

13. The Dance of Separation

*Sadness, sadness tears streaming
down my eyes.*

ISIS SIEN, "A Poem of Sadness," grade 1

Saying good-bye to your kids can be really hard—and at times, it can be as hard for you as it is for them. Most parents have been faced with leaving their children at times they wished they didn't have to and have asked themselves, "Will she be safe without me?" "Am I neglecting my duties as a parent if I leave her for two hours?" "Will she be mad at me for leaving?" "Will she remember who I am when I come back?" Most of us have felt torn when faced with a child who was reaching for us and begging us not to go. Yet separation is an inevitable part of life.

There's a natural ebb and flow to relationships that encompasses being together and being apart, being close and being independent, exploring the world and then coming back to our family, our home base. Good-byes and reunions are an integral part of family life. We go away and we come back. Learning to deal with these separations is a skill that evolves throughout our lives.

Children's experiences of separation vary widely during their early years. In some families, children are left only with family members. In others, children are cared for by a community of

trusted caregivers.¹ Some children are in child care starting shortly after they are born. Others are not cared for by anyone besides their parents until they go off to kindergarten. Ideas about acceptable separations vary widely among child development experts as well as among families and cultures. It is important to consider both your child's developmental readiness and your family's needs and beliefs when making decisions about separations.

Why It's Hard for Children to Say Good-bye: A Developmental Perspective

In the first five years of life, children go from being merged with their primary caregiver to developing a completely separate, autonomous

¹ We're choosing to use the word "caregiver" instead of the more familiar terms "baby-sitter" and "nanny" to describe people who care for children, including child care center teachers, in-home child care providers, family day care home staff, and family or friends. We believe the term "caregiver" most accurately and respectfully reflects the valuable work done by these people.

identity. In the course of this evolution, children go through periods of "separation anxiety" in which they fear being away from the people they are closest to.

Very young babies are generally happy for short periods with anyone who holds them securely and lovingly, even though they can differentiate a familiar face, voice, touch, or smell from those that are unfamiliar. Babies whose temperament makes them more highly sensitive to touch or changes sometimes balk at a new caregiver, crying because that person feels different. It's important to remember that all babies need time to gradually accustom themselves to anyone new who takes care of them.

In the second half of the first year, children's increasing mobility coincides with their discovery of separateness. When children first become mobile, they often eagerly crawl off across the room only to look back and find that you have "moved" and are suddenly far away. For many children this experience introduces the idea that they are really physically separate from their anchor person. Increased anxiety about a parent's whereabouts often accompanies this discovery. Babies in this developmental stage frequently whine when you walk into the other room or cry when you leave them in someone else's care.

Toward the end of the first year, two other discoveries add to children's fears of separation. One is the development of "object permanence," the understanding that objects or persons may still exist even though the child can't see them. Babies begin to grasp the fact

that when you leave you are somewhere else. Given that knowledge, they want you to stay with them.

Second, one-year-olds begin to use their previous experience to predict events in the future. They learn that when you pick up your keys, it means you are going to be leaving, and that when you leave, they're going to be without you.

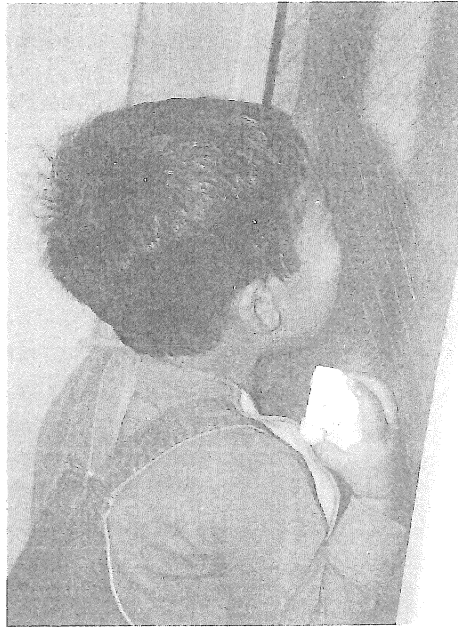
Although their memory has increased, older babies and young toddlers still don't have a linear conception of time. Their experience when you leave is often "You're going away and I don't know if or when you're coming back!"

Often what looks like regressive behavior when you leave—clinging, crying, wanting to be held all the time—is actually a sign of a more sophisticated awareness on the part of the child.

Toddlers also go through periods of difficult separations because of their rapid growth. Any time a child is having a developmental spurt or going through a period of increased fears, she may want to stay closer to her family. As toddlers push

for autonomy, the natural counterbalance is clinginess: "I want to be out climbing, throwing, jumping, making my own decisions, playing with the kids, and I want to be on your lap, all at the same time."

Although there are big individual differences as to when children experience difficulties with separation, it's important to know that a child who's previously been comfortable with separation may all of a sudden start crying when you leave. Although any dramatic shift in your child's behavior needs to be looked at



carefully, a change in your child's response to being left doesn't necessarily mean that anything is "wrong." It may just mean that he's reached a new level of understanding about being away from you.

