

To say Diana Upp has mixed feelings about her daughter Mirielle, 2, starting preschool would be an understatement.

Upp will soon return to work after being a stay-at-home mom – a prospect that is exciting, but it brings with it anxiety about how Mirielle will adjust to her new routine. Letting go will be a challenge, as much for Upp as for her daughter.

Preparing for the first day of preschool can be a frightening prospect for parents and children, but knowing what to expect – and finding the right school – can ease the transition from home to classroom.

Upp has been getting ready by interviewing and visiting child care facilities. She struggled to find just the right fit for Mirielle, who has some development and language delays and is deaf in one ear.

“She’s very smart, but she’s not yet walking,” Upp says. “We’ve actually found a day care that will be very accommodating and will keep her in a younger class so she won’t get run over.”

Upp’s concerns about Mirielle’s medical needs may add to her fears, but it is not uncommon for parents to feel anxious about that first drop off.

Debbie Button, director of the Summerville location of Gateway Academy, tries to make

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parents and children feel at ease.

“I get down to the child’s level,” Button says. “I greet and communicate with the child.”

Button said taking both the parent and child to the classroom is helpful. Teachers ask the child to join in with activities, while parents get a few moments to tour the school.

“Ninety percent of the time, the children

are already playing,” before parents are done, Button says.

Mount Pleasant resident Tara Daniher says her children, Lola, 6, and Beck, 4, had different attitudes about starting preschool. Both were around age 2, though Lola was a little older than her brother.

“It was mixed emotions,” says Daniher. “I was excited for her to meet new friends but it was hard. I am a working parent, so preschool is necessary. Lola is more outgoing. She didn’t have a hard time at all. She was excited.”

But Beck’s start was a little rocky.

“He cried his whole first half a year,” says Daniher. “The teacher suggested that I drop him off, tell him I love him and tell him I would be back to get him – and then get out of there.”

Ultimately, that consistent method of quick, no-nonsense departures paid off. Beck is well adjusted and happy at his school.

“He loves it now,” Daniher says.

As part of the transition, Daniher sent in a blanket or teddy bear to serve as a comfort item for Beck during the day. She also found that the transition was sometimes made easier if her husband took Beck to school and she stayed out of the picture when it came time for the emotional separation.

"Give it time," Daniher says. "The most important thing is to stick with it and be firm about it. Be consistent with it."

Button says parents should visit the school with their child, several times if necessary, before the child's first day. She also recommends half days initially, if either the parent or the child feels anxious.

"It is a transition," says Button. "When they start to cry, it's OK. That's why I'm here and why my teachers are here."

As with Beck, many children prefer a special blanket or toy to provide a little extra security.

"Having that special lovey – if they need that to ease the transition, let them have it," says Debbie Williams, Gateway Academy's regional director. "The teacher can tuck it away when they are engaged in class. It's a bridge to getting them comfortable."

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Button said having a picture of the child's parents can also help.

Upp is getting Minielle ready for the school's routine by structuring her day around a similar schedule for naps and activities. And even though she feels good about her school choice, she still worries.

"I'm really nervous," Upp says. "Not knowing what happens every minute of her day – how long she napped, what she ate, if her poop looked weird, which I know moms think about. I don't know how I am going to handle that first day of leaving her."

Williams said those fears can be overcome, with time, through good communication between parents and teachers.

"One of the keys is developing a relationship of trust with the parent," Williams says.

Williams has distraught parents wait in the lobby for a few minutes so they can see first-hand that their child is adjusting. She will also e-mail a photo of the child to parents so they can see that all is well.

Upp admits she might need a little extra help when the first day of preschool arrives.

"It's very intimidating to know you have to trust other people to love your child like you do," she says. "My biggest fear is that I drop her off and she gets ignored for six hours. I am almost sure that won't happen, but it's a fear."

Daniher says her son's story may help others facing the first day jitters, serving as a source of encouragement that the anxiety will pass.

"It just takes time," she says. "Kids are ready when they are ready."

### To make the transition easier:

- Visit the school in advance and show your child the classroom.
- Start with several half-days, if possible, before transitioning to a full day at school.
- Allow your child to bring a comfort object such as a blanket or stuffed animal.
- Say a quick good-bye and tell your child you will be back after work.
- Try to pick up your child at a consistent time. Call the school if you will be late so teachers can let your child know.
- Address concerns with the teacher or director. Make sure the school is a good fit for your family and that communication flows freely between home and the school.

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