

Parenting Tools,
Strategies and Scripts
for real life.

Back to school wobbles - when goodbye feels hard.

Practical ways to support your child through tricky school drop-offs.



Calm, Confident and Connected Parenting
Find Your Calm. Lead with Confidence.
Reconnect with Your Kids.

www.destinedforgreatnessni.com

**Crying at the gate? Clinging at drop-off?
You're not doing it wrong. Your child isn't doing it wrong.
September can simply be a LOT.**

If school drop-off feels awful right now, take a breath.
Back-to-school can bring excitement and worry at the same time, even for children who love school. New classroom. New teacher. New routines. More noise. More people. More expectations. Less time with you. Some children cry. Some cling. Some say they feel sick. Some become really argumentative. Some are absolutely fine at drop-off and then fall apart at pickup. None of this automatically means something is terribly wrong.

**The aim isn't to talk your child out of every uncomfortable feeling.
It's to help them feel safe enough to move through it,
while you stay calm, confident and connected.**

A really important distinction

This guide is about the common, often short-term transition wobbles that many children experience around starting or returning to school. It is not a guide to emotionally based school non-attendance (EBSA). EBSA is a more persistent and complex experience in which emotional distress significantly affects a child's ability to attend school. That needs an individualised, collaborative approach and appropriate support, not a few Instagram tips or a single parenting script. If your child's distress is persistent, escalating or significantly affecting attendance, please seek support from your child's school and relevant professionals.





Hello! I'm Katrina

I'm a Behaviour Expert, Parenting Coach, and Education Consultant and Trainer, and the founder of Destined For Greatness NI. With over 20 years of experience supporting children, families, and schools, I specialise in social, emotional, and behavioural wellbeing.

But beyond all of that, I'm also a parent and grandparent. I understand first-hand that family life can be messy, emotional, and at times, overwhelming. **My approach is simple - when parents feel calm, confident, and supported, children thrive.**

This resource is here to help you strengthen your connection with your child and feel more confident in your parenting, without pressure for perfection.

If you'd like to learn more about my experience or the services and support I offer, please visit:
www.destinedforgreatnessni.com

Before we start...

This resource is designed to offer guidance, practical tools, and supportive strategies to help you navigate the complexities of parenting. You might find ideas that resonate strongly, others that need adapting, and some that simply don't fit your family and that's entirely expected.

Parenting isn't one-size-fits-all, this resource is meant to be flexible, not prescriptive.

As you use this resource, approach it as a toolkit rather than a rulebook. You are encouraged to reflect, experiment, and adapt the suggestions in ways that align with your values, your child's unique needs and your family's circumstances. *Progress in parenting often comes through small, consistent adjustments rather than immediate change.*

The advice, tools, and strategies provided in this resource are intended to support you in your parenting journey. **However, all decisions you make for yourself and your child are your responsibility.**

This guide is for general parenting support and education. It is not a substitute for individual assessment or professional advice.

This resource does not replace professional guidance, diagnosis, or treatment.

If you have concerns about your child's health, development, behaviour, or emotional wellbeing (or about your own mental health and wellbeing) it is important to seek support from appropriate professionals.

This resource should be used alongside, not instead of, professional advice where needed.

Every child and family is different. Strategies that work well for one child may not be appropriate or effective for another. **By using this resource you acknowledge that it serves as a supportive guide, and that you remain the primary decision-maker in your parenting choices.**

Please use these age ranges as a guide rather than focusing on your child's exact age. Children develop emotional skills at different rates, so choose the help that best matches your child's developmental stage, communication style, and emotional needs rather than their chronological age.





When goodbye feels BIG.

The school gate can be emotionally intense.

Your child may be crying, clinging to you or repeatedly asking you not to leave. Your job isn't to prove that school is nothing to worry about. Your job is to acknowledge the feeling and communicate confidence that they can get through the goodbye.



Try this...

"I know. You really don't want me to go.

Saying goodbye feels hard.

Your teacher is going to help you and I'll be back after school."

