

Music:	00:00	[Music].
Brenda Ramos:	00:06	Hello parents. Welcome to the CUSD Cares Podcast. This is Brenda Ramos, Director of Counseling today. I am so excited for everyone to be able to listen to our little conversation here. I have Cynthia Howell, she is a counselor at Hartford Sylvia Encinas in Chandler Unified Schools. Thank you for coming. Cynthia.
Cynthia Howell:	00:28	Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited to be here.
Brenda Ramos:	00:31	Well, I know you have a world of knowledge being a former teacher and now currently in your counseling role, you've been a counselor for many years. How long has it been?
Cynthia Howell:	00:40	This will be my fifth year here in Chandler.
Brenda Ramos:	00:42	That's awesome. That's awesome. And today our topic, drum roll please. You're going to be talking about the transition into kindergarten. It's such an exciting and scary and gosh, what emotion do you not feel at the start of kindergarten as a parent? Right? And it seems like many moons ago for those of you experienced parents, even if you have your last little one going in, but it's, it is certainly an experience the first day of kindergarten for each and every single one of our students. So today's podcast, we're going to talk about what can you expect, you know, from the eyes of a counselor and how we as, as a school can support you throughout this process and just what are some things to know, and you know, anything that we can do to make sure this is a easy process as possible, not just for you but for your student as well.
Cynthia Howell:	01:39	Of course.
Brenda Ramos:	01:40	So, let's start off with expectations. I think it's important for parents, especially first time parents, to kind of get an idea right? If we're going to paint a picture, what does their day look like? Because by this time, they've probably attended a lot of information setting, you know, and meetings as to sharing a lot of written information to prepare their student. But what -- give us a little glimpse as to the day in the life of a kindergarten teacher with her kindergarten students.
Cynthia Howell:	02:12	Absolutely. So that first day is a wonderful, fun filled day, full of milestones. So that's something to keep in mind for our parents and students that this is first and foremost a transition. So depending on if our students attended preK or if they attended

some type of daycare program, this will definitely be a transition for them. So it's normal for them to be feeling a lot of different things that first day. So that first day it's really important to know, for parents, that there'll be a lot of extra personnel reallocated to our kindergarten classrooms. They are our priority that first day because they're our little ones. So we will make sure to have often our counselor, our behavior specialist, our principal is often in there as well, checking on our students, greeting our parents. Making sure that it's a smooth first day, especially a smooth first morning.

- Brenda Ramos: 03:04 I like what you said about every extra hand, right? Being available.
- Cynthia Howell: 03:08 Absolutely.
- Brenda Ramos: 03:08 Because we know it to really, you know, the more support students have, the easier it is for them to adjust in. Right? We want them to feel safe and feel welcomed as well as you parents. Right?
- Cynthia Howell: 03:19 And we want them to feel good when they're walking into the classroom. And it seems like it's a really good transition to have our parents walk them into the classroom and then let our teachers take over from there.
- Brenda Ramos: 03:29 It's hard. It's hard for a lot of parents. Gosh, I go back to many years ago, but I won't say how many years, to say to drop your student off all day. Right. And for you to carry on with your day without worry. But we really would probably encourage parents not to extend their stay, because we want to foster that independence for students. So the longer you stay, the harder it is to say goodbye.
- Cynthia Howell: 03:56 So, Brenda, you just brought up a really good point. This is a really, really critical aspect of the first day is making sure that while we want our parents to come in to bring them into the classroom to say hello to the teacher, we also want to make sure that they understand that at a certain time and is appropriate for them to leave. Our teachers are really good about giving them that time to transition, to come into the classroom, to put their backpacks down, but also to escort our parents out. So I'm often down in that kindergarten wing that first day, sometimes even that first week to make sure that our parents are setting up some of those boundaries of when our students should be walking into a classroom independently.

