

Choose Therapy

ART & PLAY THERAPY
CHILD, ADOLESCENT & ADULT
PSYCHOTHERAPY

Show them photos of their new school

online and talk about what you see. Ask questions that are open “what activity do you think looks most fun?” Tell them what you’re excited about “I’m so excited about how big the playground is!”

Read books about nursery. When I started my son at nursery I read books like ‘George’s first day at playgroup’ but occasionally used his name and his key teachers name instead of the characters in the book so that he would learn who to talk to if he needed something.

Take them to see it and arrange play dates with other children that will be there.

Tell them who ‘their person’ is “Miss Amy is your person so if you need the potty you ask Miss Amy.” Then test them later “who do you tell if you need a wee?”

Process through play. I used a small plastic school and Peppa Pig figures to show mummy pig dropping George off and that George felt a bit wobbly. Once he’d gone through the door all his friends were waiting.

Ask questions and offer personal experience “how do you think Susie feels?” “I get nervous the first time I go somewhere, it feels like frogs in my tummy.”

Practice putting on uniform & the journey. I’d do this once or twice in the months leading up and then maybe a day or **Offer solutions for anxious feelings.** Give attention to bodily sensations like butterflies and wobbly legs and discuss how you can manage the feelings. They’re totally normal and it shows our bodies are working properly but we can do things like run around, jump up and down or shake out wobbles out.



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Create a routine for their morning. Will they eat breakfast at home or nursery? Will you get dressed and brush teeth first or have some play time and then get dressed? Create a visual guide so you can show them how many stages there are before drop off.

Adjust your schedule in preparation. If your child normally eats and then has a nap you may need to give them something to eat on pickup so they can sleep as soon as they get home and then eat lunch after.

Discuss ways we can connect when we're apart. Maybe you can have a friendship bracelet or matching stickers. Explain that these things connect you and you can think of each other whenever you want to. I told my little boy that we live inside each other's hearts and can send love waves to one another. (There're some beautiful books such as "the kissing hand" and "the invisible string")

On the big day and after Consider someone else dropping them off, this may be easier for you both and gives you the chance to say goodbye at home in a calm and familiar environment.

Give them plenty of time to get ready and choices that are actually theirs. Saying things like "shall we put your shoes on?" Sets you up to fail, if they say "no" you've got nowhere to go. Instead ask them something like "which shoe shall we put on first?" "Shall we put them on fast or slow?"

Be clear about the boundaries and use simple, clear language. "When we to nursery, you will go inside with Miss Amy and I will go to work. My work is my job and nursery is your job."

Give them some seriously focused attention even if it's just 10 minutes. 10 minutes of play together is worth far more than an hour where you're also doing other things.

Validate their feelings. Saying things like "don't cry." or "you're ok." Is disrespectful of their experience. Instead connect with their emotions "I can see you're sad to leave me and that's really difficult." "I wonder if you're excited but also nervous and that's a lot of big feelings!" You don't need to try and fix them, just acknowledge them and that they're challenging.

When it comes to crossing the threshold of the nursery ask them if they want to jump in like a frog or stomp like a dinosaur?

Trust your nursery. No one wants a screaming child and no decent nursery will let your child suffer. Let them do their job but follow your gut too. Sometimes, our kids just aren't ready and perhaps if after a couple of weeks your child isn't able to settle and stay for the allocated hours, you may need to consider a smaller setting like childminders or nanny share.

When you collect them, avoid closed questions like "how was your day" and try open questions like "what was your favourite thing today?" "Who did you play with?" I also recommend avoiding statements that can be misinterpreted. It's lovely to say "I missed you" but some children are very susceptible to taking on adult feelings and this kind of statement can make them worry about us. Instead just reflect how happy you are to see them. The sentiment is the same.

Take the pressure off at home. Now isn't the time to be really rigid about tidying up or saying please and thank you. Turn a blind eye to some of it and recognise what an enormous transition this is for them. It's very normal for things like hitting to begin around now and the best thing to do is to role model how to manage someone being aggressive "I can see you're going to hit me, I'm sorry you're cross but I'm going to move away you keep my body safe." Their 'transitional behaviour' can last for months and often they settle just before the first school break. This is a much bigger adjustment for them than you.

For older children starting at primary school or senior school, a lot of the suggestions I've made still apply but can be adapted to be age appropriate. The only addition is that you can role play making friends and the type of questions you can ask someone to get conversation started and to make a connection.

About me

I am a toddler mum, adult & adolescent counsellor and psychotherapist and art and play therapist working with children from 4+. I work in schools and privately and am experienced with neurodiversity and behavioural disorders. I really like soft serve ice cream and biscuits.

Finally, I hope this guide has been helpful, for some parents delaying a start or using a nanny or childminders isn't an option and I wanted to acknowledge how difficult this is for caregivers and children. I have observed many toddlers struggle to settle and the distress this causes. BUT - I have also seen these children come through the other side. There are many ways to support them at home if this is your situation. If you need tips or support on a specific issue or think your child would benefit from therapy, you can find further information on my website www.choose-therapy.co.uk

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