

TIPS TO HELP YOUR CHILD SETTLE INTO CHILDCARE

Susannah shares her experience of her little one's first day at a childcare center and offers tips to help the settling in process. We also hear some transition advice from center staff



Having had a lockdown baby with all the restrictions Covid brought, our son didn't have the chance to get to know our family and friends, and we didn't have the chance to meet other mums and babies in the normal mummy and me groups. I knew that a childcare center environment would give him something I couldn't - the social interaction with other children his age - but I was still anxious about how he would cope with starting at the center.

First Day Fear

The big (dreaded) day arrived. I felt excited and scared at the same time, while he didn't have a clue what was about to happen. When I rang the bell, his key worker came out wearing a mask, and when I handed my baby over he instantly started to cry. Actually, it was a piercing scream. During that moment guilt took over and I hated myself for leaving him.

I decided to go shopping to take my mind off it. It felt strange because it was my first time in a year without him. After forty minutes the center called asking me to go and get him because he was very distressed. Not a great start - he didn't even make the first hour.

A Change in Tactics

Thankfully, the second day was better; I made sure that this time we set off with his favourite blanket and a dummy - even though he normally only had a dummy for sleeping - these were desperate times and I needed all the help I could get! Success, he made it through the full hour - phew!

Over the next two weeks we started to extend his settling in sessions before his 'official' first day. We had a few protests, but according to the center he calmed down quickly after I left. By the time he joined full time, we both felt much calmer and happier.

My Top Tips for Settling In:

1. Communication is key. Voice your concerns and don't be afraid to ask questions – childcare center staff are there and happy to answer any questions and queries you might have.
2. Be reasonable with your expectations. It's never going to be perfect, but with good communication, the help of an experienced center team and a good relationship with your key worker, you can create a smooth transition together.
3. Be strong and be prepared for tears. Children often get upset, especially to start with, but that isn't necessary a sign that something is wrong - it's more likely their way of communicating that they don't want you to leave.
Separation anxiety and fear of strangers usually starts around 8 - 9 months, which is not ideal considering that's when many families start to think about starting their child in a center.
4. Have trust in the center's expertise. Staff have been through this transition many times. They know what they're doing and they want you and your baby to succeed - listen to their advice and work with them to find what works for your little one.
5. Go with your gut & keep smiling! Your child will pick up on your emotions, so if you appear happy and calm this will help to reassure them. Difficult as it may be, remember that you've chosen the nursery knowing that it will help to broaden your little one's exposure to new experiences and skills, which in turn, will have a positive impact on their overall wellbeing and development.

It's been six months since my son started at the center and now he doesn't even look at me when I wave goodbye. He loves it and it's a real joy to see him so happy and settled, loving, learning and seeing his friends, especially when I remember how hard it was at the beginning.

Tips and Recommendations from Staff:

- Don't rush your settling in sessions. Schedule them around a month and half before your official start date. Begin with a short session, maybe an hour for the first time and gradually build up to a full session.
- Routine and structure helps. Having mealtimes and activities at set times helps children learn what to expect and when. Ask your nursery what they do and when so that you can mirror this at home to help your child to feel confident and secure.
- Talk about your child's interests. Give your nursery as much information as you can about your child, including their likes and dislikes so they can have their favourite toys out to help make them feel happy and comfortable. If they have a comforter or a special toy, bring it with them.
- Keep in touch. Parents are always welcome to call and check in on how your child's doing. Most centers will be happy for parents to call as many times as you like, but do try not to worry too much.