

Caring for the Little Ones

by Karen Miller



The Parent Who Lingers

How do you help the lingering parent — the mother who cannot pull herself away in the morning and seems not to be satisfied until the child cries?

Jami Kiss, who teaches two year olds at Early Explorations in San Clemente, California, described a recent situation you have probably experienced as well. There was a new family with a two year old and a four year old. The mother came to the two year old's room first. He looked around at all the bright toys and other children with obvious interest, but still hung onto his mother and cried when she was about to leave.

Jami reassured the mother that he would likely stop crying quickly once she left. The mother said to the child, "I'm going to take your sister to her room now, and then I'll come back here and say good-bye." As soon as she left, the little guy started playing and stopped crying. However, ten minutes later, when she reappeared to say good-bye, he cried again. She lingered longer. Each time he stopped crying and started playing, she said, "I'm leaving now," and he resumed his crying. When she finally left, it took much longer to comfort him.

The parent may need comforting.

Jami recognizes that often separation is more difficult for the parent than for the child. It's a milestone of growing up. The parent recognizes that this baby is no longer exclusively hers — that he has interests in the wider world. And who

knows — there may be more going on for that parent than you know about. Jami says often she will meet the parent at the door, take her things, and help her get settled. Then she'll walk the parent out and give her a hug and say, "It's going to be all right. You'll feel better soon when you get used to the new routine. Your little one will be fine and will have a good time here. I'll call."

We do tell the parent to say good-bye to the child and not sneak out. Usually this situation is with new children and resolves itself quickly when both parent and child feel comfortable with the new experience.

A gradual adjustment is easier.

Perhaps you can talk about this before the child starts to attend. Tell the parent that parting can be as difficult for parents as for children, so she doesn't feel foolish. Invite the parent to attend *with* the child the first couple of times. She should feel free to play with the toys and the other children with her child. This allows the child to think, "Gee, even my mom thinks this is a neat place." The first time she might leave for ten minutes to have a cup of coffee and come back. The next day she could leave for a half hour and return. Increase the intervals until both child and parent are comfortable with the full time of separation.

This does two things. It lets the child experience that "mommy comes back," and it allows the parent to feel comfortable with you and confident in your program as she sees how you handle things

and experiences in the routine of the day. She also feels respected. While not all parents can do this, it really does help. (It works for infants and younger toddlers, too.)

Are there feelings of competition?

But occasionally a parent will linger and watch as the child is happily engaged and involved with the other children, and seem to actually *try* to make the child sad and cry before she will leave — and it goes on for months. Maybe this is just their little ritual. But there may be an unspoken feeling of competition with the teacher. The parent may be reassuring herself that her baby really does love her most and miss her when she is not present. Try to reassure this parent of how important she is to the child. Help the parent notice the child's delight when he sees her at pick-up time.

Create parting rituals.

Perhaps you can help this parent/child pair create a more upbeat ritual for partings. Rituals are good! They help people get through hard times. You might say, "I've noticed that you two have kind of a hard time parting in the morning. That's natural. Saying good-bye to someone you love is difficult. How about estab-

lishing a little ritual or routine to do each morning? Maybe after you get her coat off and talk to me about any messages you have, you could pick her up, give her a big hug and one twirl around and a kiss on the nose, and then hand her to me. I'll go to the window, and you can wave at her again, and we'll watch you get in the car."

What do you do? Please share ways you have helped this type of parent we all have seen!

Open Discussion

Brenda Fischer of Stevens Point, Wisconsin, describes how difficult it is to get several toddlers dressed during the winter months to go outside. "It seems like by the time they get outside it's time to come back in again!" She'd like to hear about any techniques that seem to smooth this transition.

What's Wrong With This Picture?

This large infant room is a sea of *baby traps* and has almost no floor space for free exploration and play. In the first place, the group size is way too large for the relaxed and intimate caregiving we associate with quality. Every one of the full-sized cribs has a wind-up mobile in it, indicating that children are expected to spend time in their cribs even when they are not asleep or falling asleep. The line up of swings and walkers are where babies are put when they are awake, keeping them effectively out of the way

of other babies. They also keep babies from using their muscles, practicing new skills, and enjoying the social feeling of being part of a group. It is an environment that is designed for adult convenience rather than active learning for babies.

Good Ideas

Rubber Stamps and Playdough

Give toddlers rubber stamps to press into playdough. They enjoy discovering the marks in the playdough and seeing the repeated patterns when they pound.

Partitions for Non-Walkers

Joanne Barney, director of the FDIC Child Development Center in Washington, DC, designed these simple partitions to fence off an area of the play space in the infant room for young infants. About two feet high, they are easy for staff to step over and also make a good *cruising rail* for older infants who are not yet walking. The panels of clear plexiglass make the rest of the room visible to the *tummy babies* and are easy to decorate and change as well.

Plastic Bottles Make Great Toys

Collect an assortment of large plastic bottles with handles. Older infants and young toddlers love to haul them around, stick things inside, and dump things out again. This enticing collection is displayed in a way to invite children to help

themselves in a play space at the South Bay Child Development Center in Redondo Beach, California. Note: Remove caps if they are small enough for a child to choke on.

A Cozy Nook

A crib mattress, pillows, and some old couch cushions leaned against the wall make an inviting quiet corner in the toddler room at the Child Development Lab of the College of the Mainland in Texas City, Texas.

How to Respond

People who work with infants and toddlers are very busy and may not have a typewriter or computer right at hand. But I really want to hear from you! So feel free to make your responses very informal and scribble them on any handy piece of paper . . . well, *almost* any piece.

Send comments, questions, feedback, giggles, good ideas, as well as any photos you'd like to share with other readers to:

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