

What to Do when Your Child Cries at School Drop Off

By Nina V. Garcia

I couldn't get the image out of my head: my son crying on his first day of preschool, trying to wrestle himself out of his teacher's arms as I said goodbye. I reminded myself that this was to be expected, that adjusting to *anything* takes time. But as I stepped into my car, the mom guilt came into full force. I felt so bad thinking about my son upset, and even questioned whether preschool was the right decision.

It didn't help that I saw only a slight improvement over the next several days. Even getting out of the house became a challenge, as my son began to resist leaving, knowing he'd be at school that day. I found myself feeling stressed and harried, trying to juggle his emotional needs with getting to school and work on time. The guilt turned into impatience and frustration, especially when the crying didn't let up the next day or the several days after. Drop offs officially became the hardest part of the day.

When your child cries at school drop off

Maybe you can relate. Maybe you also feel guilty when your child cries at school drop off, the sound of her screaming and yelling gnawing at your head. Perhaps drop offs are so challenging that concentrating at work is all but impossible. Nothing you've tried so far has worked. You're likely feeling a whole range of emotions, from guilt to anger to complete overwhelm about how to make drop offs much smoother. Not exactly how you want to start your mornings.

1. Talk about school in a positive way

With a child resisting school even before you leave the house, you might find yourself inadvertently talking about school in a bad way. Don't. This only confirms her fears and assumptions that school *is* a place she shouldn't be. What are a few common ways you might be painting school in a negative light? Avoid saying:

- **Dreadful talk about school:** "Yay, there's no school tomorrow!" or "We *have* to get to school, no matter what!"
- **Empty threats:** "Don't cry so much or I'll take all your toys away."
- **Bribes:** "If you put on your shoes, we can get ice cream tonight when I pick you up."

A good rule of thumb is to avoid making school an issue to argue about. Instead, keep it positive or at least matter-of-fact.

2. Give your child a special item

Making that leap into the unfamiliar is difficult for anyone, more so with kids. One way to ease the transition is to give your child a special item she can keep during school. Perhaps it's her favorite bracelet, one she can hold onto when she feels scared or nervous. Or maybe it's her lovey, waiting for her at the end of the day. It can even be a special note from you that she can keep in her pocket. Having a special item, either nearby in her cubby or in her pocket, will help bring a bit of familiarity into what feels like a new and foreign place.

3. Arrive earlier than other kids

If you sense your child is overwhelmed with the morning bustle, try dropping her off a few minutes earlier. Avoid the rush of children, and instead give her a chance to settle in, chat with her teacher, and adjust before everyone else arrives. Getting to school earlier will be much easier if you wake up earlier as well. It's never easy trying to get to school and work on top when you're rushing out the house. Give yourself plenty of time to accommodate an earlier drop off. Better yet, have everything already prepared the night before so you avoid last-minute rushing. Pack things like your lunches and work bags, and have clothes ready to go.

5. Don't leave without saying goodbye

It's tempting to make a quick getaway and leave without saying goodbye. After all, she seems distracted enough, maybe even enjoying her activity—why tarnish her mood by drawing more tears? As easy as it is to dash out the door and avoid seeing her tears, don't. Your child will struggle even more at the next drop off. Rather than focusing on the activity or settling in, she'll look around and wonder whether you're going to leave without telling her again. Start a fun goodbye tradition you can do with your child. Maybe it's saying the same phrase every day, waving goodbye at the window, or kissing hands like the characters do in [The Kissing Hand](#).

6. Keep goodbyes pleasant and brief

Lingering until your child stops crying sends her mixed signals. She's told she's in safe hands, but you're also comforting her as if she's in an unpleasant situation. Instead, convey confidence by acknowledging her emotions while reassuring her she'll be fine. You might say, "I know it can feel scary to be away in a new place, but your teachers will take good care of you and make sure you have lots of fun." No one else can comfort your child better than you, but in this case, allow the teachers to assume that role. So don't come back for second snuggles or linger by the door, waving goodbye for five minutes. Don't cry alongside her as if there's no way she'll enjoy herself without you.

7. Ask the teachers how the rest of the day went

It's easy to feel guilty after drop offs, especially when the last thing you saw was your child in tears. But don't let the last scene color the rest of your day. Truth is, she probably didn't cry the rest of the day. In fact, she likely stopped crying a few minutes after you left (and the briefer and more pleasant your goodbye, the better!). At pick up time, get a report of how the rest of the day went and how your child coped. You may find that she enjoyed the rest of her day, or that she played well with others at circle time.

Conclusion

We're their parents, their world. A healthy attachment to her parents is usually the reason your child cries at school drop off. Don't feel like you didn't do a good job because she cries while others don't seem to. Instead, revel in the strong parent child connection you've built. It'll get better. Both of you will find a rhythm to your mornings. She'll learn to love and trust her caregivers. You'll feel more confident about letting go and separating also gets better with age. In time, you'll both adjust to your new normal, one with less tears and more confidence.