Separation may also be more challenging depending on children's temperament. Kids who are very sensitive and have developed a relationship with a parent in which the parent helps to buffer the world for them may have a more difficult time separating. Children who are late talkers and who rely on a unique communication system with their parents often find separations more challenging. And children who tend to be observers, who like to "take a lot of notes" before they move out into the world, may also find that comfortable separations take longer to develop.

In the preschool years, many children experience an easing of separation anxiety. By the time they reach three or four, most children who've had the opportunity to experience some predictable separations adjust more easily to the idea of "good-byes." As children move out of the toddler years, they become more certain of their relationship with you and start to have a more sophisticated sense of time that allows them to "remember" that if you aren't here now, you will still return. However, there may still be times, due to developmental changes or other stresses, when children go through temporary tears or clinginess and need renewed support around separation.

Why It's Hard for Parents to Say Good-bye

While children are learning to deal with separation, their parents are often having their own complex, ambivalent feelings: "I desperately need some time to work, be by myself, and get

things done *and* I can't stand the thought of leaving you."

With both men and women under increasing pressure at work and at home, more and more parents feel torn, as if they're aren't doing any of their jobs well. As Golda Meir once said, "At work you think of the children you have left at home. At home you think of the work you've left unfinished. Such a struggle is unleashed within yourself. Your heart is rent."

These feelings of inadequacy often surface when parents begin their transition back to work after a child is born. Many parents experience guilt, anxiety, and self-doubt when they first leave their child. They worry about whether they can find a trusted person to care for their child and wonder if their child will be okay without them. As Faviola recalls, "I would kiss my daughter and wave good-bye, then make a dash for my car and bawl my eyes out."

When children are also having a hard time saying good-bye, parents' feelings of distress over leaving often increase. Sari recalls: "After Lola had been caring for Jordan for a number of months, he entered that stage where he couldn't bear for me to leave him. Whenever it was time for me to go, I felt wracked inside. How could I leave my son when he was holding up his arms, sobbing his heart out, crying 'Mama! Mama!?' If I went to work, would I damage him forever?"

These doubts and worries are natural. They are a barometer of the depth of love we feel for our children, a testimony to both our connection and our sense of responsibility. It is not easy to go from being the "primary" caregiver for our baby to sharing our baby's care with someone else.

Our feelings about separation continually lead us to clarify our priorities as a parent. Sorting through these feelings, dealing with those that just need to run their course, and responding to those that are clues to a need for change is an ongoing process in our lives as parents.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: SEPARATIONS

- What do I remember about separations as a child?
- How have separations been with my own children?
- When is it easier for my child to say good-bye to me? Harder?
- When is it easier for me to say good-bye to my child? Harder?

Daily Separations

Daily separations have some degree of regularity to them—every Sunday afternoon your son goes to Uncle Phil's house; on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings, your daughter goes to preschool; every morning at seven-thirty, you kiss your kids good-bye and go off to work. Daily separations have a quality of predictability and sameness that, over time, children can learn to anticipate and grow used to. This consistency helps make separations easier for children. But even regular separations may be difficult at first—or even later, after they have already been successfully established. A child's difficulty saying good-bye is often related to changes, development, stress, or temperament—factors over which parents may not have control.

Changes such as a new child care situation often cause tearful good-byes. This is a normal response. Children need time to become comfortable in new surroundings. Some children go



off happily the first several days, never seeming to notice that Dad is gone, and, all of a sudden, on the fifth day, they break down in a sobbing good-bye. It is not unusual for a child to be fascinated by the new setting for a few days—“This looks like an interesting party. I don't mind being here for a while”—but then to respond differently when he realizes that it's a permanent situation.

Stress can also cause difficult separations. If Mom has the flu for a few days, the child's equilibrium may be thrown off. He may feel, “My mom has been different for a few days. I wonder if she is okay. I wonder if she is still my same mom. It's hard to leave her when I have all these questions.” If there is a move, a divorce, or other changes at home, a child

may also experience increased difficulty with separation.²

As well as sometimes being difficult, daily separations can also be valuable and worthwhile for children. They help children establish trust (“You go away and then you come back”) and give them opportunities to build significant connections with other caring adults. The security that comes from those relationships—and from experiencing day in and day out that you always do come back—ultimately makes separation easier.

Strategies for Dealing with Daily Separations

Consistency, clarity, and confidence can all help ease daily separations between you and your child.

- **Make your comings and goings as regular as possible.** You can’t say to a baby, “I’ll be back at a quarter of two,” and have her reply, “Okay, I’ll keep an eye on the clock and pace myself till you get back.” The only way babies can anticipate that you’re going to come back is through practice. And if you leave at predictable times, it’s easier for them to get used to the schedule. You drop your daughter off at day care right after breakfast and you always pick her up after lunch. You return for your son every day after his nap. If you come back at a predictable time, your child’s internal clock begins to expect it, and that helps him deal with the separation. But if your work schedule is such that you work six hours on one day and an hour and a half on another day, maybe two days a week, maybe six days a week, it will probably take longer for your young child to adjust.

² See “When Parents Separate: Making It Work for the Children” on p. 390 for more on separations after a divorce.

