

The Kindergarten Blues

Moms Cope With First-Day-of-School Sadness

by Teri Brown

For many of us, the start of school brings memories of fresh pencils, clean notebooks and new beginnings. For moms, it means sending our children out into the world with a brand new set of expectations. It is both an exhilarating and oddly sad experience, especially for those who are sending a child to kindergarten for the first time.

Bittersweet School Days

For Shirley Jump, mother of two from Fort Wayne, Ind., the experience this year will be a bittersweet one. Her youngest child is heading off to school for the first time.

"I'm excited and sad at the same time," says Jump. "He's my last one, and in the last year, my husband and I went through the whole debate about having a third child, finally deciding that this was it. I already know how much I'm going to miss him, since I've already gone through it with my oldest child. I'm dreading school as much as I'm looking forward to it."

That sentiment is one that Heather Haapoja, a work-at-home mother of four from Duluth, Minn., can relate to. "I really have mixed emotions," says Haapoja. "I've had children around me 24/7 for 16 years, and it's going to seem very strange to be alone with the peace and quiet. On the other hand, I'm looking forward to having that time to myself, to build my business without the guilt of feeling like I'm ignoring my son while I'm working."

Haapoja is excited to be done with the baby portion of motherhood and yet at the same time is reluctant to let it go. "It's hard to believe that my babies are all growing up," says Haapoja. "Part of me wishes I could go back in time. Life was simpler then, in a way. Although there was more physical work involved in caring for little ones, the worries were fewer. But there's no going back, so I've been trying to focus on the positives that will come with the change."

Haapoja hopes to build her business in the free time and to get her household a bit more organized. "My expectations there may be a bit too high, though," says Haapoja. "I imagine I'll feel a bit lost at first, rattling around in an empty house, but hopefully I'll adjust quickly."

Growing as a Parent

Steven A. Richfield, Ph.D., a licensed psychologist and author of [The Parent Coaching Cards](#) (Parent Coaching, 1998), believes that mixed emotions are perfectly normal for parents of kindergarteners. "Kindergarten represents a developmental step for children and their parents," says Richfield. "Kids enter a new world of formal learning where teachers occupy the roles of authority, while parents must contend with many realities that can tug at their hearts."

Richfield believes that the No. 1 reality for parents is the obvious loosening of parental control that comes with sending one's child to school. Kindergarten ushers in teachers who will be influencing how our kids feel and who they become. Another factor is that strong feelings about separation, trust, attachment or independence may rear their heads as we let loose of our babies. If a parent experienced any traumas or particularly difficult times during their own schooling, these memories affect feelings about sending children to school.

"Whether you choose to talk with your spouse, a good friend or just give yourself some quiet time to reflect upon what this means to you, it is important that you give yourself the opportunity to acknowledge your feelings," says Richfield. "Exploring interests that may have been put aside during the earlier years of infancy and toddlerhood can be helpful."

Involve Yourself

Another way to deal with separation anxiety in both your child and yourself is by taking an active part in your child's classroom. "When parents become involved in their child's classroom they become linked to their child in another context," says Richfield. "This helps ease the separation pangs and provides a new feeling of attachment to the child's learning environment. It is much easier to start discussions with the child about their classmates, teacher or learning objectives when the parent has witnessed the lesson firsthand or met the kids in the classroom."

Being involved in your child's education and classroom is the lifework of Erika V. Shearin Karres, Ed.D. Karres, a professor of education at the University of South Carolina and author of [A+ Teachers: Empower Your Child's Teacher, and Your Child, to Excellence](#) (Andrews McMeel, 2003), believes that parental involvement in education is related to kindergarten success.

"Getting involved is being in charge," says Karres. "We manage best when we know what's going on. Plus, helping the kindergarten class makes us feel better because we contribute not only to our child's well-being and growing, but to that of all children – parents are

educators, too; here's our chance to shine!"

To get your kindergartener ready for the big day, Karres suggests making a calendar and marking off the days with a sense of excitement. Another activity is to practice the kindergarten routine at home by "playing school."

The Big Day

"Use the time just like a pre-holiday time to discuss upcoming events and get new outfits, pick up kindergarten supplies and read fun stories about kindergarten," says Karres. "Fix a lunch similar to what your child will eat in kindergarten – just throw yourself into this wonderful task at hand!"

To get yourself ready to let go of your child's hand at kindergarten, set up some Mommy reward time. Meet a friend for shopping or sign up for some classes. Rediscover interests and passions you had before you had children.

While Shirley Jump plans on catching up on some work, she is also realistic about her own emotions. "I have to have a stiff upper lip because there are days when I have a much harder time with it than they do," says Jump. "I joke about how I can't wait for school to start, but in my heart, I hate to let them go."

She also believes moms should take time for themselves. "Take time for all those special treats you never seem to find a moment for when you have a preschooler in tow, whether it's a leisurely cup of coffee at a cafe or a stroll through the mall – some time alone and uninterrupted to just shop, think or be," says Jump.

Helping Your Child Through the First Week of School

- Convey a positive attitude about school.
- Make transportation plans clear to the child.
- Create a normal routine atmosphere at home the first few days of school.
- Give your child free playtime at home after school.
- Plan your day so that you can spend time with your child when he or she returns from school.
- Help your child cope with the occasional frustrations and disappointments in school.
- Remember that learning to like school and liking to learn are closely related.
- Avoid comparing this child's school experience with how siblings did when they began at school.
- Think of yourself as a coach who supports and facilitates your child's healthy development in school.

Source: National Institute of Mental Health's "Plain Talk Series."