Saying Good-Bye

1. Separation in the toddler years

Why are good-byes so difficult? Toddlers can have a hard time separating from parents, and parents can have their own separation anxiety! Parents and toddlers who are very connected may have a hard time letting go. For toddlers, being apart from their “secure base” can be very scary, and they will protest saying good-bye. Parents can have an especially hard time leaving when their child is so upset. And if parents feel guilty about leaving or are anxious about child care arrangements, good-byes can be even harder!

2. Here are some tips for a “good” good-bye:

- **Prepare yourself.** If you are upset about saying good-bye at drop-off time, you may communicate that feeling to your child without meaning to. Get ready to convey confidence in your child’s ability to meet the challenge of being away from you.

- **Prepare your child.** Prepare in the days and weeks leading up to a child’s first separation with stories on the theme, play with dolls, and a visit to the child care site or provider. Let your child know that today is a child care day or that you will be leaving “in 5 minutes” (set a timer so she can watch the time counting down). Let your child know when you will be back in a way that your toddler understands: “I’ll be home to kiss you goodnight,” or, “I’ll see you after you eat lunch and finish your nap.”

- **Plan to stay a little while.** Staying for 10–15 minutes can help ease the transition. When you see that your child is comfortable, it is time to leave. If he is having a harder time getting engaged, you may want to ask your child’s teacher to stay with your child as you say good-bye so that when you leave, he can turn to another caring adult for support.

- **Keep your tone positive and upbeat.** Children pick up on the reactions of the trusted adults in their lives. So try not to look worried or sad, and don’t linger too long. Say a quick, upbeat good-bye, ensuring that your words, tone of voice, and facial expression all send the same message to your child: She will be okay. Try not to run back in the classroom if you hear your child crying, as upsetting as this can be. If you are worried, call later to check in.

- **Think about creating a special good-bye routine.** For example, you can give your child a kiss on the palm to “hold” all day long. Or, the two of you can sing a special song together before you leave. Good-bye routines are comforting to children and help them understand and prepare for what will happen next. Don’t sneak out, as this can cause additional stress for young children.

- **Use a comforting object** (see handout on Transitional Objects). Have your child’s favorite stuffed animal or a soft blanket available. Other ways to comfort a child while you are apart is to leave a family photo in his cubby or pocket or to start drawing a picture with your child before you leave and promise to finish drawing it when you return.