

Your Personal Coach

By

Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

Our almost two-year-old just started daycare and is having a very hard time adjusting. My wife has stayed home with our daughter since she was born but, for financial reasons, she now has to go back to work. Our daughter is fine getting up and dressed and riding all the way to the daycare center, but the moment my wife tries to get her out of the car – she pitches a fit. She screams and cries so loud that my wife has taken her back home almost every day. I don't think that's a good idea, but my wife says she doesn't know what else to do even though this is keeping her from getting a job. I work nights and am not even home at the time my daughter goes to school so I feel helpless to help my wife with this problem.

-- A Dad in Need of Some Help

Dear Dad,

Beginning daycare or school can be quite upsetting for kids (and parents) but, you might be relieved to know that the kind of separation anxiety your daughter is experiencing indicates that she has formed healthy and important attachments.

Separation anxiety is particularly strong for children around the age of two. I've no doubt that your daughter is making her feelings particularly well known while being left in a new situation while Mom goes her own way. You and your wife can begin to solve this problem by first examining your own feelings.

Remember, that starting daycare is a major life transition for everyone in the family. You and your wife may be communicating your own discomfort to your daughter if, for example, your wife is feeling unhappy about having to re-enter the workforce or uncomfortable with the daycare program you've selected. If the latter is the case, make sure that you've chosen a daycare program that you feel confident about.

Repeatedly, assure your daughter that you love her and that she can trust that one of you will pick her up at the end of the day. Then always keep that promise and be on time. I realize that two-year-olds cannot communicate in the same ways that older children can, but you can make sure that you are talking with her in very positive ways about daycare.

There are a number of excellent books for kids about this very issue; many of them show children or animals coping successfully with daycare or the first day of school even though they started out being lonely or scared. I suggest that you and your wife take your daughter to the library or bookstore, pick up some of these, and read them together.

Help your daughter develop a good feeling, even excitement, about spending time with other children and her adult caregiver. Plan to take this slowly if you can. Give your daughter time to get prepared by having her mother take her to daycare and then remain with her for a day or so. This will allow your daughter to get accustomed to her new surroundings and new friends.

If possible, let your daughter go to daycare for increasing amounts of time. For example, your wife could pick her up after only an hour on the first day, two hours on the next, and so on. On these days, it might even help for her mother to stay with your

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daughter for a little bit so that she can get into the flow with the caretaker and other children. Your wife can give some warning that she will be leaving “after we color this picture” or “when this story is over.” Then, when it’s time, you wife must leave.

It’s likely that your daughter will protest and start to cry but continuing to put off the inevitable – that your wife must go to work – will not make the situation any better. In fact, it will only make it worse by reinforcing your daughter’s outburst by learning that it keeps Mom from leaving. What your daughter needs to overcome her separation anxiety is the repeated experience of staying safely at daycare and consistently being picked up at the end of the day. If your daughter has a favorite stuffed animal or blanket, make sure she brings it with her. Separation anxiety is about the fear of abandonment; these special toys can increase a child’s feelings of security and comfort.

Let your daycare caregiver know that you daughter is having a hard time – though from the sound of it, this might be hard to miss! I can assure you that your daughter is not the first child who has expressed this kind of protest and the caregiver will know lots of ways to help her make the adjustment.

Give your daughter lots of praise when you pick her up from daycare. Tell her how proud you are that she spent the day there. Ask about what she did during the day. Then listen and let her brag about all the wonderful things she made. Post her drawings on the refrigerator and give her lots of attention.

Lots of kids go through this initial problem with being away from home but soon become excited and enthusiastic about going off to daycare or school.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com, call 473-4004, or direct questions to the Outer Banks Sentinel, P.O. Box 546, Nags Head, NC 27949.

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