



# SEPARATION ANXIETY

## During the First Days of Kindergarten

### TIPS FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

**It is natural for a young child to feel anxious** about separating when starting the school year. It can also be a stressful time for parents. As a parent, the first thing to do is check in and be honest with yourself. Are there feelings of apprehension and dread about leaving your little one at school? Do you get frustrated or exasperated at your child's resistance, meltdowns, and/or controlling behaviours? Do you have guilt or ambivalence about whether your child will be OK? It is natural to have mixed emotions about this big step. **Gently acknowledging and taking care of your own feelings will help you find that calm, confident parent inside of yourself that your child is going to need during this transition.**

### BEFORE the first week of school:

1. **See if you can go in and look around the classroom, and meet the teacher before school starts.** Whether they meet in person or not, it's important to foster a relationship with the teacher in advance. Talk about going to school in positive ways, and how delighted the teacher is to have your child in his/her class. Sometimes more anxious or sensitive children will want to attach to their teacher first before they branch off to befriend other children. **Some ideas:**

- Talk about shared likes and interests, e.g. *"I heard Mrs. Johnson loves reading books about animals, and you do too! I wonder if she likes trains too?"*

- Have your child draw a picture to give the new teacher on the first day.
- Help your child think of something special to show the teacher.

2. **Help your child work out some of their fears in advance through play.** Some ideas:

- Act out successful and loving separations and reunions with toys. Reverse roles and have your child be 'in charge' and leave *you* at home or school. Use humour to make it fun.
  - Hide and seek gives your child "safe" separation practice and the experience of being found over and over no matter what, e.g., *"I will always come find you a million times, no matter what pirates or ogres try to stop me!"*
- (cont..)



[www.anxietybc.com](http://www.anxietybc.com)



[www.anxietylab.educ.ubc.ca](http://www.anxietylab.educ.ubc.ca)

In anticipation of school separation, some children may **express or release anxiety through crying and emotional outbursts.**

It's important for your child to feel heard, so sitting with the child with calm confidence is important during these times, without trying to convince them out of their feelings. Think of it as 'unloading' some pent up worries beforehand.

3. Go to the library and find some children's books on helping with separations (ask Librarian for help).

4. Create a special "transition" photo book of the steps for school drop off and pick up (e.g., putting on shoes, getting in car, front door of classroom, waving goodbye), including photos of loved ones and warm, encouraging messages. Your child can keep this at school or in his or her backpack or cubby.

5. Make sure your child gets enough rest. Start turning back bedtime by 15 min increments (instead of going to bed at 9:00 pm, first night go to bed at 8:45, next night 8:30, next night 8:15, etc). This may be hard due during late sunsets, but one way to ensure an earlier bedtime is to wake the child in the morning at the "usual" time for school (start the day at 7:00 am). Little ones need lots of sleep, usually 10-12 hours of sleep a night.

6. Have adventures in and around the school. Plan frequent, short trips to the playground (include other neighbourhood children if you can). Talk about what your child will be able to see from the classroom window, give the trees or other landmarks secret or silly names, suggest favourite things to do at recess or lunch, and games children might play in the field.



- Draw a heart or put a sticker on the child's hand and on your own hand, and say every time your child looks at it throughout the day, you will think of each other.

- Together, make up a special **goodbye handshake or secret silly parting ritual** (e.g. tugging ears and then kissing the back of your child's hands).

- Leave an **encouraging note or drawing** in your child's bag to look at during a certain time of the day (e.g. at lunch).

- Share things that **you are carrying around to remind you of your child** (e.g., photos on your phone, a drawing your child made) to show that while apart, you are 'holding on' to your child too.

- **Being hungry** can make separation issues much worse. Even a small protein snack just prior to leaving the house can help.

- As much as possible, **focus your child's attention into the reconnection** after school. "After school, let's sit on the hammock together and you can tell me the three most fun things you did at school today. I can't wait to hear!"

## At Drop-off:

- This is the time to maintain a **stance of warm confidence**.

- **Arrive early** if your child likes a bit more quiet and calm to get settled.

- Spend a bit of time talking about **something fun or interesting** you both see in the classroom.

## The Morning(s) of School Days:

- **Remind your child about the fun things** that are happening at school that day and what the classroom will look like. Paint a mental picture for your child of what to expect.

- **If your child is looking worried**, say "I see that you have some worries and butterflies inside. And I know you can be brave!" Parents can say the same thing over and over, in a soothing tone. Soon the child may begin mimicking the message to themselves.

- **Give your child an item of yours** to hold on to for the day until pickup, or buy something special that is the same, such as matching bracelets.

- **Talk about how you can't wait until after school** to see the craft project for the day, or learn about what story the teacher will read or what game the kids play at recess.

- Make sure you are **transitioning or 'handing over' your child to another caring adult in the classroom** that he or she feels comfortable and can attend to, such as the teacher.

- Once your child is attending to the other adult, give a hug or kiss and say goodbye with a warm confident smile.

**And leave.** Resist lingering too long around the doorway or sneaking back and seeing how things are going.

- Finally and most importantly, have **confidence in your child's teacher to handle your child's feelings** and take care of your child. And importantly, believe in your child's ability to cope.

## Other things to keep in mind:

- At any stage in this process, your child may cry, cling, freeze, or become excessively controlling or aggressive. Your child's frustrating or difficult behaviours are coming from deep instincts to elicit a response from caretakers to take action and remove the 'threat' (= being left at school). The child just wants to feel better again. **Your child is not acting this way to upset or manipulate you.**

- Children this age **often don't know how to calm themselves down in the moment**, and are dependent on adults to help them feel more safe and secure. They may have no idea what is really making them anxious, so asking 'why' is not going to be very productive.

- Saying "Calm down!" "Don't be afraid!" "You'll be fine!" are not very effective and may make the child more distressed. Instead, **using a calm, soothing tone**, say "*I see that you are having a hard time. We'll work through this together*" "*Let's see what is in your new classroom.*" "*Your teacher is over there and looks so happy to see all the children!*" "*Let's see if we can find your courage.*" are examples of simple sentences to state over and over. If your child is irritated by hearing these types of verbal

encouragements, instead convey your belief in them through your patient body language and steady tone.

- It can be particularly exasperating when your distressed child resists your attempts to soothe or calm down, so **stay tuned into your own emotions and behaviour when you feel your temperature start to rise.** Your child will be very sensitive to your non-verbal cues and have a heightened focus on your tone and body language. Try to maintain a stance of calm confidence.

- It may sometimes be less emotionally charged if **another trusted adult drops off the child**, such as a grandparent, older sibling, or another caregiver. Consider going with a school buddy or a neighbourhood friend.

- **Some children may not exhibit separation anxiety for a few weeks into school**, once the novelty has worn off and it really sinks in that this is not temporary. Or a child's anxiety may reappear after long holidays or after an illness. Better to expect it will happen rather than repeatedly get surprised.

- **Some children will be upset and have a meltdown at pickup when they see you, or when you get home.** This is likely because your child is reminded of the separation and may feel safe enough to let out his or her anxiety and frustration at you. Or your child is really tired and has had a long day at school. Your child's brain is developing and learning so much now, and there are many new things to figure out. But with lots of love and confidence in your child's abilities, you'll both get through this milestone!

