

## **Separation Can be Scary**

By Patti Drobot

Lately, I have had a number of parents coming to see me because their child is having difficulties separating for the school day. These kids are generally 5 or 6 years old and the parents are distraught. "It doesn't feel right to have my child dragged out of my arms crying hysterically." It doesn't feel right because it isn't right and yet all too often, parents are afraid to trust their instincts.

I recall a close friend in this struggle years ago when her daughter had trouble entering the classroom at the start of the day and saying good-bye to mom. The teacher told the child that Pippi Long Stocking, Harry Potter and Anne of Green Gables all managed to get by without their parents and she would too. Her alarm skyrocketed and the school administrator told my friend she was not allowed to come into the school to say good-bye to her daughter at the beginning of each school day. Coming home at lunch was also thought to contribute to the problem and more peer interaction was recommended. An anxiety disorder was suggested and therapy recommended. This mother would have none of it and did what she knew was in the best interest of her daughter. She continued to walk her daughter to class to say good-bye and put the focus on their return by letting her daughter know they would see each other at lunch. She also bridged the distance by giving her daughter a locket of hers to hang on to during the day. The school staff disapproved but she felt she knew best. Her daughter is now 12 years old, a leader in her community and happy to go to school.

The daughter recently commented on the time in her life when it was hard to leave her mom. One of her significant memories was when one day, the classroom aide got down to the child's

eye level and said, "It's okay to be scared. It's okay it miss your mom." For this little girl, those words were her comfort and she never forgot them. The principal recently commented on how much this girl had "blossomed" which was really about her development – something that happens quite naturally when we cultivate deep attachments and provide emotional safety for our children.

Parents are too often being told that their children need to "self-regulate" their emotions. Behavior management techniques aimed at stopping emotions such as fear and frustration are being recommended for children as young as 5 or 6. Children this young are often being taught to change their thoughts in order to control their emotions. The funny thing about development is that it can't be taught. Gordon Neufeld has a wonderful expression: "We don't need to learn to grow up. We need to *feel* to grow up." In other words, children need to have their emotions – all of them. There is no need to push or panic or teach "self-regulation" which is all the buzz these days.

In young children, too much separation is alarming. Do we need to hand them a self-soothing technique to try and make their fears go away? What message are we giving? I tell parents that for many children in Kindergarten, 6 hours is too long to be away from those to whom they are most attached and that it is normal for children to be scared and nervous when they are young. It is quite "normal" for young children to not yet be able to "regulate" their emotions. We need to be careful as a culture not to pathologize separation anxiety in children at 5 or 6 and expect them to behave like small adults.

To quote Gordon Neufeld, "*Children should live unconsciously*". It is their right. As a culture, this all too often seems to be forgotten.