- **Always say good-bye.** In Janis’s toddler development class one night, Stanley, the father of three-year-old Amir, confessed, “It’s just too hard when I drop Amir off and he cries, so I just sort of vaporize.” Stanley told the class that he’d wait until Amir was involved in something, then he’d slip out of the room without saying he was leaving.

When children are struggling with separation, it can be tempting to slip away unnoticed. Yet often kids whose parents leave without telling them feel they have to be constantly vigilant: “I can’t really get involved in anything because somebody I care about might slip away.” Even when you have to interrupt your child, saying good-bye is important.

- **Have confidence in your child’s capacity to make a successful transition.** When you take the time to tell children good-bye, you let them know, “I’m leaving. I’m going to come back. I trust that you’re going to be okay while I’m gone and that you can handle this separation.”

- **Develop a predictable good-bye routine.** For some children, leave-taking rituals make separations easier—standing at the window with the caregiver, blowing three kisses, walking you to the elevator, looking you in the eye and saying “Good-bye.” Sometimes the caregiver can sing a special song of good-bye or welcoming. Such rituals reassure children.

- **Leave a token of yourself behind.** Leaving something with your child can help—for babies, a familiar shirt or nightgown that has your smell on it; for older children, a plastic-covered photograph they can slip in and out of their pocket. Give the item to the child and say, “Will you hold this for me while I’m gone?” Then they can keep the cherished article in their cubby, in a special hiding place, or in the bed where they nap. Touching it and looking at

it throughout the day can help bring back the tangible memory of you.

Cap, a day care worker, explained, "One child was having a hard time coming to the center so her dad started putting a note in the pocket of her overalls that said 'I love you.' She'd walk around all morning, showing that to people."

- **Respond to your child's needs for reassurance.** During those times when kids are more clingy and they seem to need you more, it's useful to be more available if at all possible. But even when your children are struggling with your absences, it's still helpful to keep up some of the separation you've already established. Even when it's hard, separation teaches valuable lessons. When kids are nurtured and well cared for by someone else, they learn to trust other people, to see the world as a safe and friendly place.

- **Stick with familiar caregivers.** When children are having particular problems with separation, try to avoid introducing new caregivers.

- **Try for a daytime date.** If you're leaving your child so you can go to work or school, you probably have a set routine that can't be changed. But if you're going out to see friends, to get a few moments alone, or to reconnect with your partner, you have more flexibility. Although concerts and movies, dinner and dancing all happen at night, that's often the hardest time for children to be separated from you. In the evening, kids are tired and want their familiar routine; they have fewer resources for

dealing with things that are different. So it can be helpful to try "going out" earlier in the day, at a time when your child is refreshed.

- **Make the child's activities away from you special.** You can leave a treat or suggest a favorite activity for your child and caregiver to do while you are gone. In Mimi's family, the kids all look forward to playing nerfball tag with Marcy, who comes over from next door to take care of them.

Part of making the time special for your child is the way you introduce the idea. Laura explains: "Whenever Eli's Aunt Janet is going to watch him, we talk about the fact that we're going out on a date and that Eli is going to have his own date with her. Even if his 'date' is still hours away, he starts strutting around the house yelling, 'Date! Janet! Ready!' He's not just being baby-sat. He has something special that he's doing, too."



Strategies for Coming Home at the End of the Day

At the end of every separation is a homecoming. For those of us who work, go to school, or have other responsibilities outside the home, reuniting with our families at the end of the day can present challenges as well as delights. Moving from the world's pace into our lives at home requires that we slow down, clear our minds, change our rhythm, and leave the day behind.

For Shinta, the transition between work and home is the hardest part of her day: "I'm always happy to see Momo and to hold her, but sometimes when I'm sitting on the floor read-

ing her a book, my mind is still racing with the work of the day. If I could just learn to be in the moment with her, and at work when I'm at work, everything would be easier."

Homecomings can be hard for kids, as well. Children often fall apart when they're picked up at day care or just as we're trying to get dinner on the table. The reuniting time, which we've looked forward to all day, is often a setup for short tempers and trouble.

Every family will develop its own strategies for reuniting after the day's separation, but here are some ideas that have worked well in many families:

Coming Home: Paula's Story

Paula has almost always worked outside of the home, and the transition between her work life and the needs of her family has been a constant challenge she's had to deal with. After twenty-plus years of coming home from work, she's learned a few things, but she still hasn't worked it all out.

Coming home from work to my family has always been horrendous for me. Everybody needed me the minute I came home. Somebody had a spelling test the next day, someone had a report due, someone had an emotional experience, someone just tried out for a sports team. My littlest kid had a ton of needs. Each person had a real need of me when I walked in the door.

I used to stop the car and sit in it for ten minutes and prepare to go

from intellectual, cohesive thinking to absolute chaotic frenzy. In my mind, I finished any loose ends from the day. I wrote myself notes about things I needed to follow through on. Then I let go of the day as completely as I could so I could walk in the door with a clean slate. I needed to do that because my grumpiest time was always when I still had something I wanted to do for work, when what was needed was to give my absolute attention to my kids.