- Brenda Ramos: 04:36 And we know it's a transition for both. It's hard for students and parents, but I think what is important for parents to know is kindergarten is our first priority in elementary school. They're the babies. We know how hard it is for them. We know this is an adjustment period that's going to take time. And we also know that for some students this is their first experience in any formalized schooling. Some of them maybe have been home, well, you know, with their parents or grandparents or caregivers. So we understand that this, those first impressions are really important for us to make sure and fill them, make sure they feel comfortable and safe. So we're getting, as we move into right that first day, there are a lot of things that happen within that first week in which what I would consider would be how we orient the student and the parent with life here at school and what does that look like? Right? So that they, the next day are really excited to wake up to come to school. Right?
- Cynthia Howell: 05:29 So a lot of the things that they'll encounter that first day are really welcoming, kind of making that classroom theirs. A lot of our teachers do a great job of setting up, just classroom expectations and guidelines and they do a great job of, designing those with our students. So our students have input in the way that their classroom runs in. You know, what they'll be learning or how they'll be treating friends. So that's a really key aspect of that first day is that they're making some of those really important foundational aspects for their classroom. So they'll also, within that first day, they'll be, just learning different parts of their classroom. So a lot of our teachers do centers, a lot of them, have cubbies. So, so I'll be going over all those different things that first week.
- Brenda Ramos: 06:17 And I remember most from kindergarten what my students experienced, my own kids, right? Mom, I was the door holder today or you know, whatever that role or job was. I just remember that sticking really, something, being something they share. What if they did have a role, what it was and how important it was.
- Cynthia Howell: 06:34 It was exciting. It's a very important part. I mean, it makes them feel valuable and a very important part of the classroom. Every time they're that door holder or they're in charge of the book bin, it's really, really important.
- Brenda Ramos: 06:45 It's a big deal for them. It's, they certainly are that little community in there. When you step in the classroom and you see the hustle and bustle and how a teacher, one person can make that huge of a positive impact and you know, 20 some

little lives, 20 little bodies, right. And get them all functioning. So it moves like clockwork. It is pretty phenomenal to see from start of the school year, I'm sure for you Ms. Howell to like even two to three weeks later.

- Cynthia Howell: 07:14 Yes, absolutely. It's very exciting to see where our students come in at the beginning of the year and then by the end they are just amazing.
- Brenda Ramos: 07:22 So some of the things, let's talk about students, right? And some of their, at least behaviors that we may see that even though they're not normal for you as a parent, right? Maybe your student adjusts really quickly, but somehow, you know, the start of kindergarten is, is, it's looking a little different, right? This is our first experience. What are some of those behaviors that we, that you have seen in your experience? The whole gamut, I'm sure. But if you could give parents a little glimpse, like... It's okay if they what?
- Cynthia Howell: 07:56 So, parents, keep in mind, what we have just discussed about a transition. So some of the behaviors you might see, a little bit more on the extreme side. Trying to run out of the classroom or trying to bolt. Especially once they see their parents are leaving. Keep in mind that we have the personnel to be able to handle that. And you know, we do it with the utmost care. Another behavior you might see is crying, that's pretty typical. Normal and completely okay. So please understand that that is a normal reaction to a transition.
- Brenda Ramos: 08:28 And you didn't do anything wrong, parents. So as a big takeaway, right, if your kid is crying, there's nothing you could have done differently. It's just them expressing their emotions and it's coming out in that fashion. It's nothing you didn't do. It's nothing that you should have done. Please don't, don't take on that guilt. Right?
- Cynthia Howell: 08:50 I have many times I've had to console parents outside of the classroom and say, you've done a wonderful job. They love you. They value you. That's probably a little bit of why they're crying. So please don't ever feel like it is your fault. It's absolutely not. It's just a normal reaction at that age for a transition. Another few behaviors you might see, you might see some other, some other strong emotions, a little bit of anger, a little bit of anxiety. Those are normal as well.
- Brenda Ramos: 09:16 Or very irritable, I would imagine.

Cynthia Howell: 09:18 Yes.

Brenda Ramos: 09:18 They can't... they don't have all the words yet sometimes to explain how they're feeling. So it comes out in different ways.

