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What can we do to prepare our son for his first day of kindergarten?

Like all of life's milestones, the first day of kindergarten can evoke feelings of dread as well as anticipation in both parents and children. All caring parents feel some wistfulness as they send their little ones off to meet the world without having Mommy or Daddy there to guide, console, and support. Parents may experience a feeling of loss for "the good old days." In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if this isn't where the term "separation anxiety" was first used! However, to give a new kindergartner maximum support, parents need to do their very best not to convey their trepidation to their child, either in words or in demeanor.

Very seldom would I counsel parents not to be totally honest with their children, but this is one of those rare occasions when anxious parents would be well-advised to practice what their children know how to do so well — pretend. Pretend that they have no reservations or fears whatsoever, as far as the child is concerned. Those fears can be shared with other adults, out of the child's presence. If parental anxiety is severe, parents can ask themselves what they want for their child: a sense of self-confidence and independence, or fearfulness and lasting dependence on Mom and Dad for everything. Framing the situation that way should help even the most anxious parents put the long-term needs of their child first, even if it's temporarily painful.

Conversely, there are a few things parents can do to help set the new kindergarten venture off on the right foot:

- Visit the school building in the few days the school building is open prior to the beginning of classes, and walk the halls with the child. If known, designate his future classroom and locate the restrooms, cafeteria and playground. (At this point, some children will need to be reassured that it's not necessary to memorize where everything is — they will be shown again, later.) Show positive enthusiasm about the tour even if the child is reticent, but don't force the issue. If the child expresses fear, take the time to express true empathy, validating the child's feelings. Tell him or her that it's natural to feel fear before a new experience and that lots of children all over the world are also feeling a little scared at this moment because they, too, will soon be starting kindergarten.

- Beginning two or three weeks before school starts, have a special series of short talks with your child, relating positive memories of your own early school experiences. Indicate that even though he may have previously attended daycare, school is different. In

school, besides time to play, there is important work to do! Relate that all children go to school just as all parents go to work. School is a job for children. Tell him that learning to do new things can be fun, and that there will be new friends with whom he can learn. Emphasize that the other children also need to learn, so it's important to listen closely to the teacher whenever she speaks.

- During these talks, discuss rules. Tell the child that there will be rules to follow for all the children, and that rules are in place to keep children safe. Discuss how chaotic school might be if there were no rules and children were allowed to do as they pleased. Paint a picture of disorganization and emphasize that no work could be done and that children might get hurt. This may help take the "you must" aspect out of obeying school rules, helping the child who experiences a natural oppositionality.

- Let the child know that you expect him or her to follow the teacher's directions, since the teacher is the boss. A child may feel that a teacher is trying to usurp your parental power or take your place. Make it clear that at school the teacher is in charge, just as you are at home, and that you and the teacher will be allies. If you have met the teacher, speak positively of her in front of your child.

- Take advantage of the plethora of picture books and DVDs available that are designed to introduce children to the practice of going to school. Watch or read with the child, and listen to his or her feedback. Validate his feelings whether they are positive, negative, or mixed.

- Finally, plan a special family outing or dinner to take place after the first full week at school, with the new kindergartner as the honored guest. Use banners, party favors, and hats just as you would to celebrate a birthday. All in attendance should congratulate the child on his successful start to school, and indicate pride in him and the belief that he is, indeed, a capable and welcome student.

Should I go to the school and discuss my daughter's diagnosis of TS and OCD prior to the first day of class? She's entering kindergarten. All kids that age have their quirks and funny behaviors. If I announce she has TS, wouldn't that call too much attention to her tics? I don't want to burden her with a label unless it is necessary.

I would absolutely inform the teacher, school nurse and counselor of a TS and/or OCD diagnosis. It's true the teacher of kindergartners will see a wide variety of behaviors; however, only an informed teacher will be able to look beyond TS tics and their involuntary nature to understand that the child exhibiting them is not purposefully being disruptive with sounds and movements. Besides being supportive of your child's vulnerable self-esteem, and his right to be who he is, an informed teacher can be a role model of acceptance for the other students. Normally, children of this age are very accepting of one another's mannerisms, though they may take note and imitate. Teachers can help the other students understand that it is hurtful to laugh or imitate, and that part of growing up is learning to accept people as they are.

How do you know when a very young child (kindergarten or first grade) may need the services of a special education program? Are there benefits to getting help early? What if I'm jumping the gun and getting him help he doesn't really need?

Actually, it's nearly impossible to get a child help that he doesn't need. That's because the child must meet certain deficiency criteria, which differs from state to state, in order to be qualified to receive special education services. Many times, parents and educators of very young children opt to give the child a little time to mature, as some deficiencies are indeed remediated with the passing of time. This is especially true with little boys. A teacher of young children sees a wide range of maturity levels, and can be a good judge of the need for special education support in this population. If needed, there is indeed benefit in getting the special education support as early as possible. As a parent, I wouldn't be concerned unless the teacher, who sees a broad spectrum of children, expresses concerns or your child consistently experiences frustrations. Discuss the need for special education support with your child's classroom teachers. ■