Basically, I have to come in with no needs of my own, ready to see and acknowledge each kid. I'm a firm believer that a little bit of attention, eye contact, and physical closeness can make children feel acknowledged in a way that they then won't act out. And if they don't get that, they will.

It's really helped me to think "I

just have to spend five minutes with each kid right now" instead of "The need is overwhelming. I think I won't look. There's too many kids. I can't deal with them. I'm just going to shut everybody out and deal with this one who has the most pressing need."

Actually, my very best scenario was the one time I had a car phone and I commuted. I had five kids at the time. I'd call home ahead of time and talk to my big kids, and they'd tell me what happened at school that day. So by the time I walked in the door, I could tend to my youngest, and the big kids felt okay because they'd already told me the highlights of their day. Then I'd get the little one to bed and go back and follow up with the big kids. That worked out the best.

- **Take time to clear your mind before you arrive home.** Some people do this before they leave work; others while commuting home. Some make a quick stop at the YMCA, take a short walk, or go for a run around the block.

- **Check in.** Take ten or fifteen minutes to check in with the people you haven't seen all day. You can talk, sing, read a book, or play "horse-y" before you begin the tasks for the evening. Some parents have found it necessary to focus this time on the children and leave most of their adult check-ins until later.

- **Connect physically.** Many families have hugging, cuddling, back rubs, wrestling, or playing ball built into their days. These can be wonderful opportunities for physical contact, immediate connections, and play.³

- **Find out about your child's time away from you.** If you're picking up your son or daughter at child care, ask your child's caregiver about what your child's day was like. Having some knowledge enables you to ask specific questions: "Tell me about the dinosaur cave you made out of blocks." "Tell me about the fire truck you saw."

- **Talk about your day.** If you find that it's hard for your children to answer questions about their day, start by sharing stories about your day—about running for the bus and almost having the door close, about seeing a whole bunch of yellow and red flowers on your way to work. This gives children a chance to see what "sharing stories about your day" looks like.

- **Simplify the things you need to do when you get home.** Think about what's really important for you to do and let go of the rest.

³ See "Physical Play and Roughhousing with Children" on p. 192 for safety guidelines regarding this kind of play.

Jani's explains, "When my kids were young, I worked full time outside the home. One thing I did was simplify the things I did outside of work. Housework went way down on my list of priorities. So my house is a total disaster. It's been a disaster for years. Part of what I do when I come home from work is step over all the clutter—piles of newspapers, clothes, toys, and dirty dishes—and go spend time with my kids. Every couple of weeks or so, I do a big blitz and clear things up, but in between, it can turn into a hurricane. In effect, I'm saying to my family 'I'm away from you for this period of time that I'm working, and when I'm home, you're my priority.'"

- **Involve children in homecoming routines.** You can say to your kids: "Come help me bring in the newspaper." "Help me open the mail." "Let's water our plants." Babies can watch the activities in the kitchen from a safe vantage point. Toddlers like to wipe tables and cupboards with sponges, scrub potatoes in the sink, or wash vegetables in a low dishpan. And preschoolers like to cut zucchini, tear lettuce, or pass out the dishes for dinner.⁴

- **Share the responsibilities.** In families where there is more than one adult, divide up the tasks: "It's your night to cook and my night to be with the kids." "It's your night to do the bedtime routine and my night to read the paper."

- **Make space for regular family time.** During family time, turn off the TV and video games, and put away newspapers and books, so that the family gets a chance to be together.

⁴ See "Cooking with Children" on p. 172 for other ideas on including children in the evening preparations for dinner.



Longer Separations and Reunions

When you leave your child in a way that differs from your usual routine, a whole new set of dynamics comes into play. The separation doesn't have to be long for it to be significant; the important factor is how different it is from what your child is used to. Separations in this category include time in which your school or work responsibilities demand more of you, time spent dealing with illness or family emergencies, time spent traveling for work, trips you take without your children, as well as time your children spend away from you—when they're visiting relatives, sleeping at someone else's house, or staying with their other parent in a different home.

Generally, this type of separation is harder for children to deal with than normal, daily separations. As such, it requires more careful

forethought and planning. When you're considering a different or more extensive separation than your child is used to, here are some things that can make it easier:

- **Tell kids your schedule and reassure them that you're coming back.** Let children know when you're going, where you're going, and when you'll be back.
- **Choose a caregiver and location the child is used to.** It's easiest for your child to stay with someone she knows in her own home or in familiar surroundings.
- **Help the child acclimate to new surroundings.** If your child isn't being cared for at home, help her become familiar with the place she will be staying. Look at where she'll eat, sleep, and play. If distance or circumstances preclude visiting, see if you can get a photo or make a little book called *Visiting Grandma* so your child can begin to get used to the place where she'll be.
- **Send familiar things along.** Pack so your daughter can sleep with her favorite blanket, cuddle with her favorite stuffed clown, drink from her favorite cup, or read a well-loved book.
- **Prepare your child ahead of time.** Your ability to do this will depend on your child's understanding of time. Young toddlers can't imagine the future, three-year-olds will benefit from a couple of day's notice, and five-year-olds can imagine an upcoming event two weeks away. Let your child know what to expect while

you're away: "I won't be here in the morning when you wake up, but Dhira will make oatmeal for you and be with you all day. And then after dinner, right about time for your bath, I'll be back."

