

Healthy Habits: Drop-Off and Pick-Up

EASING TRANSITIONS

Transitions are difficult for children, especially saying goodbye to parents in the morning and sometimes even being interrupted in play to go home at the end of the day. Tears and clinging needn't be dreaded as signs of separation "anxiety" so much as understood as healthy and natural expressions of attachment.



Your child's school or center may offer helpful guidelines for these key moments in the day, or you may have found yourself left to trial and error. Asking your child's teacher for advice outside of school hours may be a good first step to help identify how you can foster smoother drop-off and/or pick-up routines. Your attitude (calm, warm, firm, connected!) will be the greatest support to your child. Sometimes parents don't realize that noisy and dramatic entrances or drawn-out, dramatic farewells are disruptive not only to their own children, but to the entire group.

Quite often, struggles that families are having with drop-off or pick-up can be soothed by considering the lists below and then shifting one or more of the parents' habits. Parents can use this list to self-assess or ask the child's teacher to check the list and give ideas for one or two changes to make. Remember, small do-able changes are the easiest to sustain long-term. If a proposed change just isn't do-able, pick something else:

Ideals for both drop-off and pick-up

- Bedtime same time every night
- Wake-up time at the same time each morning
- Parents leave cell phones in the car when at school
- Parents take a stress inventory and see if their own moods are making transitions more difficult
 - Practice calming activities if you find yourself frequently irritated, angry, or otherwise in distress during transitions
 - Unrushed energy, slow walking to/from parking lot
 - Parent remembers to remain observant and nonreactive
- Strategize with teacher outside of school hours for happier transitions

Morning / drop-off ideals

- Wake early enough for unrushed morning routine and commute
 - Dawdlers need time scheduled to dawdle (before or after breakfast?)
- Quiet conversation on the way to school
 - Devices, including radios, off during drives protects time to muse or chat
- Drop off on time, same time, every day
 - If you are person who tends to be late, practice shifting that habit by arriving a few minutes early
- Plan to meet a friend and walk in together
- Brief reminders about pick-up, what your child can expect at the end of the day, who will pick them up
- Ritual*, calm, and not-too-lengthy hello to teacher, goodbye to child

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Afternoon-evening / pick-up ideals

- On time, same time, every day
 - sometimes adults don't realize how upsetting is it to children when they arrive later than children are expecting them
 - it may seem counter-intuitive, but it can also be upsetting when adults arrive early for pick-up, interrupting a child's activity unexpectedly
- Calm, warm, ritual* greeting with clear, one step instructions, like: *"Hello, I'm so glad to see you! It's time to clean-up."*
- Don't take attachment for granted:
 - Have care for re-establishing connection with your child, at their pace, when you arrive
 - "Connect before you direct"
 - Parent is warm and present
 - Leave workday's concerns behind
- Don't say it unless you mean it, *"It's time to..."* and follow-through smoothly:
 - Clean up play things
 - Put on coats and outdoor shoes
 - Get your backpack
- Watch that you don't linger past the time you've said you'll go other than adjusting to child's timing
 - *"Oh, it's time to go, but I think you need a little more time to put on your boots. I can wait."* (this also curbs power struggles!)
 - Be careful not to make your child wait for adult conversations
- *"Goodbye and Thank you, Ms. Lee,"* to teacher
 - If you model a *ritual farewell to teachers consistently, your child will eventually imitate it out loud

*Designing and practicing intentional family rituals are some of the most supportive means for smoothing transitions. You might consider how consistent and predictable your "hello" and "goodbye" rituals are. It can be helpful if farewells are brief (not rushed, but short). For example, at morning drop-off, a calm and consistently paced farewell ritual will help your child accept that you are leaving when you say you are and that you will be reunited when you say you will: *"After school, Mama will pick you up and then we will have a snack on the way home. I love you. Have a good day. See you later alligator."* You might try one long hug, a kiss on each cheek, and then a quiet, *"After a while crocodile,"* as the parent departs. With practice, the parent leaves swiftly and quietly and the child fusses less and less each day. Over time, goodbyes are shorter and shorter.

So long as you have confidence in your child's school and teachers, you and your child should be able to normalize departures and reunions over a few weeks. Remember: your child experiencing sadness when saying goodbye or even falling apart when they see you at the end of the day may be a reflection of normal and healthy attachment. This can help shift your feeling of *"Oh, no, he's crying!"* to *"Yes, yes I know. I miss you when we are apart. I love you."*

If, however, your child is sensing your own uncertainty about the school, or teacher, or even the child's school readiness, then that needs to be addressed by the adults **before** your child will relax into the security of your confidence! School and program fit are very important and "school readiness" applies to children and parents.