

Understanding and coping with Separation Anxiety

Helping Children Learn to Separate: Strategies for Parents

With the ultimate goal of smooth transitions for all, **Marie Conti** offers teachers and parents guidelines to assist them in developing strategies for happy good-byes.

Throughout our lives we experience separation from those with whom we have developed attachments: the first time we are left with a non-parental caregiver, our first school experience, our first overnight away from home, going off to college, getting married, etc. How we experience our initial separations in infancy through early childhood, and how those from whom we are separating have experienced partings, affect our reactions.

Separation is a process whereby an individual learns to recognize him or herself as separate from others. Because we have a genetic bias to form secure attachments, separation anxiety is an instinctive human response. It is a universal common phenomenon affecting infants, children, adolescents, adults, and even animals.

Separation behavior can produce both positive and negative reactions, sometimes even simultaneously. Both are normal. When a child goes to a caregiver or school situation for the first time the child may feel fear, wonder, doubt about still being loved, anger, resentment, confusion. At the same time the child may feel excitement about the new experience, about meeting new friends and having fun. A parent may feel guilty, lonely, uneasy about the child's reaction, experience doubts about the abilities of teachers or caregivers to provide for the child, be worried about being replaced as the giver of affection, worried that the child will no longer love the parent after the separation, or that the child will not measure up to her peers. Simultaneously, the parent may feel happy about having made the choice of a wonderful caregiver or school, and excited that the child will meet new

people and have new learning opportunities.

Many factors affect our feelings when we separate from a person to whom we are attached: less age and developmental level, temperament and personality, family and other relationships, attitude or what we bring to the moment, issues and concerns in a relationship, immediate physical and emotional condition of those in the relationship, the intensity and duration of the separation experience, the extent to which we are able to allow others to substitute as an attached figure, prior experiences, language barriers and cultural differences, and physical location of the separation event.

What else can help enable separations to go smoothly?

Parents can prepare the child for an initial separation experience in a variety of ways. Several weeks before the new separation, begin to acquaint your child with the physical location, as well as the person to whom the child will separate. Start with a few pre-visits, first visiting the outside of the building, then the actual room where your child will spend time, and finally meeting the person in whose care your child will be left.

Be prepared to leave each day with all items necessary in place the night before to prevent the stress of rushing at the last minute. Create both nighttime and morning rituals. Children, especially from birth to 5 years, are in a sensitive period for order; routine and regularity help reassure them.

Be aware of who is having the most difficulty separating, your child or you. Often it is the parent who feels more intense sadness than the child. If your child is not having a negative reaction,



Allow the child to retain physical closeness to the parent at the time of separation, and keep some distance from the person to whom the child is separating. Gradually try to engage the child in an activity from a slight distance.

avoid encouraging one by prolonging the good-bye. If you must leave your child crying, arrange with the teacher or caregiver to contact her to get an update on your child's reaction. It is difficult to spend a day at work not knowing for how long your child was upset. Allow for tears; they are a natural human reaction to sadness and sense of loss, and they are very cleansing. Avoid asking a child to stop crying, or bribing a child. Bribes and rewards may help elicit desired reactions temporarily, but do not change behaviors permanently.

Set parameters around the farewell process, e.g., "Mommy will spend five minutes with you in the classroom, then kiss you good-bye and walk with you to the door." Any limits that are set must be adhered to or your child's trust will not develop. Do not give in to



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Teachers and caregivers can provide help and assurance to both parents and children to assist them in developing strategies for happy good-byes.

pleas to extend the departure or to change the agreed-upon routine. These parameters should be set early on—even before arriving at school. Never slip out the door without saying good-bye, even if your child is happily engaged in an activity and it seems the

gradually trying to engage your child in an activity from a slight distance away from the caregiver.

Transitional objects (such as teddy bears and blankets, which take the place of the mother-child bond) are helpful, as are photos of parents and

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perfect opportunity. Skipping the final good-bye will also undermine the child's trust. If a child misses that final good-bye, when the child realizes the parent is gone, a strong negative reaction may occur and the child may feel abandoned.

As young children cannot understand the abstract concept of time, help your child understand the routine of the day and schedule of events of the day that will ultimately lead to your reunion, for example, "You will have circle time, work time, lunch and nap, and then Mommy will pick you up!" Be on time to avoid unnecessary worrying. Provide honest expectations, structure, routine and stability.

Be sensitive to your child's needs and offer alternatives to express anger if necessary, such as pounding clay or coloring an angry picture. Allow your child to retain physical closeness to you at the time of separation, and keep some distance from the person to whom the child is separating, while

family that your child can turn to during the day. Providing verbal reassurance and words to express feelings help a child master separating.

Read to your child from children's books available on various separation issues before during and after separation experiences. These stories provide opportunities for conversations about separation feelings and help children know that others may feel the same way they do. ■

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Children progress through approximate developmental stages of separation:

- Birth – 1 year:** Child begins to explore and understand his world, and form attachments
- 6 months:** Object permanence mastered, i.e. the child understands that something or someone is not gone forever if she cannot see it; child perceives loss in relation to her own comfort or trust.
- 1 – 3 years:** Child begins to master his energy; a pulling away or "autonomy" struggle starts
- 18 months:** Child has developed evocative memory and is aware that the attached figure is not gone forever
- 24 – 36 months:** Child has strong object constancy and enough memories of the attached figure to enable the child to remain separated for some length of time and to be able to look to the substitute person for reassurance and nurturance
- 4 – 5 years:** Child struggles with balancing pulling away and attaching child often wants to blame someone for causing the separation experience (often herself)
- 6 – 8 years:** Child begins to ask questions about the details of the separation experience—who, what, when, for how long

Keeping these stages in mind can help parents and teachers/caregivers have realistic expectations of a child's reactions.



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