Cynthia Howell: 09:28 Absolutely. And our teachers do a really good job of helping them navigate those emotions because as you mentioned, they may not be able to express exactly what they're feeling, but because of their experience, they know to give them some time to be able to be warm and gentle with them, but also to try to redirect some of those stronger emotions.

Brenda Ramos: 09:47 And we just talked about this before starting our little podcast. It certainly takes a special person to be a kindergarten teacher. So they certainly chooses this particular grade level for a reason. And they're highly skilled. We definitely try to pick our best of the best to make sure that our students get the best experience possible. So, be aware, parents, those individuals that you're leaving your students to, they are -- not only do they want to be there, they're ready, they're equipped, to be able to handle any situation. So just let's keep that communication open, which leads into, first day tips. If you were to give a parent, right, let's say it's their first child going to kindergarten. What are some first day tips that -- I know we talk a lot about some of these first day tips in, during registration time or leading up until way before the first day of kindergarten because parents, I'm sure that you have had, umpteen or hundreds of conversation with your son or daughter in regards to what, "When you're in kindergarten..." Right? Those types of conversations, so that we can prepare them and know what to expect. But what are some good first day tips for parents?

Cynthia Howell: 11:01 So I think one of the best ones is to please make sure to come to Meet the Teacher, come to the events that the school is hosting before the school year even starts. So this is kind of a pre first day tip, but make sure to come in, meet the teacher, welcome them. have your students look at their classroom where they might sit, they might even have name tags out. It's a great, great experience to be able to take them. And then in the days up until the first day, to be able to reference that classroom or that teacher. That'll just help with their transition and how comfortable they feel. Another first day tip, and this is always really, really important. We've talked a little bit about this as well. Parents, as you take them into the classroom, make sure to be present, but make sure to leave at an appropriate time. The longer you stay sometimes makes it more difficult for your students to stay in the classroom and to feel comfortable there. Another first day tip that I know our kindergarten

teachers are always looking out for is how will your student get home? Please make sure that if they are riding the bus or if they will be picked up or if someone's meeting them in the classroom that your student knows. And even more importantly, that the teacher knows. I think that if you can prepare your students as much as you can by letting them know what this school day routine will look like, that'll make them feel even safer and more stable in this new environment.

- Brenda Ramos: 12:26 And that's a good thing. I, that you mentioned about the afterschool portion, and reminding your student right after school, when school is over, whether Grandma's picking you up or you're going to Kids Express after school or whether you're walking home with brother or sister, whatever that looks like, that we are reminding students that that is what's going to happen.
- Cynthia Howell: 12:48 So it's not a surprise. Yes. And parents please be reassured that there will be extra personnel on hand for dismissal as well because they are the smallest in the school. We are always very present and we want to make sure that it's a successful end of the day and dismissal for them. So we make sure to have our paraprofessionals or if it's a counselor or principal or whoever it might be on hand in the kindergarten classrooms to make sure that things run smoothly.
- Brenda Ramos: 13:16 It's so, I mean, we certainly, we want them to have a good night's rest, but we want them to be excited the next day without waking you up at five o'clock in the morning, right? To say, "I'm ready to go to school, mom or dad."
- Cynthia Howell: 13:27 Yes, absolutely. And our kindergarten teachers have a really great array of activities that they do that first day. While setting up routines and establishing expectations may not sound fun, they do it in a really fun and interactive way. So we want our students to come back that second day and to explore some more of those activities that they have.
- Brenda Ramos: 13:50 Yeah. I'm sure they walk away thinking, oh, that was a fun game. I want to do that again.
- Cynthia Howell: 13:57 Yes. And also another important point to mention, make sure that your student knows, are they bringing lunch, are they getting lunch? I know that the cafeteria and the lunch room can be a big cause of concern for parents and students. Once again, rest assured that we have extra paraprofessionals. Myself, I'm personally on duty for the first three weeks of kindergarten lunch duty until they establish the routine. So also we will be

there to help them open milk cartons and Lunchables and whatever it might be in their lunchbox, we will be there.

