What to say when your five-year-old cries at the school gate

"My five-year-old has started crying at the classroom door every morning and won't let go of my hand. What do I say so I can actually leave?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"You're a big girl now, big girls don't cry at school. Come on, everyone's looking."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"You're worried about today. Your teacher will be right at the door. I'll be at the gate at three. Hug, wave, go."

By five, a child who cries at the classroom door can usually tell you why, if you ask at the right time. The school gate, with a bell about to ring, is not that time. The instinct is to jolly them along or to shame the tears away. The guidance points to a different split: talk about the worry at home, and keep the goodbye at the gate short.

What is known, and at what age

The American Academy of Pediatrics notes that many children get nervous about new situations, including a new school, classroom or teacher. Its advice is to ask your child what they are worried about and work on solutions together, to visit the school or practise the route beforehand if you can, to remind them that teachers know children may be nervous, and to arrive early so the morning is not rushed.

The AAP also advises keeping a goodbye short and sweet, with a ritual your child knows, a return time they can understand, and a promise you keep. It notes that separation anxiety rarely lasts every day beyond the preschool years, so tears that keep coming at five or six are worth a word with the teacher, and with your pediatrician if you are worried.

What the words do

Take 1 tells her that the feeling is babyish and that people are watching, so she now has two problems at the door. Take 2 names the worry in one line, tells her who will be there, gives a time she can hold on to, and then hands her the ritual: hug, wave, go. The plan was made at home; the gate is only where you follow it.

If you live in two homes

If drop-off happens from both homes, share the goodbye you use and the name of the adult who meets your child, so the morning looks the same whoever brings them. Mondays and the first morning after a changeover are often the hardest; plan an earlier night before them if you can.

In the UK

If your child is upset most mornings for more than a few weeks, or says something at school is frightening them, talk to their class teacher, and to your GP if they seem unwell. In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

1. Swanson, W. S. (2026). How to ease your child's separation anxiety. HealthyChildren.org, American Academy of Pediatrics.
2. American Academy of Pediatrics Council on School Health (2026). Back-to-school tips for families. HealthyChildren.org.
3. Cafcass (n.d.). About us. Retrieved November 9, 2026.
4. UK Parliament (2014). Children and Families Act 2014, section 12: Child arrangements orders.
5. Department for Education (2014). The Children and Families Act 2014 (Transitional Provisions) Order 2014, SI 2014/1042, article 6.
6. Welsh Government (n.d.). Cafcass Cymru. Retrieved November 9, 2026.
7. Coram Family Lives (n.d.). Confidential helpline. Retrieved November 9, 2026.

This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.