

Growing Concerns
A question and answer column with Dr. Marti Erickson
www.MomEnough.com

Question: My 3 year old daughter will be starting pre-school (Montessori) this coming September. What can I do to make the transition of moving from daycare to school easier for her? It is a 3 hour per day program after which her daycare will pick her up and she will spend the rest of the day with her daycare provider.

Answer: This is your daughter's first step into formal schooling, but it is not unlike the transitions that are going on for many children at this time of year as they move into new schools or even just a different classroom with new demands and expectations. You're wise to think ahead about how you can help your daughter get off to a good start.

For children of all ages, knowing what to expect can help ease the anxiety of a new situation. In the weeks before your daughter starts school, take time to show her the school and, if possible, introduce her to the teachers. If you know other families whose children attend the school, try to arrange a play date with another child or two so that your daughter sees a familiar face when she enters the classroom. Also, talk with her about what the new school will be like and how you've arranged for her to get to and from school. And let her know that you will be eager to visit her at school after she gets settled there.

As with children at all ages, your daughter's attitude toward school and learning will be influenced strongly by your attitude. No doubt you've chosen this preschool carefully, so that's a good beginning. Once your daughter has started school, ask her open-ended questions (not questions that can be answered with a yes or no) to encourage her to tell you about her day. Encourage her child care provider to do the same. Ask to see the projects she's doing at school and display them in a place that shows you value her work. Also, communicate regularly with your daughter's teachers about her school experience, especially her social behavior and emotional wellbeing, which are so important at any age. If your job permits, volunteer occasionally to help in the classroom or to chaperone a field trip so you get to know the teachers and children firsthand. One of the most important factors accounting for school success is the active involvement of parents. What you do in these preschool years will set the pattern for your involvement at each stage of your daughter's education.

It is to your daughter's advantage that she still will continue in her familiar childcare setting. For preschool children, stability and continuity help them maintain their feelings of security. Also, since she's already used to being away from you during the day, she probably has worked through the separation issues that challenge many young children when they first enter preschool or childcare. Nonetheless, the schedule you describe makes for a busy day for a three-year-old, moving from home to childcare to school and back home to mom and dad. Anticipate that she may get tired and cranky after a day with so many transitions -- much the way we parents feel after a day of going from one meeting to another. It will be important that you make sure she has plenty of time to just play, relax, and snuggle with you at the end of a long day. For both adults and children, it is important to create a healthy balance between structured activities and "down time." In today's busy world, that starts early in a child's life!

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