

BOOKBAG

Required Reading for the Starting-School Set

By Mary Anne Duggan

It wasn't until my ninth year of teaching that my daughter Taylor started "big school"—kindergarten. As Taylor crossed the doorway into her new life, I spun around to teach a class of third and fourth graders. But something stopped me. It was Taylor's death grip on my left leg.

"Mommy," I heard as I looked down, "don't go."

"Taylor, I have to go to my own class," I said, trying to unclench her hands from my damp-from-tears leg. This drama was replayed daily for two weeks. Finally, after several meetings with her teacher, we formed a game plan and Taylor made a successful transition.

The following school year, I taught kindergarten. While Taylor skipped off to first grade, I faced separation anxiety again—this time with some of my kindergarten students. Now eyes were on me, as my students' parents grappled with the same problem I somehow dealt with the year before. No longer in the throes of my own child's fears, I was able find solutions where teachers often do—in children's books.

Miss Bindergarten Gets Ready for Kindergarten, by Joseph Slate and illustrated by Ashley Wolff, is a colorful introduction to what preschool or kindergarten looks like. The book shows school as a positive place as the animal students (whose names each start with a different letter of the alphabet) and Miss Bindergarten get ready for the first day. As "Fran Lister kisses her sister" and "Ian Lowe says, 'I won't go,'" Miss Bindergarten is shown preparing her own classroom.

We ask a lot from our kids when we ship them off on that first day. Imagine attending a party where you don't know anyone, you're not sure where the bathroom is and the host is twice your size! You are

expected to stay many hours and socialize with strangers. The fear of being alone is foremost in many students' minds. In Miriam Cohen's *Will I Have a Friend?*, with illustrations by Lillian Hoban, Jim starts school without knowing anyone in his class. On page after page, Jim observes the other children but has difficulty breaking into a group. In typical kid fashion, Jim makes a friend during nap time and soon others are included.

Some students fear separation from a parent. Rituals, such as a special goodbye handshake, can be more powerful than words. In *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn, a mother raccoon uses such a ritual to help her offspring, Chester, say goodbye on the first day of school. The kiss she leaves in Chester's hand stays with him all day and intensifies when he presses his hand to his cheek. The little raccoon reciprocates by giving his mother her own "kissing hand." Warning—have plenty of tissues, especially if you read this book the night before school starts.

Usually it takes a few months for kids to realize their teacher doesn't sleep at school. It's even harder for them to see teachers as feeling, human beings. *It Happens to Everyone* by Bernice Myers lets children in

on the secret that teachers and students are in the same boat the first day of school. The story alternates between Mrs. Daniel and her student Michael's preparations for the first day. At home, Michael spills his milk and Mrs. Daniel spills her coffee. At

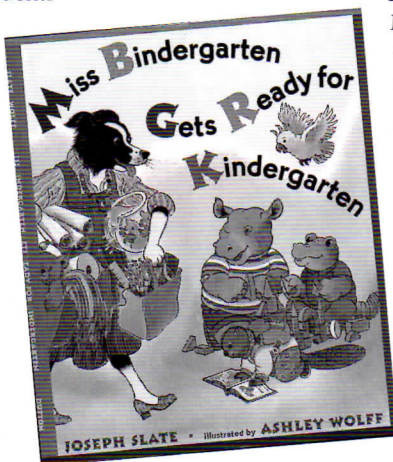
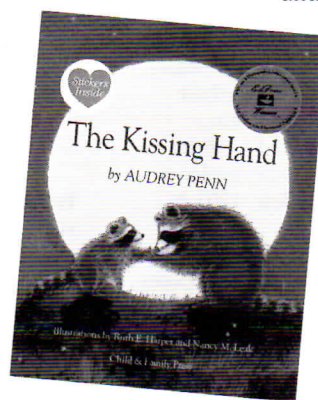
school, Michael bumps into a friend and Mrs. Daniel bumps into the principal, literally. Both are nervous. Both are relieved to see smiling faces across their desktops after the bell rings.

In *Lunch Bunnies*, by Kathryn Lasky and illustrated by Marilyn Hafner, Clyde is

afraid of everything from dropping his tray to the mammoth lunch lady, Gloria. In the end, a tray is dropped, sending Jell-O cubes everywhere—not by Clyde but by his sweet, new friend Rosemary. Clyde watches as Gloria uses humor, pointing out that Jell-O is not supposed to "boing."

The fear of misbehaving or "getting in trouble" is great for certain kids who will enjoy Kevin Henkes's *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*. Lilly's teacher takes away her purple purse when she can't resist showing off her new possession before sharing time. Even after Lilly retaliates by drawing a horrible picture of the teacher, he forgives her and they start anew.

If I had turned to books for help when my daughter was suffering, two weeks of agony could have been reduced to two days or less, especially if we'd read the books before the school year began. Live and learn—and then grab a good book!



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