- **Start small and build up from there.** If you're planning to have your two-year-old daughter stay overnight at Aunt Toni's house, start by having her go over for an evening or by taking an afternoon nap there. As she demonstrates she's comfortable with these small steps, consider taking a bigger one.

Of course, emergencies come up and there are times we're all forced to leave our children in circumstances that are less than ideal. Even in these situations, do what you can ahead of time to make the experience a positive one for your child. If you have neighbors, friends, or relatives with whom your child has already built relationships, things will be easier if they're the ones called upon to provide emergency backup care.

- **Consider your child's developmental readiness when planning extended time away.** Parents often long for the intimacy and freedom that they had before their children were born. Some consider taking long vacations away from their kids to recapture some of the spontaneity and closeness they've lost. While this might be beneficial to the parents' relationship, it can be hard on the children. If you're considering taking such a trip, it's important that you factor in your children's temperament, past experience, developmental stage as well as their comfort and familiarity with their caregiver.

From the standpoint of babies and many young toddlers, separations of more than a night or two are very difficult. After several days or a week, some young children may even begin to give up the idea that their parents are coming back. The potential for this kind of

emotional stress can be significantly reduced if the child stays in her own home with someone she is familiar and well attached to.

By the time children are three or four, most can tolerate longer separations more easily. Children who understand time may enjoy such activities as marking the days off a calendar until you return.

Some parents have found that taking a couple of overnight or weekend trips helps them to have the time they need without putting as much stress on their children. On longer trips, others have taken along a caregiver or another family member to help with child care. There are families who routinely take trips with other families who have children of similar or complementary ages, an arrangement that allows for both adult time and child time.

Things You and Your Caregiver Can Do While You're Away

When you're leaving your child for a period of time that is longer or different from usual, you can use many of the same strategies we recommended for daily separations. You can also:

- **Encourage the caregiver to talk about you.** Sometimes caregivers think it's better not to mention you when you're gone, because they don't want to "make Julian sad." But actually, talking about you helps Julian remember you and gives him a chance to express whatever feelings he's already carrying.

Your child's caregiver can casually mention you a couple of times in the course of the day. In the morning, he could say "Hey, Julian, I wonder what your mom is having for breakfast. Do you think she's eating eggs or French toast?"

Julian may cry when you're mentioned. Inevitably, he will have some sadness and confu-

sion about you being gone. But it's beneficial if he can express some of that while you're gone, instead of saving it all for your return.

- **The telephone has its limitations.** When you call three-year-old Omi, she may be delighted to hear from you. But she may also burst into tears or not want to talk to you. The moment you call may not be the exact same moment Omi was missing you. Older children sometimes talk readily on the telephone, but one-, two-, and three-year-olds are often confused or frustrated by hearing your voice on the telephone—they don't understand why they can hear your voice but not see you or climb up on your lap.

- **Make a tape of your voice.** Use a tape recorder to make a special tape for your child. Talk to him, read him books, tell him stories, sing some of his favorite songs. Having a tape he can turn on and off can be preferable to the telephone because the child can listen to the tape whenever he wants to hear it. Since he doesn't have control over when you leave or when you come back, it's helpful for him to have control over a small piece of you while you're gone.

- **Caregivers can prepare children for your return.** Caregivers can reassure children about your return and tell them when to expect it. They can help children "write" a story about their day, buy some apples, or pick some leaves to share with you when you get back. Doing something with you in mind helps children feel connected and prepares them for your homecoming.

Things to Be Aware of When You Come Back

Reunions from longer or unusual separations can be difficult for children. Here are some of the more common responses you may see upon your return:

- **Hanging back.** You may come home with the expectation that your daughter is going to rush headlong into your arms and hold on to you for all she's worth. But that may not be what she does at all. Some children run straight into your arms and sit there for a day. Others, after they notice you've come in, turn away and go back to what they were doing. They stay aloof and distant. They may cry, tell you to "Go away!" or even ignore you.

This can feel devastating to parents. You may jump to the conclusion that your daughter is mad at you, when that's not what's happening—or when it's only a small part of what's happening. Most likely she's simply taking the time she needs to make the adjustment to being back together with you. Her sense of time is different from yours.

What happens is this: You go away for the weekend. As an adult, you know what Friday to Monday looks like. You can feel how long it's going to be until you hold your daughter again. When you start driving into your town, when you reach your neighborhood, when you head down your street, you warm up to being with her. But your two-year-old doesn't have the capacity to do that. She has to start warming up after you arrive.

Janis remembers arriving home after being away for two nights: "Maya was three at the time. When I walked in, she was at the sink washing dishes. She said 'Hi, Mom' and went back to washing dishes. I was left standing there thinking 'She's really absorbed in what she's doing. She's not ready to connect with me yet. She's making the transition from being a girl in the world with her brothers and her father. She's remembering how to be with me; she's figuring out how to depend on me again.' About forty-five minutes later, she was all over me. She was like white on rice. But it took her that long to warm up."

