



## STARTING CHILD CARE

### It's a Transition for Parents Too!

Sarah Merrill

As I talked with a mother, Dawn, about the past year with her infant daughter in my care, she shared how hard it was to start coming to the program: "I really didn't know you yet, and I worried that you might not take good care of Lucy. Worse, I was afraid that she might forget me." Then Dawn confessed, with some embarrassment, "Sometimes, when I smelled your scent on her clothes, I felt like she was cheating on me."

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Illustration by Melanie Hope Greenberg.



I WAS STRUCK BY THE DEEP EMOTIONS this parent's words indicated. I had not given much thought to how hard a transition beginning child care can be for a parent, and I wondered what I could have done to help ease that transition.

Although many of us understand that it's a big adjustment for families when their child begins child care, our professional preparation focuses mainly on supporting the children during this transition. Parents, especially parents of infants, like Dawn, are coping with a range of emotions while they adapt to returning to work and leaving their baby for the first time.

First-time parents are still negotiating the developmental transition of becoming a new parent, responsible for nurturing a new, entirely dependent human being. Now, they have to incorporate into that transition the task of separating from the baby during the day and leaving her in another's care. Like Dawn, parents may worry and wonder: Will my baby be OK? Will she be well cared for? Will she still love me? Can I trust these people to keep her safe?

When parents are anxious and stressed, their tension may interfere with their ability to respond to and support their child and may make their relationship with teachers a bit tense. When early childhood professionals offer parents empathy and support during this major life transition, things tend to be better for everyone involved!

Here are some ideas for helping parents and children together as they navigate the transition of entry into a child care program.

#### What programs can do

The policies and practices of high-quality programs respect and support parents' role as their child's primary caregivers. Programs can

**Create an open-door policy** through which parents may visit and call whenever they are able. This policy supports healthy parent-child

attachment and honors the parent's responsibility for ensuring the child's well-being. It is fine to explain that there are busy times of the day when staff may not be able to chat for long; however, teachers can return a call later, when they have more time to talk.

**Establish transition plans** that allow time for parents to visit the new program with their child before the start date. This gives parents and staff time to begin building relationships and allows parents to observe and ask questions. Offer families the option to gradually phase into the child care routine by extending the length of the child's day over the course of a week. Consider encouraging families to spend extra time at drop-off and pickup times during the initial weeks.

**Assign a primary caregiver** to each family so parents have a point of contact. Be aware that sometimes parents "click" with a staff member who may not be their child's primary caregiver. If possible, let this person take on the official role. If not,



encourage the budding relationship, but create communication systems between staff so they share pertinent information.

**Provide ongoing staff guidance** focused on working effectively with families, such as regular individual and team meetings, reflective supervision, and training events. Topics

may include team building, active listening, stages of parenting, working with adults, and cultural diversity.

## What caregivers can do

Teachers can make all the difference in helping families and children get off to a good start in the program. When caregivers are responsive and caring, they help parents in turn to be nurturing and responsive to their baby. Since the baby's healthy development depends on consistent nurturing care from the adults in his life, teachers are promoting healthy development for babies when they support families. Here are some effective and doable strategies to consider:

**Get to know the parents.** Greet them by name and take a few minutes for small talk about favorite TV shows, sports, or other interests. You never know what subject might create a personal connection.

**Check on them,** especially during the transition period. Calling or asking them in person, "How are

sleep, you are valuing and respecting their skills and knowledge. You are also helping the baby to feel safe and to regulate her own behavior. This makes parents' and babies' transitions from home to program much smoother.

When certain routines cannot be carried out exactly as they are at home, ask for parents' help in creating a new routine that works for both home and child care settings. For example, if regulations prohibit placing a snuggly toy in the baby's crib, try holding him with the snuggly toy next to you until you lay him down.

**Talk to parents through their child** to affirm their importance.

Imagine how comforted parents can feel when they hear you tell their child, "Here's Mommy. You're so happy to see her—you never give me that big a smile!" or "Now you can cuddle with Daddy. That will feel so good."

**Include family photos in the environment.** Frame and mount photos on the wall, create family albums for children and families to view and provide some loose photos for the children to hug and kiss.

## THINK ABOUT IT

Think about a time when you started something new (like the first day of a new job). What did it feel like, getting to know new people and new routines? How is this similar to what parents may be feeling as their child begins child care? What do you do to make parents feel welcomed? How do you reassure them in their role as a parent and ease their worries about sharing their young child with you?

## TRY IT

- Ask parents to bring in a burp cloth or small, lightweight blanket they have used with the baby and worn on their body. Tell the family that the baby will be comforted by the familiar scent on this material. Use it when you snuggle with the baby during the day.

- Attach a photo to the plastic top of the diaper wipe box and then cover it entirely with clear contact paper or packing tape. This creates a lasting image you can point to again and again.

- Follow consistent rituals at drop-off and pickup times—and throughout the day—that support babies' and parents' many ways of dealing with separation.

- Find something positive to say to each parent every day.

## Recommended resources

- Brotherson, M.J., J.A. Summers, D.A. Bruns, & L.M. Sharp. 2007. Family-centered practices: Working in partnership with families. In *Practical approaches to early childhood professional development: Evidence, strategies, and resources*, eds. P.J. Winton, J.A. McCollum, & C. Catlett, 53–80. Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE.
- Galinsky, E. 1987. *The six stages of parenthood*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books.
- Honig, A.S. 2001. *Secure relationships: Nurturing infant/toddler attachment in early care settings*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- Lerner, C., & A.L. Dombro. 2005. Sharing the care: Making decisions with the other adults in your child's life. In *Bringing up baby: Three steps to making good decisions in your child's first years*, 61–71. Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE.
- Pawl, J.H., & A.L. Dombro. 2001. *Learning and growing together with families: Partnering with parents to support young children's development*. Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE.
- Pawl, J., & M. St. John. 1998. *How you are is as important as what you do . . . in making a positive difference for infants, toddlers, and their families*. Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE.
- Powers, J. 2005. *Parent-friendly early learning tips and strategies for working well with families*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf.
- Raikes, H., & C.P. Edwards. 2009. *Extending the dance in infant and toddler caregiving: Enhancing attachment and relationships*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes; Washington, DC: NAEYC.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 1999. *Infant and toddler transitions: Training guides for the Head Start learning community*. Rockville, MD: Aspen Systems Corporation.
- ZERO TO THREE. 2008. *Caring for infants and toddlers in groups: Developmentally appropriate practice*. Washington, DC: Author.
- ZERO TO THREE. [www.zerotothree.org/parenting-survey](http://www.zerotothree.org/parenting-survey).

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you doing?" sends the message that you are thinking about them. Be aware that you may get an array of responses, from "I'm fine" to tears. Often, you won't have to do anything but simply *be* with them. Listening and empathizing shows parents you care about, value, and respect them.

**Include families' home caregiving routines in the day.** By incorporating the ways parents hold, feed, soothe, and settle their child for