- Brenda Ramos: 14:27 It sounds so simple yet as daunting task for a very hungry kindergartener who, and he's probably sitting there like, "But I can't do it all by myself." And we know they can't do some things all by themselves, whether it's finding where to go to the bathroom or like you said, lunch time. There's all those extra supports in place until they get adjusted and acclimated to the building and where to go and what to do. And then of course then they feel like one of the big kids at the school. Right? Which is so neat to see. The other thing I know in the hustle and bustle of life, because we as working moms that we are, we know there are times where we forget to pack a lunch. If we pack a lunch or we forget to send money. What happens at that point, Ms. Howell, and how, what can we tell parents, right? We know those circumstances happen, because life is busy and that is life, that happens.
- Cynthia Howell: 15:21 So at our school we actually, our students receive free lunch so they will always have a lunch as a backup. I know at our other sites they will also offer a lunch to our students. So there's always, you know, rest assured that they will never go hungry.
- Brenda Ramos: 15:34 Right. There's always a backup.
- Cynthia Howell: 15:35 We'll always make sure to take care of them. They'll always be a backup plan.
- Brenda Ramos: 15:38 Absolutely. And we will communicate, "Hey, today, you know, there was no money sent in or maybe the lunch account was empty," and we'll come to the teacher who will make sure that's a high priority to communicate that to the parent in case that does happen. Because we just live busy lives, and sometimes it's just an oversight and it happens. As grown ups, we make mistakes just like kids do and that's okay, but we are going to take care of your little one. And I think that's what's important for parents to know. How can parents help? What can they do? When we think about... Let's go along the lines, the busy-ness of our day to day and just, you know, what needs to happen, what can parents do to help their students?
- Cynthia Howell: 16:21 So it's really important as I was talking about earlier, to kind of establish some of those routines, not just in the classroom but at home. Our kindergarten students will have homework, whether it be reading sight words or an easy reader book or whatever that might look like. It's important to establish a place for them in their home that they know that they can sit and

quietly or, not distractedly do their homework. So establish some of those routines at home. If they have older siblings, it's a really kind of seamless transition because older siblings typically already have homework, so are your kindergarten can easily join them. And if they don't, it's just a good idea to establish a place for them that's theirs, that they know they will have to work on schoolwork.

- Brenda Ramos: 17:07 A great opportunity for that student and parent to interact. Right?
- Cynthia Howell: 17:12 Absolutely. Beyond the "What happened at school today?" Maybe, you know, maybe more open ended question, "What was the best part of your day today?"
- Brenda Ramos: 17:20 Yeah. And it's also a great opportunity that time that parents have with students to work on homework but also ask them about social situations that are happening at school. I'm sure that, there's a point that we were going to bring that up later on in this, but...
- Brenda Ramos: 17:32 No, that's totally good. This is a good lead in.
- Cynthia Howell: 17:35 However, it's really important to have those conversations with them. Ask them, "How was recess? How did you feel at lunch? Who did you sit by?" All those questions are so important. Our students really do want to talk about these things. Sometimes they just don't have the words for it yet. So, don't feel discouraged if they say, "Oh, it was great." Or "Oh, I stopped by someone." Keep pushing, ask them, inquire.
- Brenda Ramos: 17:59 Yes. And you know what, I'm so glad you brought up that social piece because it's a so important part of school. because as we know, as we get, as they get older, that is -- usually they're looking forward to those relationships that they've already formed. And some relationships, I mean, I can think of, I have a good friend that I've known since kindergarten. I know, some of us are lucky enough to have formed those relationships and keep them later on. But I think it's very important for parents to very openly allow that student that open time to just share anything about any social situations. Even those that we, that they can learn from, right?
- Cynthia Howell: 18:34 Of course.
- New Speaker: 18:35 Especially if it was a situation in which, right, they were sad or they were upset. But maybe even role playing with students.

Right? So why don't I pretend to be you, and you pretend to be your friend and let's, what did the conversation sound like?

