

SCHOOL ADMISSIONS TIP SHEET \* THE SIBLING IQ DEBATE

# New York family

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## Her Greatest Role

Marcia Gay Harden  
On Balancing  
Motherhood  
And Movies

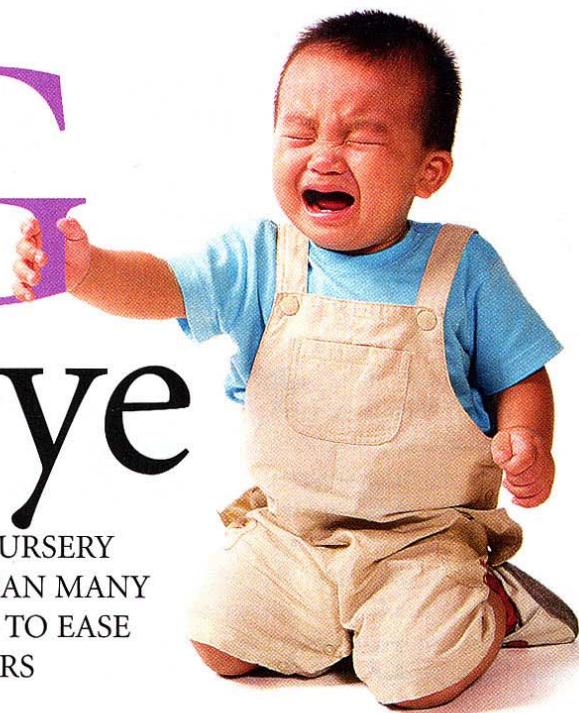
*Marcia Gay Harden  
and her children  
Hudson, Eulala  
and Julitta*

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CHILDREN'S CLASSES \* FALL FOLIAGE \* RUDE TWEENS

# The LONG Goodbye

BY ELICIA BROWN



THE FIRST TIME A CHILD HEADS OFF TO NURSERY SCHOOL (OR EVEN KINDERGARTEN) CAN MEAN MANY TEARFUL SEND-OFFS, BUT THERE ARE WAYS TO EASE HIS SEPARATION ANXIETY—AND YOURS

Oh, how I loved nursery school. During the early weeks, I sipped coffee from my insulated mug, whispered with the other parents and tapped my feet to the funky, soft tunes emanating from the classroom radio. And I watched. I watched as Talia, my 2-1/2-year-old daughter, shyly questioned her teachers, sang about Mr. Morning Sun and lavished loving attention to collage after collage.

And then one day, the teachers quietly slipped us all the news: adults could leave. I was shocked. Did “could” mean “should?” Yes, in fact, it did.

Talia didn’t look back as she loped over to the “mini-gym” with her classmates and teachers. I tried not to cry. But once I was safely out of her sight, I leaned against the corridor and sobbed. The milestone felt as shocking as when Talia wobbled on two legs for the first time. My baby had moved on.

Of course, we were lucky. Not every child separates as easily as Talia. Some wail for months when their parents leave. Others develop stomachaches. I knew one 3-year-old girl who allowed her nanny to leave in the morning only after she proffered the beloved pacifier.

I first encountered the phrase “separation policy” during the application process for preschool. It quickly entered my lexicon. We heard it on every school tour, at every school interview. “The Manhattan Directory of Private Nursery Schools,” by Victoria Goldman, deems the subject so significant that it examines the separation process of every school listed in its book, along with categories like class size.

Many believe that this step of independence, this first separation from the one-on-one attention of a loving adult, must be handled with extreme care. According to Dr. Chris Lucas, the director of the NYU Child Study Center, separation issues account for as much as one third of all anxiety in young children. For a child in the midst of it, “there might be

a feeling of loss, of dread and a feeling of terror,” says Lucas.

For a 2- or 3-year-old, this is often “the first time the child is being left in an unfamiliar place,” says Wendy Levey, the director of Epiphany Community Nursery School on the Upper East Side. “The child feels a little abandoned. It’s very unsettling for her.”

School policies on separation in New York City run the gamut. However, although some institutions permit parents or other caregivers to drop their children off on the very first day, most preschools adhere to a program of gradual separation. During the phase-in period, the length of the school day is shorter. The class is often split into smaller groups, with each section assigned to a separate time slot; a loving adult is expected to be on the premises for every child. Some schools allow adults to stay in the room. Others encourage them to head out for a cup of coffee right away, either at a nearby lounge or at a neighborhood venue.

Some parents seem especially ill-suited to making this adjustment. At Epiphany, Levey says, “There are always some high-anxiety moms who insist on staying and sometimes even hide around the corner from the classroom. But eventually everyone settles down.”

A child’s nature plays a large role in how he or she responds to the challenge of separation at any age. “There are children who just seem to be temperamentally sensitive to separation anxiety,” says Jean Kunhardt, director of Soho Parenting, which offers counseling and support groups for parents. “Other children jump in two feet first and ask questions later. Still others are slow to warm up from the sidelines, but once they see the lay of the land, they are fine.”

Stress can also surface later. That’s what happened to

Bennett Abeles in nursery school. A social, chatty child, he separated easily—at first. But after the initial honeymoon period, his mother Lori remembers, “He hit a wall. Reality sunk in.”

Parents help their children adjust by conveying their confidence in the situation. So, when a teacher suggests it’s time for adults to leave, parents should not prolong goodbyes, according to experts in early childhood. Kunhardt says that when the adults leave, it should be like the pain that accompanies the quick tug of ripping off a Band-Aid.

Suzie Newman, the director of the nursery school at Rodeph Sholom, also suggests visiting the school with your child shortly before it starts, and talking about school a week or so beforehand. However, she warns, “The less editorializing, the better. Don’t say, ‘You’ll have lots of friends.’ You don’t know that. And if the child has one or two friends, he may not feel that is good enough.”

Experts suggest that children might want to bring a familiar toy with them to school, or a backpack chosen with their parents. And although a parent might also be trembling inwardly, try not to let it show. “Children can read your gut,” says Jean Mandelbaum, the nursery school director of All Souls School on the Upper East Side. “They know your body language.”

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By kindergarten, many children suffer less severe separation anxiety. “A child of 4 or 5 has a much more mature view of the world,” says NYU’s Lucas. “They have a better sense of time and the permanence of relationships.” Kindergarten students better understand that although their loving adult may be out of sight, he or she is not forever out of commission.

Still, some parents may be surprised that 5-year-olds can encounter difficulty with separation. Lori Abeles, whose son Bennett recently completed kindergarten at P.S. 9’s Gifted and Talented program on the Upper West Side, says that Bennett faced “a few teary mornings last fall, and some of his classmates continued to struggle into October.”

Even though most of the focus is on the child during separation, it’s not uncommon for the process to provoke apprehension in parents too, of course. Parents whose children are struggling with the separation issue would be wise to consider whether they themselves are doing or feeling anything that might be exacerbating the situation. Separation anxiety is one of the issues that is worth taking seriously.

“In some way, it will color many experiences of separation all the way down the line,” says Mandelbaum, “Separation will continue forever. For some people, a haircut is a separation.”

This fall, I return to preschool. This time I’ll be watching my son Joel as he acquaints himself with the world apart from home. And once again, I’m sure I’ll be wincing when it comes time to yank that Band-Aid off. ♦