Give your child the time she needs to warm up without getting your feelings hurt, "reject-

ing” her back, or assuming “She’s mad at me.” Be available, but let her move at her own pace.

- **Ambivalent feelings.** When you come back after being away, children are often full of ambivalent emotions: “I’m not used to being with you. So you should go away! But I missed you horribly so you should come close!” That can be confusing for both of you when you don’t understand where it’s coming from.

- **Testing.** Often kids want to find out if you’ve changed, to see if you’ll react in the same ways you did before you left. They may test you by immediately doing something they know you’ll have to stop. It’s as if they’re saying, “You haven’t been here. So I need you to show me in a very physical way that you’re still my mom.”

If you can recognize that this is what’s happening, you can respond to testing with more compassion. “I see you’re throwing your food. Let’s move your food away for a minute. Do you want to come over here and sit with me?”

- **Clinging.** Your child may need to be attached to you for several days after you come back. He is going to want to reconnect with you in some real, tangible ways. If possible, clear your schedule so you have at least one day you can really devote to being with your child.

- **Preference for the other parent (or caregiver).** When you get home after being away, your daughter may repeatedly insist, “No, Daddy do it.” Your daughter has grown accustomed to Daddy doing everything. That doesn’t mean she doesn’t like you, it just means she’s more used to Daddy and she wants to choose. Give her some time to change gears and get used to you again.⁵

⁵ See “When Children Prefer One Parent over the Other” on p. 382 for more on dealing with this situation.

Building a Bridge to Child Care

The issue of child care comes up very tangibly when we think about leaving our children. There are three main components of building a strong bridge to child care: making a good initial choice, supporting your child’s transition, and nurturing your family’s relationship with your child’s caregiver over time.



Choosing a Caregiver

Finding the person who will care for your child is a highly personal decision. Here are some important considerations in making your choice:

- **Think about what you value most in a caregiver.** Clarifying your values is an important first step in making the right choice. Sometimes the process of meeting several caregivers will help you clarify what you really want.

- **Think about what you need to trust a caregiver.** Assessing what you need to build trust is at the core of finding the right person for your family.

Finding Quality Child Care Programs

What is quality care? How does it differ from unsafe, inadequate, or mediocre care? What does it take for children to be well nurtured in a setting away from their families?*

Some determinants of quality care are low staff turnover, well-paid, well-trained caregivers, a low child-adult ratio, and good communication between staff members and between parents and caregivers.

There are several ways to evaluate a child care situation. You can begin by interviewing caregivers, the director, and other parents who are familiar with the program. Initial screening questions might include:

STAFFING

- Do staff members have early childhood training? Are they involved in ongoing education and training?
- Is the staff paid a living wage?
- What's the frequency of staff turnover? Are staff members usually here long enough to establish long-term bonds with children?
- Do children have consistent caregivers to provide the safety and trust they need?

*The National Association for the Education of Young Children has brochures to help parents recognize quality child care. It also has national lists of accredited programs. For information or a catalogue of resources, write to NAEYC, Information Services Department, 1509 16th Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20036-1426; call (800) 424-2460; e-mail: aauj82d@prodigy.com

GROUP SIZE AND RATIO

- What's the ratio of adults to children? (For infants, we recommend a 3:1 ratio; for toddlers, 4:1; and for preschoolers, at least 6:1.)
- Is the group size small enough to prevent overstimulation, to ensure that children will be well cared for? To provide good supervision, attentive care, and personal relationships between children and caregivers?

LICENSING AND ACCREDITATION

- What kind of a license does this daycare home or program have?
- Is the program accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children?

HEALTH AND SAFETY

- What are the health and safety policies and procedures?
- Are caregivers trained in first aid and CPR?

Once you've gathered this basic information, it is important to visit. If at all possible, go a few times during different parts of the day. Although it is important to visit with your child, it can be useful to visit on your own, as well, so you can observe the center without having to pay attention to your child. Through observing and talking to staff, you can address the following questions:

PHILOSOPHY

- Most centers have a written philosophy statement that reflects the values and goals of the program. Does this statement reflect your values?
- Is the philosophy evident in the environment?
- Is it consistent with the day-to-day interactions between caregivers and children?

ENVIRONMENT

- Is the environment safe, clean, attractive, well cared for, child-centered?
- Are there places for large physical play, quiet play, group play, individual play, pretend play, messy play, sand play, reading, art, science, block building?

RESPECT FOR CHILDREN

- Are interactions between children and caregivers respectful?
- Are children's feelings respected?
- Are children's needs for free choice considered in the schedule?
- Are their needs for flexibility, predictability, stability, for quiet as well as active times, taken into account?
- Is there adequate time for transitions?

CHILDREN'S AUTONOMY

- Is the environment set up so that children can get the toys and materials they need by themselves?
- Do the toys encourage creative play?
- Are both girls and boys playing with a diversity of toys?

PROBLEM-SOLVING

- Are children supported in solving their own conflicts?
- Are children who are testing limits responded to safely, respectfully, and without punishment?

