



**M**y son, Max, is off to kindergarten this month. He has mastered his letters, is sounding out words, and has suddenly started telling time. He is ready for a longer day, eager to learn and make new friends. Since preschool ended in June, he's been proud to tell everyone that he's about to be a kindergartner.

For Max, I marvel about this milestone. But underneath, I am grappling with it. I don't feel ready to send him off to the big brick elementary school in the center of town.

Kindergarten is Max's first real step away from me. Over the past two years, he thrived at his small preschool. I was fortunate to have a close relationship with his teacher, who shared the litany of Max's days with me when I picked him up after lunch.

Born seven weeks premature, Max spent the first month of his life in an incubator. He had a breathing tube and an IV in his tiny hand; when I was allowed to hold him for a few moments at a time, I was terrified I'd break him. He came home weighing 4 pounds. I protected him from germs, the sun, and overstimulation. We stayed home a lot, making sure Max ate and slept at the same time every day.

By the time Max's little sister arrived, two years later, my obsessive nature had evened out and Max had grown into his own: a healthy, energetic boy with constant curiosity. Now 5 years old, he's a good friend, a devoted big brother, and a keen observer of his surroundings—he doesn't miss a trick.

#### CONNECTIONS

## Lessons in Letting Go

BY JACI CONRY

From the moment my husband and I heard Max's heartbeat for the first time, I knew that I'd do everything in my power to shield and nurture him, that my love for him would be boundless. But I wasn't prepared for how it would feel to have him love me back. A million little acts feel huge: the weight of his hand squeezing mine; the way he runs and engulfs me with a hug so powerful I'm almost knocked down; the pictures he draws for me because, according to him, I'm "a really, really great mom." Those moments fill me with joy and gratitude.

I want Max to be self-confident and independent. I know I won't be the center of his universe for much longer. But letting go isn't easy. The hardest part is realizing that I must give him up to the less-than-perfect world that awaits him. He will have bad days I can't fix, questions I can't answer. There will be lessons that won't come easily, people who will hurt his gentle soul.

As the first day of school approached, Max asked questions about his new classroom. "Where will I hang my backpack? Will there be show and tell? Who will sit with me at lunch?"

When we recently visited the school for orientation, I waited for Max in another room while he went off with a group of students he'd never met.

An hour later he returned with a slightly dazed look. "I had to go to the bathroom," he said quietly as we left the building. "I didn't know where it was."

"I think I might want to go back to preschool."

Max's uncertainty made him seem small, and for a flash he was the baby I'd so fiercely protected. I wanted to gather him into my arms. But I didn't.

"You are ready for kindergarten," I said. "You're a big boy, you're brave and smart."

His blue eyes searched mine. Finally, he turned toward the playground across the schoolyard.

"Will I get to play there every day?"

I nodded. His mouth stretched into a small smile. We walked toward the maze of children swinging and sliding, laughing and calling to one another. "Do you want to hold my hand?" I asked.

"No, I'm OK," he said. And with that, he broke into a run.

I took a deep breath, wiped the tear trickling down my face, and watched him go.

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