



# Tape Puts Everything Back Together

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Editors' Note: As young children learn more about themselves and the world around them, they often experience awe, joy, frustration, sadness, and more. Big feelings like these show up every day in preschool classrooms as children interact with others and explore new concepts and environments. Helping children learn to recognize and manage these feelings is an important part of social and emotional education. This article reminds us that patient, caring

attention from their teachers, supported by communication with families and caregivers, makes it easier for children to deal with powerful feelings.

Every day, before our Threes class has outdoor playtime, the 10 children, my assistant teacher, and I hold hands in a circle. We “take it apart” by dropping our hands, then “put it back together” by rejoining them—our circle reestablished, all of us put back together again.

*Take it apart.*

*Put it back together.*

*Take it apart.*

*Put it back together.*

In the life of a 3-year-old, things come apart every single day, several times a day. Block towers tumble down, knees are skinned, crayons are broken. Things come apart, and we—the children and the teachers—try to put them back together as best we can.

Today, Jacob is coming apart.

It's about 10 weeks into the school year. Jacob stands at the door of our classroom, his 3-year-old body rooted firmly in the determination not to enter.

We have seen this before. Last year, when Jacob first started school in the Twos class, it took him many weeks to separate from his parents. He was tentative and worried, slow to warm up to teachers and classmates. Knowing that each child's separation journey is a unique one, his teachers were able to give him the time he needed to adjust to the new world of the classroom. After a few weeks of his dad staying with him during the phase-in process, Jacob was ready to be on his own. Jacob was ready to play.

When he started in the Threes this year, Jacob's parents anticipated a repeat of his difficult process. It was a new class, with new classmates and new teachers. When his parents expressed their concerns during a home visit just before school started, we assured them that Jacob would be given the time he needed to adjust.



Jacob's mom and dad accompanied him to school for the first two days, waiting for protests and tears that . . . never came. It seemed Jacob was comfortable at school now, comfortable giving a hug and saying goodbye to his mom or dad. He loved the sand table, the easel, and making pretend playdough cookies.

Until one chilly November morning when, after being home with a stomach bug for three days, Jacob returned with the newfound conviction that *no, no, no, he wouldn't go to school today*. This small break in his routine seemed to upend the little boy who had grown used to running into the classroom with a smile.

On his first day back after being sick, Jacob clings to the leg of his caregiver, Casey, as she balances Jacob's baby sister Nora

on one hip. I assure Casey that I will take care of Jacob, and that I will email his parents later that day to let them know how he is doing after she leaves. Jacob cries. He flails. He wails. Casey gives him a hug and leaves the classroom with a glance and a smile.

I walk over to Jacob and put my hand on his shoulder. "I'll sit with you while you cry," I tell him. He sinks into the big blue pillow in the book area and leans against me.

"Casey will be back after storytime," I say. He continues to cry, his gaze fixed on the closed classroom door. "You're sad that Casey left," I say. "You're mad, too." Jacob sniffles, then wails once more.

For the next two days, Jacob cries. He cries when he arrives at the classroom. He cries as he dictates words to me for a letter: "Come back, Mommy. Come back, Daddy. I want you now." He cries as we read books about going away and coming back. He cries as his classmates offer their words, hugs, and gentle pats on the back. While his crying always stops after five minutes or so, it seems there is no one, there is nothing that might offer Jacob comfort.

I get the tape.

For 3-year-old children, tape is a source of endless delight. Tape provides opportunities for development in fine motor skills, problem-solving, critical thinking, and hand–eye coordination. And in our classroom, it supports literacy and creative expression in *tape stories*, as children dictate words about the tape creations they have assembled.

With tape, children use their imaginations and are challenged physically and cognitively. But for Jacob, tape is also the answer to his sorrow. Tape helps him put himself back together.

Our big tape dispenser holds four different colors. Jacob glances at the dispenser, then after a moment chooses green, his favorite. He pulls a long strip, snips it with scissors, and attaches it first to his sleeve, then to the art table where he is sitting. He looks down at the tape, pleased that somehow he has become part of this tape story. He pulls another strip, then another. Soon, after much hard work, focus, and planning, Jacob has taped himself to the table. He sits there, smiling, until snack time, when he pulls the tape off and happily helps himself to crackers and apple slices.

At the end of the day, I wonder: might tomorrow be an easier entry for Jacob? Might he run in, once again, ready to play?

The next day, at morning drop off, Jacob is crying again. Casey gives him a hug and leaves with Nora, blowing a kiss before closing the door. Jacob sinks to the floor, tears streaming down his face.

I say, "I'll sit with you, Jacob." He looks at me and sniffs twice. Then he stands with a sigh and slowly, purposefully, ambles over to the art table.

This time, Jacob picks up the tape dispenser and brings it to Amelia, the assistant teacher, who is sitting by the snail tank in the science center. He sits next to the snail tank, places the tape dispenser on the floor, then pulls a long, long strip of green tape, attaching one end to his sleeve and the other to Amelia's. I watch as he continues his tape story, pulling, twisting, and applying the tape in a concerted effort to secure himself to his kind, smiling teacher.

"You are working hard, Jacob," I say. "You are working hard with the tape."

Amelia's sleeve is tethered to his own. Jacob looks at it, then looks at me.

"You were sad, Jacob," I say. "And now how are you feeling?"

Jacob pauses. His big brown eyes are smiling, even as the rest of his demeanor is serious, focused, reflective.

"It changed," says Jacob. "I'm happy."

He pulls another long green strip and wraps it around his tummy. He grins.

Sometimes, tape puts everything back together.

Photographs: courtesy of the author

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