PARENT INVOLVEMENT

- Are parents invited to participate in the program?
- Are there places for parents to meet, to talk with other parents?

- Are there places for parents to talk to caregivers?
- Are resources available for parents?
- Are parents free to drop in and visit anytime?

DIVERSITY

- Does the group of children include diversity in terms of ethnicity, income levels, culture, physical ability, and family structure? Is that diversity valued and acknowledged in the program—through books, stories, pictures, caregiver's language, and parent information forms?
- Are children of both genders equally respected?

MEALS

- If the center provides snacks or meals, are they nutritious and wholesome?

- Are children invited to participate in serving and feeding themselves and in making choices about what they eat?

You may want to bring up other questions to address your particular concerns. It's also important to remember that no one program will meet all of your criteria. Knowing what is most important to you will help you choose the program that's best for your family.

Many excellent programs have long waiting lists. Even if you're not sure when you need care or exactly where you want your child to go, putting your child on the waiting lists at several places you might consider in the future can be helpful so that an opening is available when you need it.

- **Get referrals.** When friends, other parents, or coworkers suggest caregivers, ask specific questions, such as "What especially do you like about Gretchen?" "What does your child enjoy about her?" "Have there been any problems or things you dislike?" "How have you and Gretchen dealt with these differences?" "Would you recommend her wholeheartedly?"

- **Check references.** Knowing how a caregiver has worked with other families can help you assess a potential good fit with your family.

- **Screen over the phone.** You can save a lot of time by doing your initial screening by phone. Ask about basics such as cost, availability, hours, training, and experience. Then ask about the issues that most clearly reflect your

values. You may know that you want a caregiver who speaks Spanish, helps kids with conflict resolution, or who's had experience with special needs. Conversely, if you find out that a caregiver smokes, doesn't respect your religion, or has the TV on all day, you may know right away that she's not a match for your family.

- **Interview caregivers.** After your initial screening, set up a mutually convenient time to talk in person. Interviews will be somewhat different for in-home caregivers than they will for staff at a child care program.

For initial interviews, kids don't need to be present. Spend a little time getting to know each caregiver. Have them talk about their interests, what they enjoy about children, their work history, and their skills. You can also ask

hypothetical questions, such as: “What would you do if Jake refused to put on his shoes?” “How would you respond if Lucy kept trying to bite you?” “What would you do if Lucy and Jake were pulling on the same toy and screaming?” “How do you imagine a morning with Jake might go?” “What would you do if you and I felt differently about handling a situation?” You may also want to ask what the caregiver thinks would make for a good relationship between the two of you.

No one caregiver will ever answer every question exactly the way you hope for. That’s why it’s essential to know which answers are most important to you. Would a negative answer on any particular question disqualify this person? Or are there certain differences you can live with? It’s important to know which issues carry more weight, which are negotiable, and which aren’t.

- **Pay attention to how you feel.** While it’s important to listen to what caregivers say, it’s also crucial to pay attention to how you feel when you are with them. Not everyone can articulate who they are with words. Sometimes the way people are with you, the way you feel when you’re with them, is more descriptive of who they are than anything they say.

- **Observe the caregiver with your child.** Once you’ve narrowed down your choices, set up an informal time for you, your child, and the caregiver to get together. The way the caregiver initiates contact, interacts, and responds to your child can give you important information about her style and skills. Even if your child is cool or standoffish, you’ll have an opportunity to see whether the caregiver can read his signals.

- **Consider how a caregiver deals with your child’s feelings.** When children are having trouble saying good-bye, it’s important that they have help dealing with their feelings. Since children’s good-byes often include crying, it’s valuable to know how a prospective care-

giver will respond to crying: “What will you do if my baby cries?” “What if she keeps crying?” If you want a caregiver who will be accepting and comfortable with your child’s feelings, you may not choose someone who responds only by providing distraction: “Well, I’ll bounce her up and down,” “I’ll just find something fun to do.”

For caregivers, working through tearful good-byes can be an important part of their relationship with children. As Sue, a full-time caregiver, put it, “I can tell the level of bonding I have with a child by the sad times we spend together.”

- **Trust your intuition.** Intuition plays an important role in making a good choice. Patti, who was putting her son, Kevin, in group care, said, “I visited one center. The children were clean. The room was bright and cheerful. The activities seemed appropriate and the teachers were okay with the kids, but there was something that just didn’t feel right about it. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but I knew I couldn’t choose that center for Kevin. He ended up in a center that was a little less well ordered and a little less well scrubbed, but there was something about the way the adults were with the kids that felt just right to me.”

Supporting Your Child’s Transition to Child Care

How children begin care can foster their successful experience of separation. Here are a few suggestions for a smoother start:

- **Arrange some time when you, your child, and the new caregiver can be together.** Such time can create a meaningful bridge. The caregiver gets to see you with your child, and you get to see the caregiver with your child. Your child also gets to explore the new person (or environment) with you there. Once you know that your caregiver understands your child’s cues and communication system, you can

leave feeling more confident. And when your child and your caregiver have some sense of knowing each other, neither one of them is left with a stranger.

