



SESAME STREET PARENTS

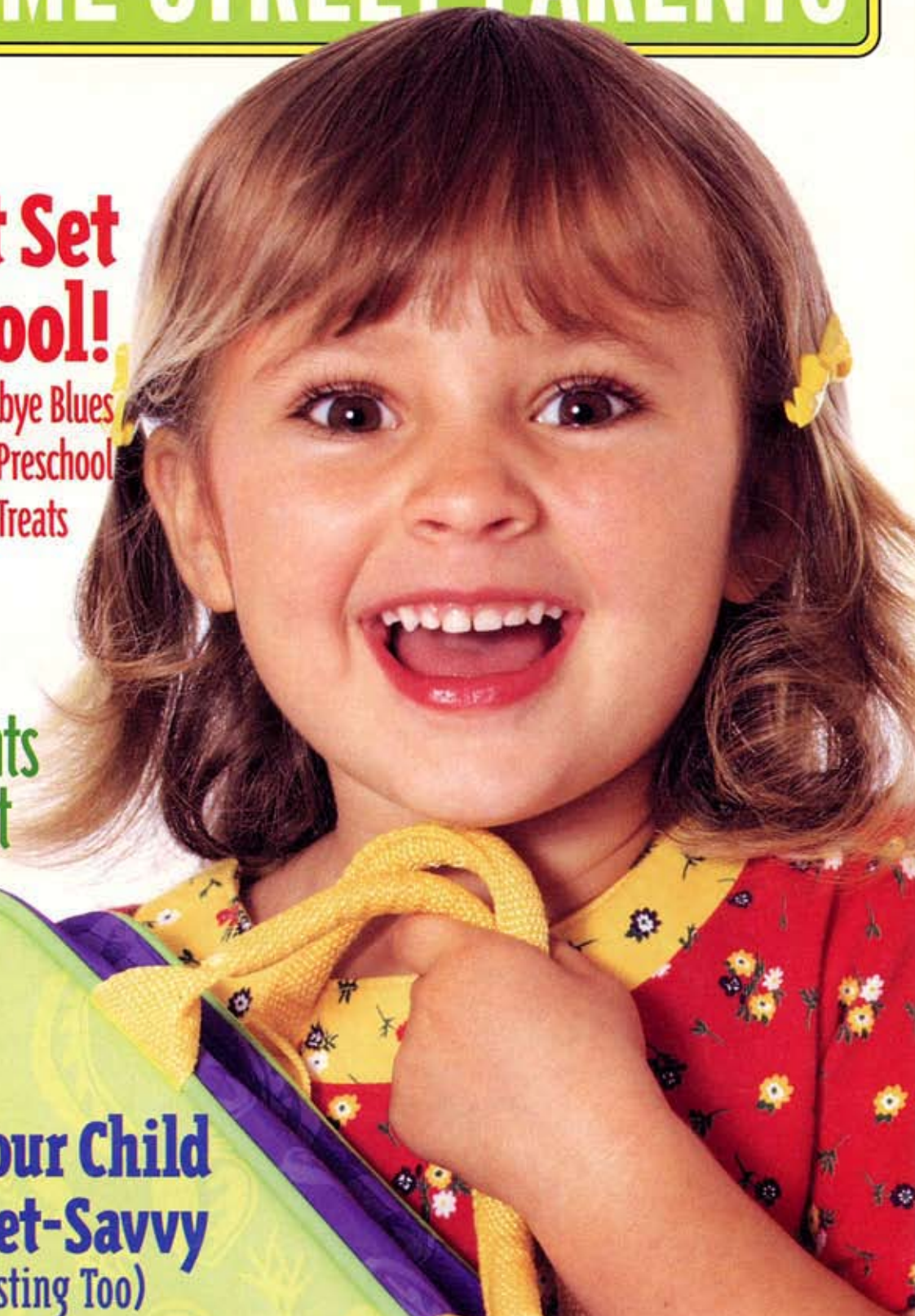


Get Set for School!

- Soothing the Bye-bye Blues
- Sneak Preview of Preschool
- Lovin' Lunch Box Treats

Two Words
Smart Parents
Never Forget

Raising Your Child
to Be Street-Savvy
(and Trusting Too)





WHEN SUZANNE WEIDLE OF FAIRVIEW, PENNSYLVANIA, took her then three-year-old son, Johnny, to his first day of preschool, the transition went remarkably well. Johnny happily got out of the car and marched into the school. The next day, however, she had to pry his arms from around her waist to get him to let go. On each school day that followed, Weidle drove her son to school with a knot in her stomach, worrying about the struggle she inevitably faced. One morning the situation hit rock bottom: As Weidle walked around the car to open the door, Johnny wiggled out of his car seat and bolted into the parking lot. She quickly caught him, but it was grueling to convince the youngster to go inside that day. For the next few weeks, until the three-year-old adjusted to the

says Dr. Vrana. "Being out of sight or reach of the person who takes care of them—usually Mom or Dad—causes a young child the most distress." And it's tough for a parent too, because you may have your own pangs of pain about saying good-bye to your child. Yet you also know that learning to separate is an inevitable and important developmental task for children to master. So how can you help your child and yourself ease your way into better bye-byes? Seeing separation through your child's eyes is a good start.

