**How to Enhance Your Child(ren)'s Montessori School Experiences**

***Reduced Separation Anxiety***

***An Increased Sense of Belonging at School***

***Used for Older Toddler Programs (age 2-3), Children’s House (age 3-6), Lower Elementary School Programs (suitable for students age 6-8)***

When I was four years old I cried at every kindergarten drop-off for 6 months.  I was determined to not have the same experience for my daughter Darcy.

I discovered there are many things that you can do at home to help your child(ren) thrive at school.

Until I went looking for tools I never realised that every parenting issue I've had can be worked through with short stints of either directed or undirected time with my child. Included in this article are tools designed for separation anxiety and feeling a sense of belonging at school.

These 25 ideas that I've developed and discovered for two to eight year olds may be different to others that you have tried, a couple counterintuitive even, but if you're tired of struggling you might like to try something new.

Even if you’re not struggling, this article will still be of help to your family. It will help your child(ren) fit solidly into the class routine, encourage children to be closer to their teachers and classmates, feel closer to you, your partner, and any carers they may have. It will help a child to be more in-tune with their own needs about school.

Developed especially for Montessori children starting and Older Toddler Program (age 2-3), starting Children’s House (3-6) or Lower Elementary School Programs (6-8 year olds), changing classrooms, for when they are not wanting to go to school more often, after school holidays or illness or simply to reconnect with your child(ren) around school issues at any time of the year.

These ideas are designed to assist your child(ren) to:

* Attach well to their teachers;
* Feel empowered by reducing any fear about school;
* Feel emotionally and physically connected to their parents/ carers so it’s easier for them to say goodbye;
* Say goodbye with smiles instead of cries; and
* Gain the information they need to be confident throughout their time at school.

These tools are from the perspective and experience of a Montessori parent who has read extensively and follows the methodology of Doctors of Psychology Dr. Marion Rose and Dr. Aletha Solter.

I have used all these tools with my four year old daughter who attends Melbourne Montessori School (MMS) throughout her young life.  Since experiencing amazing results, I have also started sharing them with my friends, who are using them with great success. My daughter has never cried at drop off in two different classrooms, although she has understandably hesitated on occasion.   I have taken families from considering leaving the school to children entering classrooms with ease within two days of using just three of my techniques. (They chose numbers 3, 10 and 13 below).

Some of these ideas may seem a bit young for Younger Elementary children but I find nearly all of them still have relevance. For example, the use of dolls/toys in idea 10 is simply a role play game which is often used in your child’s class and in the adult workplace. With older children instead of dolls you could role play with humans. The child directs the parent(s) what to say and do and the parents follow. As this would then also become a power reversal game (see idea 18) it could create laughter for all participating.

Humans love choice and this article provides it.  This document has a summary list of all the tools I recommend at the end. Plus there is a larger document available on my website [www.expandingminds.com.au](http://www.expandingminds.com.au) called ‘Tools in Practice’ that you can look through to find a full explanation of each tool that interests you.

Trust your instincts and start with the ones you find the easiest to use. Ideally at least one from each list. Your child(ren) will sense your comfort with them and will be more likely to respond positively. As a parent of one child I’ve found these work for us. If you have multiple children you made find different tools work for each of them. These tools may also spark ideas in you, and you may then develop ones that are unique to your family and your specific needs.

**Detailed Information Provision**

1. Provide as much information as you can about what will happen at school; what, when, where, why and how
2. Watch the 5 minute introductory video on the MMS website homepage by Gay Wales (Melbourne Montessori School principal). Or use the one your school may have. Use YouTube for more Montessori videos. Read all school correspondence to your child(ren) if they are interested
3. Make your own “Starting Pre-school” or “Starting Children’s House” book with your child. Use whatever vernacular your school or family use. Make ”I wonder….” statements speculating about what will happen at school if you don’t know some parts and empower the child(ren) with as much choice as you feel comfortable with
4. Take your child to watch other children being dropped off/ picked up (before they experience it themselves) and have them watch it again if they are hesitant during the term. If starting Younger Elementary, watch the children being picked up at the gate instead of the classroom door
5. Tell your child why you believe it’s important they go to kindergarten/school and tell them what you, their siblings and your partner will be doing while they are there
6. Buy or borrow fiction books about first school experiences
7. Send your child to school with familiar things, rather than rushing out to buy a new school bag/ clothes/ lunchbox/ shoes. Dress them in comfortable, well-fitting clothes

**Teacher Attachment**

1. Obtain a photo of your classroom teacher, assistant and extra-curricular teachers and learn their names
2. Chat casually about what you know or don’t know about your teacher/ assistant/ others that will be with your children to help your child attach to them
3. Use dolls or other toys to represent key people to help your child role play experiences at school prior to starting or during the school year
4. Set up a simple Montessori home school with jobs on a low bookshelf
5. Practice with the items your child will bring and use at school
6. Consider offering a security object to be left in the bag at school or use other ways to remind your child of home and you while at school
7. Do not ask direct questions of your child after school about what happened at school

**Enhancing Child/Carer Bonds**

1. Emotionally and physically connect with your child(ren) upon waking up before getting ready
2. Play separation games such as hide and seek and chase
3. Be playful and intentionally make mistakes about things that your child might have problems with at school. Do this with a big smile on your face
4. Play power reversal games. These also have a great ability to have children become more agreeable afterwards
5. Introduce 5-15 minutes regular special time each day/week with each child. As much as you can manage. It will be remembered for decades if it is done regularly no matter how long or often it is
6. Listen to your children’s disappointment, frustration and fears when they are crying, hesitant, angry, whingeing, sulking, saying they don’t like school or do not want to go to school.  Tell them you hear them and repeat what you hear them saying with empathy. Do not invalidate their emotions. Even though often triggering for us, they are all valid emotions and methods of expression for children. If you cannot listen anymore in that moment tell them this and the reason why. Then tell them when you will be able to listen again. “I will make time to listen to you upset after school today”. Your child(ren) are less likely to cry at the classroom door if you can do this for them
7. Try not to do too many activities after school (at least initially). Instead use this time to reconnect with your child(ren)
8. Let your children play at school after class time if they want to with you or other child(ren)
9. Experiment with slightly different drop off times within eg the 15 minute window of school drop off and try not to be late at pickup
10. Know as many of the job and activity names, children’s names, and as much of the classroom routine as you can
11. Discuss your feelings about dropping your child(ren) off and any negative school experiences you had when you were young with another adult