

## OTHER OPINION

# What Kindergarten Can Do In 10 Months

KAREN A. ZOTT

Dear journal: It is Sept. 1. Today my son goes to kindergarten. I wonder if I can maintain my composure when the bus comes to pick him up. I cried at orientation, I cried on visiting day, and I had tears streaming down my face every day this summer as I passed his school on the way to the grocery store. I have nightmares of chasing after the bus screaming, "Don't take my baby!"

I have tried to analyze why mothers like me are so traumatized by sending their children off to kindergarten. My guess is the experience tells me not only that my baby is getting older, but so am I. The baby remains only in photo books and my memories. Today I am releasing my son into an unknown but exciting world.

The bus comes to pick him up. His excitement is contagious. My sadness is temporarily forgotten. The bus door opens. I think of grabbing him before he ascends the stairs, because this bus driver looks too young to be taking my baby away. Before I can, he has found a seat next to friends and is waving out the window. The bus pulls away. I spend the rest of the afternoon wondering how five years passed by so quickly.

He gets off the bus. I almost miss meeting

him. They say the bus comes at 3:30, but it actually comes at 3:20. I am sure the bus driver thinks I am an insensitive mother who cannot get to the bus on time to meet her child. Thank goodness he was not taken back to the school, where the principal also would find out how insensitive I am. My son hands me his backpack and says, "I gotta go tell my friends about school." Not a little hurt, I tell myself that kindergarten did this. Kindergarten transformed him into a boy who shares his adventures with his friends first, his mother later.

Two and a half hours later, he comes home for dinner. I interrogate him. I find out that he has had a "really fun day!" He learned so much, he says. Then he adds, "My teacher is SO nice! She is also

SO smart!" Be still, my heart; obviously I will have to work hard to compete for my son's affection. And it is just a matter of time before he finds out his mommy is not as smart as the teacher. I will be headed toward psychiatric care once he tells me, "Mommy, my teacher does not yell like you do."

At bedtime, we follow our usual routine of reading a book. He has been requesting "Franklin Goes to School" for several weeks now, so I pull this out. "No, Mommy," he says. "We read this book in school today." Be still, my heart!

The next day, I pick up my son from his after-school program. He seems a bit down, and

I wonder if he does not like the after-school program. When questioned, he assures me that both the after-school program and school are fine. So I take the kid out for some ice cream to cheer him up. While we sit there, he says in his most mournful voice, "My teacher gave me a timeout today."

Several thoughts run through my head: Maybe I won't have to compete with this woman after all; perhaps she is even meaner than the mommy is! However, I have never ever seen him this forlorn about ME giving him a timeout. Upon further questioning, he sadly tells me the details of his offense justifying a timeout. About a second later, he regains his beautiful wide grin on his face and says, "The timeout clock is really cool, Mommy. I had so much fun watching my time tick by."

Remind me to tell this teacher at conference time to lose the cool clock and find a really boring one.

As the year progresses, so does my son. He now reads to me and signs his own thank-you notes. He has informed me that crabs feed on the legs of starfish, but that is OK since starfish can grow those legs back at any time. He wants me to know all about fruit bats. It becomes a time in which I seriously consider investing in a set of encyclopedias if only to separate truth from fiction.

Thanks to his art teacher, he was able to identify specific paintings at the National Gallery of Art. He can identify dollar bills in most denominations and he knows precisely how many of each is in his piggy bank. His

gym teacher has made him a nutrition expert. He reminds me that if I eat my broccoli, I will be big and strong.



DEAN ROHRER

One has to sit in the classroom for just an hour to see how exceptional his teacher is. She and those who help her take 40-plus children, learn their names, learn their strengths and learn their idiosyncrasies. Each child is then directed onto a path of learning based on those qualities. Amazingly, this job is done with enthusiasm and cheerfulness daily.

It is now the end of the school year, and I wonder how one begins to thank the adults who have had such an impact on my child's life. I scan through the isles of greeting cards and I do not find one that expresses the depth



of my appreciation. Perhaps real appreciation will come years later when the child comes back as an adult, filled with a love of learning, and simply says to the teacher, "Thank you."

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