Q:

 My 3 year old daughter is starting preschool in April. I have been fortunate enough to stay at home with her but am rejoining the workforce next month. This will be her first time being away from any familiar surroundings and my husband and I are really concerned about her reaction when we drop her off. What should we do to prepare our daughter (and ourselves!) for this big change?

-An anxious mom

A:

Dear Anxious mom,

 You and your husband are already doing a great job preparing for this transition just by asking for information on how to help your daughter. Separation anxiety is a very common response for children when encountering a big change, and it can present in different ways depending on the child. At our preschool site, we are witness to a variety of reactions from the children on their first day of school. These can range from tears to tantrums to instant engagement in their new setting with a casual good-bye to their parents. Sometimes parents who are expecting their children to struggle with separating on their first day are quite surprised when their child is the one needing prompting to say good-bye! No matter the reaction, here are some ideas on how to help prepare a child for their transition to school:

 If permitted, take the child to visit the school site prior to starting. This way, they can become familiar with their new environment, check out the playground and meet their teachers before the first day, which is likely to be overwhelming.

Read your child books (i.e.: I am too Absolutely Small for School by Lauren Child) about starting school as a way to help them process the anxiety or fear they may be feeling. This could also give you an opportunity to share any stories of what your first day at preschool/elementary school was like and what you did that helped improve your experience.

Allow your child to choose an object from home to take with them to school with the understanding that it stays in their backpack or cubby. Most children feel comforted in knowing that a little piece of home is with them throughout the day. Sometimes parents or caregivers have made small photo albums with pictures of loved ones, including pets.

Have a consistent schedule of who is picking your child up and tell them who it will be when you drop them off. Predictability goes a long way with helping children feel less anxious.

 While these tips will hopefully help prepare your child for their big day, keep in mind that you may also experience some separation anxiety. If possible, try to stay calm because this will also help your child stay calm. We know that children observe their caregivers closely and she will be looking to you and your husband as a source of comfort. I would also encourage you to follow the teacher’s cue. Sometimes parents have a harder time saying good-bye and will want to stay for a long time. This can make the separation even more difficult for a child. If the teacher is politely encouraging you to make your exit, say good-bye to your child and let the teacher take over. Remember, they are skilled at what they do and nine times out of ten, a crying child will calm within moments of their parents leaving. If you have any follow up questions, please feel free to email me at lgbrennan@wecarechildren.org.