Then aim for:

- Warm connection - a cuddle, eye contact, calm voice.
- Simple words, especially when your child is already upset.
- A predictable goodbye - same phrase, same basic routine where possible.
- A confident handover - allow the school adult to take over.

Try not to turn the goodbye into a 20-minute negotiation. One more explanation, one more cuddle and one more promise can keep the separation going and make everyone more dysregulated.

You can validate the feeling without agreeing that the feared thing is dangerous.

Remember: crying does not mean you are a bad parent for leaving. It means your child is having a hard moment and you are helping them through it.

A **goodbye ritual** gives your child a simple, predictable way to know what happens when it's time to separate. It doesn't have to be complicated, just something warm, familiar and consistent that helps them feel safe and connected as you say goodbye.

Toddlers & Little Kids | 2–5

At this age, keep the ritual short, physical and repetitive.

Try: "Our 3-step goodbye"

One big cuddle

Three kisses (one on each cheek and one on the forehead).

"Grown-ups come back. You are safe. I'll see you after school."

Then wave and go.

You could even make it playful: "Cuddle, kiss, wave... and off you go!"

The repetition is the important bit. Your child learns: This is what happens when Mummy/Daddy leaves and they always come back.



Big Kids | 6–9

Older children can have a little more ownership over their goodbye ritual. Try a secret handshake or "power-up":

Fist bump - High five - Hand on heart

"You've got this. I'll see you at pickup."

They might even choose the final move or create their own secret handshake with you.

You could also give them a little phrase to repeat to themselves:

"I can feel worried and still do it."

The aim isn't to make them not feel nervous. It's to give them something familiar to hold onto when you aren't there.



Tweenagers | 10–13

They may absolutely NOT want a big emotional goodbye at the school gate and that's OK! The ritual might happen before you leave home instead. Maybe it's:

Five minutes together before they leave

A quick hug/high five (depending on the child!)

“Remember, You've got this. One bit at a time.”

For tweens, the ritual is often about connection without making them feel like a little kid.



Neurodivergent Children

For some neurodivergent children, the most helpful goodbye ritual may be visual and predictable.

Create a simple “Goodbye Plan” together:

1. Arrive
2. Hang coat/bag
3. Say goodbye to Mum/Dad
4. Go to [named adult/place]
5. First activity
6. Mum/Dad comes back at pickup

You could use a small visual card they carry in their pocket.

And agree on the exact words you'll use:

“You know the plan. First school, then home. I'm going now.

[Name] is here to help you. I'll see you at pickup.”

For some children, knowing exactly what happens after you leave will be much more reassuring than repeated reassurance that “everything will be fine.”



The golden rule

Whatever ritual you choose, try to make it:

Predictable → Brief → Warm → Consistent

a goodbye ritual isn't about stopping your child from feeling upset.

It's about giving them something familiar and predictable to lean on when goodbye feels hard.



What do I actually SAY?

Different ages need different language.

A three-year-old and a twelve-year-old can both be worried, but they need very different support.

Toddlers and Little Kids | 2–5

Child: “No school! I want mummy!”

“You really want me to stay. Goodbye is hard.

Your teacher will help you and I’ll come back after lunch.”

Keep it short. Young children usually need your calm presence and a predictable routine more than a long explanation.

Big Kids | 6–9

Child: “I hate school. I don’t want to go.”

“Something about school feels hard today. You don’t have to solve the whole day right now. Let’s just work out the first bit.”

Then ask:

“What would make getting through the morning a little easier?”

Tweenagers | 10–13

Child: “I don’t want to go. Everyone’s annoying.”

“Sounds like you’re really not feeling it today. I’m listening.

Do you want me to just listen or help you think it through?”

Sometimes tweens need connection without feeling interrogated.

Neurodivergent Children

Child: “I can’t go. It’s too much.”

“Okay. Let’s slow this down. What’s feeling too much -getting ready, leaving, the classroom, noise, people, or something else?”

