Back to School: Holding Onto Our Kids When Facing Separation
Patti Drobot, September, 2010

Fall has arrived. School is in. Once again begins a season that for many parents is fraught with getting children to school on time, packing healthy lunches, getting them to actually eat the healthy lunches, homework, and bedtime routines. It's possible your child might not be happy about it. For many parents it may be a time when young children have difficulty separating. A child is crying and clinging at the classroom door, unable to make the transition form home to school. For other children it may be less obvious; the vague "I don't want to go to school" or "Can I stay home with you?" may be the sign that separation is difficult. What is a parent to do? It might help parents to understand that for young children, this can be part of normal development. So often in my private practice, I help parents discern what is frustrating and inconvenient for them but may be part of normal development for their child. We often make the mistake of seeing children as small adults and become frustrated at what seems like the easy task of spending a day at school. But when you are young, sensitive, or prone to worry, it's sometimes not so easy.

As a parent, there is a lot you can do to make this transition easier. Mornings can be tricky. Your child has been separated from you for several hours during sleep and now there is that short amount of time before they will be leaving you again for school all day. Connecting with your child during this time is key and can make all the difference. With all that has to happen to get out the door on time, this may seem like a difficult task. It need not take long however and the benefits can be profound.

Greet your child first in the morning. Let them know how delighted you are to see them, how you checked on them in the night. Dr. Gordon Neufeld calls this 'collecting our children' and states how important this is for deepening attachment. How we collect our children depends on the child. For me, I cuddle my children or ruffle their hair, taking a few moments to let them know how special they are to me. And most challenging of all, preserve the connection even when you've already told them 3 times to get their socks and shoes on. I recall a morning not long ago when I was

frustrated and grouchy. My daughter said to me …" Mommy, it's hard to leave you for the day when we're not friends." Indeed, going into the challenges of the day are far easier when you are connected with the ones you love. The same is true for spouses.

Also key in this transition phase is what Dr. Gordon Neufeld calls "bridging the divide". When it is time to say good-bye, let your child know how much you are looking forward to seeing them at the end of the day (or at lunch time if you can swing it). Talk about the cookies you are planning to bake with them later, the story you look forward to reading them at bedtime, the soccer game you want to watch with them later. This helps them hang on to you and puts the focus on the return rather than the separation.

Giving your child something they can hold onto can also help; a locket, note, scarf or a belonging of yours. A wonderful book is "*The Invisible String*" by Patrice Karst. This children's book illustrates the heart connection we all hold with those we love, even when we can't be with them physically. I read this to my daughter 2 years ago and as a ritual, we still run an invisible string from my heart to hers every time we part for the day. And remember, taking the time to connect and bridging the divide is not just for your little ones. I make sure that as my 13 year old heads off to school each day, I have made some form of connection, focusing on what we will do later together, and letting him know I delight in his existence even when, and especially when, he is not so delightful.

Connecting in the morning, focusing on uniting again, and giving your kids something to hold onto during the day can go along way to strengthening attachment and decreasing separation problems.