

*Creating a Network of People Who Work with Infants and Toddlers*

# Caring for the Little Ones

by Karen Miller



Dear Reader,

We've been talking a lot about transitions and helping infants and parents feel comfortable and secure in our surroundings. This month, **Heather Wenig**, who is the head teacher of twos at Tippecanoe County Child Care, Inc. in Lafayette, Indiana, responds to last November's open discussion question about helping the parent who cannot seem to leave in the morning.

The other end of the day causes concern as well. Next to biting, the most frequent question people ask me in workshops is "What does it mean when the child cries and doesn't want to go home at the end of the day?" So, I begin that discussion in this issue as well, and would welcome your thoughts.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Karen Miller".

## When Parents Have a Hard Time Separating

by Heather Wenig

I have discovered a non-threatening way to help a parent who is having trouble separating from his/her child.

You begin by explaining to all the parents that you would like to capitalize on toddlers' ritualistic behavior for the purpose of relieving separation stress. We've all experienced this ritualism, whether it's a toddler refusing to drink from a red cup when he usually uses a green one or gobbling up a sandwich cut in quarters but refusing one cut diagonally. With so many things in a toddler's life being out of his/her control and unpredictable, it's no wonder many of them cling to what is familiar and secure!

By working to develop a comfortable separation ritual, you can add predictability to a stressful situation. Some parents will want to come up with — or may have already unwittingly established — a separation ritual; for example, waving at the window until mom is in her car, or using funny words for hugs and kisses. Others may want to use one of the rituals listed below that you can suggest. Ask the parent to come up with a specific routine and communicate it to you so you can support it.

**At Home/At School.** Make a poster-board display with a picture of a house on one side and a picture of your cen-

ter or home on the other. Use Velcro or hooks to hang photos of the children on each side. As the parents bring children in, they can help their children find their photo and move it from "At Home" to "At School."

**Traveling Photos.** Take a photo of each child and cover it with clear contact paper. Use a clothespin or Velcro to attach each child's photo to his/her cubby (or just keep the photo inside the cubby). As parents bring their children, the child can find his or her photo and give it to mom or dad to take to work with them. Parents then return the photo to the child's cubby when they come to pick their child up at the end of the day.

**Story Time.** Make a collection of books for this ritual and store them in a box or basket you and the children have decorated. These books should be short because chances are mom and dad will be rushed at the end of the day. Each morning, parents can let their child choose a book that the parent can read to them when they pick them up — a promise of some special time together. After the child has chosen a book, the parent will put it in a "special waiting place" (also a decorated box or basket) until they come to take their child home. (Books are not taken home but read to the child in the classroom, creating another pleasant association with being there.)

## They Don't Want to Go Home

Little Joey, eight months, has been in your program for three weeks. He seems to be adjusting well and hardly cries at all when his daddy drops him off in the morning. Furthermore, he seems perfectly happy during the day, eats and sleeps well, and enjoys exploring on the floor and being with the other children when he's awake. Just one thing. When daddy appears at 5:30 to pick him up, his face contorts and he cries, almost for the first time of the day. What's happening? What do you say?

We know one thing — how the parent feels. Worried. Embarrassed. "Isn't he happy here?" "Isn't he happy to see me?" "Does he love the caregiver more than me?" "What will she think of me as a parent?" And, of course, we often make the parent feel worse by saying something like, "How strange. Really, he's been fine and hasn't cried all day."

One explanation might be what I call the "Miss America Syndrome." Think about the beauty contestant. All week long at the competition, she has held herself together and has been perfect. She has maintained perfect posture, has smiled brilliantly, kept her hair lovely, and has answered every question well. Finally, one after another of her companions leaves, she is pronounced the winner, and the crown is placed on her head.

What happens then? She cries! She slumps. She stumbles. The crown is on her head. They can't take it away. She's safe. She can let go and, in the release of tension, the tears flow. This is how a competent baby feels when the parent arrives. The parent is the prize — the crown. The baby, who has held it together well all day, using considerable emotional energy and skill, now is safe and can let the tension out. If you can explain it this way to parents, they may feel a lot better about the whole thing. "This shows just how important you are to Joey!"

Most caregivers tell me that this behavior disappears once the infant has been in the program awhile and is used to the routine.

If you find this response with an older child — a toddler or two year old — it might be the Miss America Syndrome, or it could be "autonomy" kicking in. The child could be oppositional, crying, running away from the parent, just to assert herself. Toddlers don't like transitions — they don't like to stop doing what they are doing, especially if it is fun. You might remind the parent that it was the same child who cried in the morning. Heather Wenig's "Story Time" activity suggestion on the previous page might be a good "get reconnected" activity for this situation.

Once the parent feels respected by you, soon she is able to say, "Aren't we fortunate? She loves it here so much that she cries and doesn't want to go home. It's a bit of a hassle, but I'm glad she feels so comfortable here."

Of course, if your gut tells you that the child is crying out of fear and that you might have a child abuse situation on your hands, pay attention to your instinct. Watch how the parent holds the child, and the child's posture with the parent. Does he stiffen? Is there an intensity to the cry that is different from tension release or normal toddler opposition? Don't ignore your suspicions. Discuss it with your supervisor. Remember, you must report suspicion of abuse, and it is not your job to investigate.

Keep in mind, with all of this, that your most important functions are to keep the child safe, and to strengthen the bond between the parent and the child. In the vast majority of cases, end-of-the-day crying simply is reestablishing the parent/child bond, and your supportive words — to both the child and parent — can help everyone rejoice at the reunion.

## Open Discussion — Staff Children

**Tonja Deviney** supervises a small child care center serving children six weeks through three years in Glenside, Pennsylvania. She is expecting a baby and is planning to include her child in her program. Knowing this is a common situation in child care centers, she would like some insights from you. How does it affect you as a supervisor when your own baby is in the program? How do you make it work for the child who must learn to share the parent if the parent is a caregiver of the other children as well and working in close proximity? Or in and out of the room all the time if the parent is purely a supervisor?

How do you make it work? Please send your comments to the address at the end of the column.

### Why Didn't I Think of That?

#### ✓ Clean-Up Tip

**Sonia A. Zec** at the child care center of State University of New York in Farmingdale uses a squeegee, the kind designed to clean car windshields, for quick clean up of finger-painting tables. It works like a charm!

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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*Karen Miller is author of **Ages and Stages, Things to Do with Toddlers and Twos, More Things to Do with Toddlers and Twos, The Outside Play and Learning Book, and her new book, The Crisis Manual for Early Childhood Teachers (Gryphon House).***