Then problem-solve the actual barrier - predictability, visual supports, a quieter entrance, a familiar adult, a transition object or knowing exactly what happens next may be more helpful than repeated reassurance.

Three things I'd avoid at drop-off.

1. Sneaking away...

It can feel tempting, but disappearing without warning can make some children more worried about whether you'll vanish again.

2. Staying forever...

If you keep returning for one more cuddle, one more explanation or one more promise, the separation can become longer and harder.

3. Trying to bribe a feeling away...

Rewards can sometimes have a place, but we don't want the message to become "stop being upset and I'll give you something."

Instead:

- Connect.
- Use simple words.
- Follow your predictable goodbye.
- Hand over to the school adult.
- Leave calmly and confidently.

A useful script



"I know this is hard. I love you. You're safe.
Your teacher is going to help you. I'll see you at pickup."

***If your child is neurodivergent, work with school on the transition rather than expecting them simply to "push through".
Small environmental changes can make a big difference.***

You don't have to talk them out of their feelings.

When our children are upset, our instinct is often to make the feeling disappear:

"There's nothing to worry about."

"You'll be fine."

"You'll have a lovely day."

"Stop crying."

"Look, all your friends are going in."

We mean well.

But children don't always need us to make the feeling disappear.

They need to know: You can feel this AND I can handle it.



Try:

"I know you're worried."

"You really wish I could stay."

"It's okay to cry."

"I'm going to help you."

• "You don't have to like it. We're going to get through it together."

That's different from giving anxiety more power.

You're not saying, "Yes, school is terrifying."

You're saying,

"I can see this feels scary and I believe you can manage it."

Validate the feeling.

You don't have to validate the fear.

If your child is neurodivergent

September can involve a huge amount of hidden processing. Think beyond “Will they go into school?” and consider what makes the whole transition easier or harder.

Before school

Use a simple visual or verbal sequence: get dressed → breakfast → teeth → shoes → school.

Keep mornings predictable where possible.

Reduce unnecessary decisions.

Build in extra transition time if rushing increases distress.

At the school transition

Can your child enter through a quieter route?

Is there a familiar adult who can meet them?

Would a visual “first/then” cue help?

Do they know what happens immediately after you leave?

Is there a safe way to communicate when they need a break?

Behaviour is communication.

Get curious about what your child’s behaviour is communicating and plan ahead with appropriate adjustments and supports.

Your own September reset.

Your child's emotions can activate your emotions.
That's completely human.

If you find yourself panicking because your child is crying, try giving yourself a tiny pause before you respond;

STOP

Drop your shoulders.

Take one slow breath.

Lower your voice.

Remind yourself: "This is a hard moment, not necessarily a disaster."

Then CONNECT

Get close. Name what you can see. Keep your words simple.

Then LEAD

Hold the boundary calmly: "I know you don't want to go. I'm going to help you."

Calm doesn't mean you never feel stressed.

It means you keep coming back to a place where you can help your child feel safe.

A final reminder

You don't need to create a perfect September.

Your child does not need to walk through the school gates smiling every morning.

You are building something much more important: the experience that difficult feelings can be managed, grown-ups can be trusted, and hard moments can be repaired.

Parenting is a journey, one that is constantly changing, sometimes challenging, and often deeply rewarding. There will be days that feel calm and connected, and others that feel overwhelming. Both are part of the process.

This resource isn't about getting everything "right." It's about helping you feel more confident, more supported, and more connected to your child as you find what works for your family.

Small changes matter. Remember, you don't have to do this alone.

Continue Your Journey

If you'd like more personalised support, guidance, or practical strategies tailored to your family, I offer a range of services including:

- Parenting consultations
- 1:1 coaching
- Programmes and support pathways
- Workshops and masterclasses

These are designed to give you deeper understanding, real-life tools, and ongoing support as you continue your parenting journey.

To find out more, visit:
www.destinedforgreatnessni.com

You are the most important person in your child's world.
The connection you build, the safety you create, and the effort you show every day truly matter.

Katrina x