- Cynthia Howell: 18:49 That's a great idea, a wonderful thing for parents to be able to do with students. Our teachers in the classroom help a lot with those conversations as well. When they set up those classroom expectations, they'll set up some of those expectations for social situations. They will be really vigilant about our students that might need a little bit of extra care in that area. I, we also, our extra person -- our extra personnel are out on duty those first few weeks. So I have an opportunity to intervene in those situations as well, which I'm really happy to be able to do.
- Brenda Ramos: 19:22 That's a prime reason why we have school counselors at our elementary schools is so that you can step in at those times. And sometimes students will possibly have some challenges, but at the same time, I think as they learn to have somebody there to kind of guide them and the school counselor, their role is perfect for that. To be able to have those conversations and kind of support both students. If students are not seeing eye to eye, or any other circumstantial situation that happens out on the playground or at lunch, sometimes it's something really small and silly and, we can take a step back and have students take a breath in order to see how reasonable we can be with one another.
- Cynthia Howell: 20:11 Absolutely. And kindergarten is really, they learn quite a bit of academic skills, but it's also a lot of social skills. So this is really their first experience with friends and developing relationships and friendships that last or don't last sometimes. So it's really important to also keep in mind that as much as they're learning, they're also learning in regards to social emotional.
- Brenda Ramos: 20:34 And it's such an important part of important skill, soft skill, they're you know, all of us, all of us have huge takeaways.
- Cynthia Howell: 20:41 Yes. And sometimes all of us are still learning, right?
- Brenda Ramos: 20:45 Yes, absolutely. We never stop learning, that's for sure. I want you to share a little bit, Cynthia, with parents as to, who to reach out to, right? Let's say we've passed the two weeks, maybe even the three week mark. You, as we know, parents know their students best. We strongly believe that, you know, every facet of them. We're just getting to know them and they're ever evolving and changing as they grow up. But, let's say beyond the start of the school year, they've transitioned, you know, you feel at this time that they have adjusted, they should have adjusted and there's still some kinks to work out or

some challenges or something that maybe doesn't quite sit right and you can explain it from a parent perspective. We're your eyes and ears at school. but you, you again, are, are dictionary to everything that has to do with that student and what they need and what best, things work for them. And every student is different. Who should they reach out to? What should they do if they find themselves in a circumstance that, you know, something's just not gelling.

- Cynthia Howell: 21:47 Sure. I, I think we want to keep in mind for kindergarten, since it is such a new change in transition, you're probably gonna want to look at maybe even into that third week. You're going to want to reach out. There's a lot of great people on campus that can help with a lot of different things. So that first person, that first, contact you're going to want to make is the teacher, the classroom teacher, as they will have spent quite a bit of time with them so far, even in those few weeks. Express any concerns, don't hesitate to reach out to the teacher with any of the concerns that you might be having, whether that be, you know, what happens if my child forgets their lunch or what happens if my child doesn't have anyone to play with on the playground? That's when we, our teachers do a great job of communicating these needs to us as well. So if it is something where they need more support, I'm happy to help and facilitate conversations or friendships or whatever that might be. So the teacher really that first contact that you're going to want to reach out to. However, there's also the front office staff, which are huge lifelines to the school. They know everything.
- Brenda Ramos: 22:52 They certainly do at every school no matter what. Which one of the 30 schools, elementary schools you step into, you couldn't have said it better. They are the heartbeat in the lifeline of our schools.
- Cynthia Howell: 23:03 Absolutely. They will know when assemblies are, where to park. I mean it can range from shots or whatever it is that they might need. They are there to assist and to help. And if sometimes it can be hard to reach the teacher. if you're dropping off for example, in the morning. So for an office staff are also a wonderful contact to make. Whether that be our receptionist or the principal, secretary, whoever it might be, we're all willing to help and work together.
- Brenda Ramos: 23:30 Well, and I know sometimes throughout the school day, right, the teacher is busy teaching. She's not, he or she is not sitting behind their desk. Right. you know, answering emails, they are physically with your students and you know, in order to be fully present, it's really important that parents understand they're

not going to be able to respond to emails within the first few minutes of you sending an email over. That is of most importance. So we want the parents to know that, you know, they can certainly for things that can't wait, they can certainly reach out to that front office since that teacher may most likely not get to your email till the end of the day.

