

First Day at School

Next week is the first day of school for many 4 and 5 year olds. It is both an exciting and anxious filled time for many parents and children. The first day at school is such a symbolic moment in the developing life of any little child. It symbolises a significant step away from the influence of a child's family toward the influence of the 'big bad world out there'.

Many parents can therefore feel anxious about how their child will cope with these forces and influences – particularly if it is their first child. The sight of little tots going to school with the huge bag on their backs holding the hands of a parent is such an emotive picture that captures the essence of life.

For these reasons the first day of school can be such emotional moments for mother or father and child because on these days one hears the distant echoes of so many other life transitions. Every family has to go through these deeply symbolic transitions in life such as communions, funerals, marriages, christenings, etc. These are times when windows into the mystery of life are opened and people in families have to redefine who they are. The first day of school is the first of these and every parent senses therefore the huge significance of this first step.

When a mother drops her little boy or girl at school, on that first day, she is excited, anxious, and often tearful. She remembers her own first day at school; she feels how transient life is; she realises that her relationship with her child is changing and will never quite be the same again; she feels the sensation of loss and letting go; she remembers her own parents who may have passed away; she wants time to stand still and feels the relentless tide of time; she looks at her little child and wants to protect him/her from the 'big/bad world; she feels helpless that she cannot.

It is not only these feelings of loss that the parent feels but also the excitement of life, the sense of new possibilities; she joins in with her child's enthusiasm and imagination; she fast forwards to her child's wedding day and senses that this step is the first of many; she feels a sense of pride in her self as a mother; she knows she has done well. So, though tears may well up in the eyes as she sees her little child against the background of a huge school, she knows she has done well to guide her to this point.

The child has a mixture of many feelings from excitement to trepidation. I was going to say that the child has no sense of the significance of the first day at school in their life but realised quickly that this is not the case because as adults most of us remember this first day. So, for the child, the significance is not lost upon them. How the child experiences this day will depend on their temperament and what it symbolises within their family.

If the child is the youngest of many, for example, the day may be a long-awaited graduation to being a big girl/boy where he/she achieves the status of his/her older siblings and is encouraged by them. If it is an only or first born child it may hold more anxiety for it is more of an unknown. The child in this instance is breaking new ground. For the distractible child the significance of the day may not hit him or her until she is sitting at her desk at school. For the anxious child the days leading up to it

may be worrisome and uncertain as s(he) watches her parents for signals as to what is going on.

For parents of children who may be anxious, clingy, or unhappy about this whole enterprise the thing to remember is that what he or she has to now endure is essentially good. While it may feel traumatic to the child it is not, in the true sense of the word, a traumatic event. In time the child will, as you know, like every other child, discover her competence and capability.

For the clingy child it will also be important to distinguish between genuine distress and manipulation. A child can, at times, behave in a very distressed way as an attempt to take control of her situation and hold onto a sense of power over what happens to him or her. This is to be distinguished between the distress of a child that is genuinely afraid and unsure. Parents have to be both strong and sensitive in handling these situations and learn the difference between anxiety that needs to be soothed and manipulation that needs to be handled with confidence. Easier said than done, I know.

These are great days. It is only the cold-hearted who look at little children heading off for their first day without feeling affected by how much it symbolises about the fragility, beauty, and brevity of life.

If you are a parent you have a real right to be proud of this graduation, which will be the first of so many. But it will always remain as the most pure. The innocence of the child is a disposition toward life that we dearly love and an attitude we all, as parents, long to reawaken.