intensity.

A third grader just told me, "I'm just not ready for summer to be over and school to start." Isn't it hard for all of us to let go of summer. This is the time to talk about adjustment. We can also remind children during the first few weeks that change takes time. Listen to what your children are saying and validate their feelings. Share perspectives with other parents and gain new insights. Staying conscious of the steps of leaping into fall makes us more alive and present so these precious moments don't pass us by.

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