Cynthia Howell: 24:10

Right. And that's kind of a soft guideline that we have is that teachers try to get back as soon as they can, whether it be an email or a phone call, but it's important to keep in mind that that front office staff can get messages to them or, you know, we can jot down whatever it is, whatever question you might have so they can then answer that at dismissal. So don't hesitate to contact them yet.

Brenda Ramos: 24:31

And, or a change in dismissal procedures if someone else is picking up the student instead of their normal routine. You certainly want to reach out to the front office staff will get them the message as soon as possible.

Cynthia Howell: 24:40

Yes. And keep in mind that our front office staff isn't always limited to just the people that are up in front, but you know, principals, assistant principals, deans, counselors, behavior specialists... we are always willing to help in whatever capacity that might be. So for example, as we were discussing earlier, some of those behaviors that might be out of the norm within those first few weeks, you may want to reach out to the counselor, to the behavior specialist if the school has one. Express some of those concerns if it's in that social-emotional realm. I conduct groups all year long with many different grade levels, so sometimes it just takes a little bit of extra support or, uh, sitting down with a small group and learning some of those friendships skills that they might need. And that's what we are here for. That's my job. So I'm happy to help with those things. If it's something that has to do with more extreme behaviors, work with the assistant principal or with the dean, the behavior specialist. They are there to help and they have a lot of different resources that they can use for that.

Brenda Ramos: 25:40

And again, as parents, you are, you know, your student best. And you know, we only, we understand that we only see them in the school setting and so we have to make sure things work and function to support them within our schools. So, but we're going to heavily rely on you and the partnership that we have with you in order to, so that your student is happy to come to school. They feel safe, they feel like, you know, it's a home away from home.

Cynthia Howell: 26:07 Yes. And as you were saying, communication is key. Please don't wait. Don't wait. After a problem has been occurring for a month or two months. Come to us, communicate with the teacher, write a note, an email, a phone call, whatever might be easiest for your family. Don't hesitate to do so.

Brenda Ramos: 26:27 Yeah. And thank you for mentioning not to wait too long. You know, we know sometimes things let we let the dust settle. However, you know, when things have reached, you know, a point in which you need someone else at school to step in that your student needs support.

Brenda Ramos: 26:44 Kindergarten. Oh goodness. I'm sure for your kindergartener it's going to be a fun filled day. There's no doubt. I know our amazing teachers always have something fun planned. Even if in their eyes, it was just a game, we know that, we, our objectives are certainly to get them acclimated, adjusted in routine so they can be as independent as possible, running that little community, a classroom. Any last minute items or last minute advice we have for our kindergarten parents as they get ready to start the school year with their little babies?

Cynthia Howell: 27:25 My closing piece of advice, "Be in the moment." Take it in. This is a wonderful, wonderful grade level. A wonderful first step. It's fun filled. It's a fun filled year with so many different milestones. Be present, take it in and enjoy it. there's nothing quite like kindergarten.

Brenda Ramos: 27:43 I would agree. And there's going to be opportunities for you as a parent to come in and they're going to get to showcase and you'll be able to, if you're able to be available I should say, to come and see some of the fun things that will happen throughout the year. So, to stay tuned and keep those lines of communication open and therefore when you are in that front row seat, getting to see your little one, either recite a poem or have their, what used to be called "show and tell." I don't know if that's still what they call it! [laughing] But those types of experiences that you are able to be there and enjoy taking it in as well. That was great advice, Cynthia. I so appreciate you being with us today.

Cynthia Howell: 28:28 Thank you. This was a really good time. Thank you so much.

Brenda Ramos: 28:31 Well, parents, as we all gear up for the start of this school year. I just want to thank you and, encourage you to just stay connected with your school community so that your student also gets that message that you are connected and that you both can have a really great experience. I appreciate you joining

in today for CUSD Cares. Stay tuned for the next time. Have a great day!

Music:

28:53

[Music].