

Separation Anxiety: Preparing you & your child for separation

This is the season many of our little ones will return to child care, or be cared for by a new baby sitter. You play a critical role in helping your child to make this adjustment; selecting a quality program which is responsive to you and your child's needs is the first step. A good beginning sets the stage for a happy well-adjusted child and relieves some of the pressure and stress of being working parents.

The sooner you introduce your child to friendly strangers, the better able he will be to adapt to care by non-family members when day care, school or emergency situations arise.

Regardless of your child's developmental stage, temperament and age, leaving your baby with a caregiver or teacher for the first time usually triggers "separation anxiety." Some children, do indeed, say "good-bye" easily. Other children will cry, scream or cling to their primary care giver. Each child reacts differently.

Separation anxiety is a normal reaction for children ... and even adults. Leaving familiar people and entering into a new environment can be difficult for any one. Sometimes the pain of separation seems to hurt the parents more than their child. Be aware of your own emotions, such as apprehensiveness, guilt, or ambivalence. Remember that your child looks to you for reassurance that he is safe and that you are confident about his ability to adjust to this new environment. Talk positively about this new adventure. Instead of saying "I'm sorry Johnny, I need to go to work," tell your child "while I'm at work, you will be with all of the other children at the center." Focus on your child's needs. The initial tone YOU set can affect your child's feelings.

Beginning at approximately seven months of age, your baby may show signs of clinging to you as you leave the room. During this time, separation anxiety, which usually peaks at nine months of age is really the baby's way of saying, "I love my Mom or Dad best. I want her to stay here because I trust her/him." (Note: toddlers may experience separation anxiety again or for the first time at 18-24 months of age).

Therefore, it's best to familiarize your baby or toddler with the new caregiver early on. Prior to the initial outing, visit the center or plan to have the new baby sitter take care of your child more than once while you are present. Your child will feel secure if both you and the caregiver are more responsive to his needs during this important developmental stage. When the time comes for you to say "good-bye," try engaging your child in a fun activity. Then explain in simple terms that you must leave, but you'll be back. Never leave without saying good-bye to your child.

With an older toddler or preschooler, give him a concrete example of what will take place just after pick-up time, i.e. "when we get home we'll play with the Lego set." Only make promises that will really take place. Unlike babies, toddlers develop the capacity to retain a mental image of their parents after they've exited the room. This developmental milestone called "object permanence" allows your child to help comfort himself during your absence. Also, many toddlers and preschoolers become quite attached to a stuffed animal or other item. This "transitional object" may offer your child the comfort he will need. If your child does not have a specific object he is comforted by, offer a family photo so that when he misses you he can say hello to your picture.

When entering preschool your child may again experience separation anxiety. Some preschoolers resist their parent's departure. Other preschoolers withdraw or refuse to engage themselves in activities initially or after attending preschool for a few days or more. Children need time to differentiate between what goes on in school and what goes on at home. Once your child feels secure with new friends and teachers, chances are that he will begin to let go of you. It may take time for your child to develop that trust. In the meantime, expect that your child may take some steps backwards such as having toileting accidents or sucking on his thumb. It is common for preschoolers to develop fears such as not being picked up at dismissal time. They also may develop a sudden awareness of death (he might be afraid that you'll die while you're separated). Prepare your child by telling him what you will be doing while he is in school. Keep the lines of communication open with your preschooler and his teachers. Be an involved parent.

Never talk about your child in his presence. Your comments, whether positive or negative, can be misunderstood by your child and adversely affect his behavior. If you are concerned about your preschooler, schedule a conference with your child's teacher. During the conference be sure to mention if there are any major changes taking place at home such as the recent birth of a new baby, the death of a favorite pet, or a divorce. Dealing with separation anxiety is an ongoing developmental process that should be taken in stride.