Better Bye-byes

Great ways to calm the back-to-school jitters (yours as well as your child's)

separation, the young mother woke up suffering from just as much anxiety about the morning drop-off as her son did.

Weidle was experiencing what most parents of preschoolers confront sooner or later: the pain of separation. In fact, separation is the most frequent cause of anxiety in preschool children, according to a research survey conducted by Scott Vrana, Ph.D., associate professor of psychology and director of the Purdue Anxiety Clinic at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana.

"Preschoolers fear a variety of things, like the dark and certain animals, but nothing else affects as many children as separation,"



Think About What's Behind the Fear

To work toward resolving separation anxiety, you must first understand where it comes from. Generally, children latch on to predictable events and people. The sense of security this gives them helps them to happily explore new surroundings. But if they think that Mom or Dad or their other regular caregiver may soon be hitting the road, anxiety takes hold. "This reaction first happens when a baby is between six and nine months old," says Dr. Vrana. "From

By Caren Osten Gerszberg Photographs by Linda Farwell

then on, he fears nothing more than being separated from his parents." By age two a child is able to keep an image of you in his mind during your absence. This eases his anxiety, but he has yet to overcome an inner fear of his separateness from you, a worry about whether he can make it on his own.

"By age three a child begins to formulate her sense of self," explains James C. Stroud, Ph.D., associate professor of early-childhood education and child psychology at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. Now she is finding out that she can function independently while you're away. "A four- or five-year-old has an even more developed self-concept," adds Dr. Stroud. "She can face new

ing late to pick up your child, for instance, may increase his anxiety. Another mistake is to lie to a child ("I'm just going to the bathroom and will be right back") or to bring him to preschool and to leave unannounced. If you want to test the waters by stepping out for a few minutes, tell your child that you'll be back in a bit and then do come back. "Sneaking out can really upset a child, and the resulting distrust may unnecessarily prolong the separation process," explains Nancy Balaban, Ed.D., codirector of the Infant and Parent Development and Early Intervention Program at the Bank Street Graduate School of Education in New York City.

Equally important, avoid giving in to your child's unhappiness.

"When a child shows anxiety—which is natural—he's telling you that you're the most important person to him and that he wants you there," says Claire Lerner, a child-development specialist at Zero to Three: National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families in Washington, D.C. "If you respond by apologizing, prolonging the leave-taking unnecessarily, or taking him home, you risk reinforcing the notion that he is safe only with you, and you may make it more difficult for him to separate." Give him time, and things should improve. If the anxiety seems particularly severe or lasts more than several weeks, however, consider looking further into the situation [see "When a Child Needs More Help," on page 52].

In the meantime, be prepared: The adjustment can be painful for the parent too. These strategies, however, will help you *and* your child weather the storm:

Prepare your preschooler. Talk freely about the start of school. Say something like "Next week you'll be going to a school, where there will be a lot of other kids to play with." If possible, set up a meeting with the teacher ahead of time so that your child is familiar with the person who will be greeting her on a regular basis. Lerner suggests an outing to the school's playground or a picnic on the grounds to build good memories before the big day.

Also, call the preschool director and find out if there will be a meeting at which you can get to know other parents and arrange a couple of pre-preschool playdates. When four-year-old Kyle Larson of Milwaukee started preschool last September, he had already played with some of his future classmates. "Once he had," says his mother, Amy, "I knew he would feel more comfortable separating from me."

Validate your child's feelings. If your child displays obvious sadness when you leave him at school, tell him that it's all right to feel that way. This shows him that you understand what he's going through. "If you say, 'I know it's hard to be apart from me,' he learns that it's OK to miss someone," comments Dr. Balaban. And as for your own distress: "It's perfectly normal for parents to feel anxious, and it's fine to tell your child that you'll miss him too."

Go with the flow, but set limits. If you know that your child is the type who will cry for a few minutes and then be fine, explain to



When talking to the teacher, remember that your youngster is listening. Positive words tell your child that you're leaving her in good hands.

situations better because by now she has had some experience of being left with other people."

No matter the age, a child who fears separation will go to great lengths to prolong a good-bye or to avoid it altogether. For instance, a two- or three-year-old will cry, throw himself on the floor, or cling to you for dear life. A four- or five-year-old is better able to express himself verbally, so although he may cry, he is more likely to withdraw or make heart-wrenching pleas such as "Daddy, don't leave me!" or "Please take me with you!" Dr. Stroud adds that some children struggling with separation anxiety may experience mood swings or regress in behavior, such as toilet skills.

How Not to Make It Worse

"Although parents typically don't cause separation anxiety," says Dr. Vrana, "their reactions play a pivotal role." Consistently arriv-

