

**Easing Separation and the Transition from Home to School - A Focus on Toddlers
by Rita Brenner, Princeton Montessori School**

One school's solution to meet the needs of both the child and the working parent

Looking forward to the opening of school in September always initiates a flurry of activity. Parents are busy buying new clothing, having the children's hair cut and worrying whether they have made the right decision to enroll their child in a Montessori toddler program.

For teachers, the sprucing up of the environment is paramount along with the introduction of new materials that have been gathered during the summer hiatus. For Montessorians, the children and the environment are ever present on their minds.

As a toddler teacher at this time of the year, I present some food for thought. How can teachers get children to separate from the parents as easily and peacefully as possible?

At the Princeton Montessori School, we take into consideration the pressures that face the working parent. Parents and teachers work out a phase-in period that is the most beneficial for the child and at the same time, reduces the stress on the parent.

During the orientation meeting with parents, teachers address separation as a natural process, which occurs many times throughout a child's life. We encourage them to let the children know that they will be going to school to have fun and that they will be picked up at the end of the day. We ask parents not to belabor these points in order to reduce any anxiety.

We invite the parents to visit the classroom to see exactly where their children will be and what activities they will be doing. We share of ourselves and ask parents to share some particulars about their children so that we will have some idea of who these children are.

We also spend time in the environment with the parent and the child, observe their interactions and take notes. Which work has attracted the child? Has the class pet made a hit?

This time together is called the phase-in period. For some children an hour spent with the parent in the environment is sufficient to ease the transition on the following day. For others, an hour each day for a week may be necessary.

The teacher carefully guides the parent after addressing the developmental issues involved. We believe that now we are truly prepared for the child's first day of school.

At last, that day arrives. The office staff helps with the parents who find it difficult to leave. The children are received by the teacher who welcomes and supports the child to the classroom.

Remembering to speak with the child in a hushed tone may help the child stop crying. Recalling the specific work that the child worked with during the phase-in period also eases the separation from the parent. The child will stop crying in order to answer or think about what the teacher has said.

Once in the classroom, it is important that the teacher take the time to settle the child by linking her with an activity to which she was attracted the previous day. Having a quiet space with a stuffed animal is available can also have a calming effect.

Acknowledging the child's feelings of sadness is vital. Since toddlers cannot express these deep emotions themselves, teachers become the translators for them. The children with whom I have worked seem to relax the moment they realize there is someone who understands what they are experiencing. Genuine caring and expression is not only significant for the children but also beneficial for the parent.

It is an excellent idea to make a call to the parents during the first few days of school to let them know exactly what the child is experiencing. The parents will begin to trust the teacher knowing that she has taken time to assuage their concerns. Follow up calls are also very worthwhile. During these times there will be much exchanging of information that the teacher cannot share at dismissal or pick-up.

Teachers need to prepare themselves spiritually and emotionally at this time of the year. Teachers who greet with a smile and an understanding attitude have the greatest success. There is no substitute for the person who genuinely cares and chooses to live and work with the angels.