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## Many lessons fill children's first year of school

"My daughter started her second week of preschool today and threw a kicking, screaming tantrum when dad dropped her off."

"Since my son started school, he does not listen to me, and is using words he never heard at home."

"My child is happy and helpful at home, why do her teachers label her as moody and uncooperative?"

As disturbing and worrisome as these behaviors seem, they are common and developmentally normal.

For many parents and children, this first outside-the-home, independent experience goes smoothly. But for others, the road to starting school is rocky.

Why do some children have trouble in new settings while others take everything in stride? Children are born with characteristics (they have nothing to do with parenting skills) that will determine how they will react to changes in their environment. Which child do you have?

The "easy" child likes new experiences and is rarely anxious. A "slow to warm up" child, is shy and hesitates when confronted with new experiences and has difficulty separating from parents, but, with time and support, adjusts to new people and situations. The "difficult" child, by nature, is intense, negative, and prone to temper tantrums and behavior problems.

When school is a new experience, your child's ability to understand and adapt influences his behavior and performance. The teacher is a stranger, playmates are new, and the consistency of a classroom schedule that forced him to start and stop activities may be unfamiliar. Assertive and aggressive playmates can be frightening, and new activities and expectations can be challenging. Many children find they are exhausted and frustrated, but lack the ability to discuss

their feelings. These situations can lead to a meltdown and total loss of control, for even the easiest of children.

Understanding why tantrums and difficult behavior occurs frequently prevents them. See that youngsters have regular schedules, eat properly, and are well rested. If your preschooler displays frustration with school, rethink the situation.

Too often parents ignore the difficulties encountered by preschoolers viewing them as so much less important than the daily issues facing mom and dad. Not true. Playground bullies present as big a threat to youngsters as difficult bosses and troublesome coworkers do to adults. A child's inability to explain his problems frequently leads to high levels of anxiety followed by temper tantrums. Talking to your child about their new environment to ensure that it is safe and supportive helps to reduce childhood worries and troublesome behaviors. When necessary help her find words to communicate feelings.

When tantrums do occur, and every child has them, remain calm. Anger and shouting increase tension, and the increased anxiety makes further tantrums more likely. Whenever possible, try distracting the child. Move on to a new activity like reading or playing a game, without appearing to react to the tantrum. Some mild tantrums should be ignored entirely while others coupled with biting, throwing things, or hitting require a direct response. Strategies include firmly holding the child, or a short time-out.

Children grow and learn by exploring and testing their surroundings. For many, schools offer the first opportunity to observe the behavior of other children and teacher's responses. In many cases, they find the new ideas, good or bad, stimulating and exciting. It is natural to try out new words or ideas at home. Parents should view this as exploration, not as oppositional behavior, but as normal development, and should be prepared to set limits when the conduct is unacceptable.

If behavioral concerns persist, call your pediatrician to make certain there is no intervening illness and to get recommendations for further intervention or assistance.

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