- **Ease your child in gradually.** Visiting a child care program with your child, either once or on several occasions, can ease the transition, as can leaving your child for a short time the first day, then gradually building up from there.

Some child care centers have a policy of doing a “home visit,” either before or shortly after children begin care. Home visits enable caregivers to learn about a child’s family and culture and gives the child an opportunity to integrate both of her worlds.

- **Value crying as a form of communication.** Even when children are well prepared for child care, they may still be upset when you leave them. For many children, crying is part of the good-bye, a reasonable way to make the transition from you to a caregiver. If your child

quickly recovers, spends the rest of the time exploring, and is relatively happy, you can assume that the crying is just how your child says good-bye. If, however, your child cries the whole two hours, several days in a row, it may be time to reassess what you’re doing: “Is this the right caregiver for us? The right schedule? The right situation?”

If you’re clear that these are right, look at ways to help your child ease in more gradually. You can ask yourself: “What can I do to make the separation more comfortable, familiar, and predictable for my child?”

- **Regularly evaluate how things are going.** Effective indicators of a good child care match are the child’s overall demeanor (not just his behavior during good-byes and hellos), his relationship to the caregiver, the reports the caregiver gives you about the child’s day, and your own observations. You can also ask yourself: “Am I continuing in a comfortable relationship with the caregiver?” And if your child

Changing Child Care

Children are often in the position of changing caregivers or moving from one center to another. Such transitions are significant in children’s lives, and kids need support making them.

- **Take the change seriously.** When your child is about to say good-bye to an important person in her life, you have the opportunity to think about what you want your child to learn about transitions, rituals, and good-byes. Early experiences such as these teach children important lessons about permanence and change in relationships.

- **Talk about it.** Prepare your child for the forthcoming change. Depending on the age of the child (two weeks is usually adequate preparation time for a two- or three-year-old), you will have to decide when to talk about the move from one child care setting to the new one, but do talk about it. Give a simple explanation of why the change is being made.

- **Help your child say good-bye.** Help your child find a channel for expressing his appreciation of the caregiver he is leaving. This can be helping to roll up spring rolls or bake muffins as a gift to bring to school,

narrating a simple story the parent can write down, drawing a picture, giving a gift, or scribbling on a piece of paper with a photo of the child pasted on it. This helps your child realize that the last day is a different kind of day and also helps him learn about expressing appreciation to his important people.

- **Make a book.** You can make a simple book to help the child remember the situation she is leaving behind. Such a book could also be a lovely going-away gift for your caregiver as well. (For guidance on making such books, see “Making Books for Your Kids” on p. 298.)

is struggling with the separation: “Is the caregiver continuing to support me and my child through this difficult adjustment period?”

Building a Relationship with Your Child’s Caregiver

One of the most critical aspects of a successful relationship between a child and a caregiver is the bond we, as parents, form with the caregiver. The more connected we feel, the more of a sense we have that we’re on the same team, pulling together for our child, the more successful that caregiver can be with our child. Here are some keys to forming a strong connection with your child’s caregiver:

- **Communicate.** Good two-way communication is essential to a positive parent-caregiver relationship. Both of you should feel free to bring up concerns, problems, or issues as well as joys and accomplishments. Each of you should feel that your perspective is being understood and valued. Having a chance to talk to your child’s caregiver at the beginning and end of each day is extremely beneficial. For those situations in which this is not possible, communication can happen through notes or regular check-ins by phone. Individual “parent conferences,” time set aside for parents and caregivers to talk without other distractions or responsibilities, also offer important opportunities for communication. These should happen at least twice a year.

- **Take care of your caregiver.** One obvious way to take care of your caregiver is by paying as much as you can afford, but money alone is not enough to compensate caregivers for what they provide to our families. Acknowledging and appreciating your caregiver’s work, caring about her life, and valuing her point of view are important elements in building a mutually respectful relationship.

- **Let them love the one they’re with.** Children need to know that we feel good about the people we’re leaving them with: “This is someone my family has embraced. This is someone they say can be trusted.” Parents need to let children know that it’s okay for them to bond with their caregivers, to depend on them, to enjoy them, and, ultimately, to love them. Ironically, part of establishing a successful child care arrangement is getting out of the way.

Yet some parents find it extremely difficult to let their child love someone else. They feel threatened when their child cares deeply for someone outside of the family, as if that love might in some way diminish their own relationship with their child. But teaching children that the world is full of nurturing people, that there are safe harbors on many shores, is an important part of opening up the world for them.⁶

The Dance of Separation

In their lives together, parents and children experience many leave-takings and many reunions. The bonds of attachment are stretched for moments as a child crawls into the other room, for hours as children skip off to child care, for days as parents leave for a weekend, and finally for months or years as children mature into young adults and move out into the world. In a lifetime of comings and goings, we explore our separateness, discover the depth of our connections, and learn to trust our love.

*My mom is inside of me everywhere I go,
even when I’m not there.*

*My mom is always in me,
mostly in my heart.*

My mom is always with me.

— ZACK MATTHEWS, GRADE 1

⁶ For more on this idea, see “Mothers As Gatekeepers” on p. 379.