

Coping With Separation Anxiety

by Linda Clare

“Mommy, I need one more hug!”

Three-year-old Matthew grabs onto his mother’s coat as she tries to leave. She hugs Matthew for the 10th time, then opens the screen door. “I didn’t get a kiss,” Matthew says. Mother bends down for one more smooch on the cheek. Matthew wraps his arms around Mom’s neck and sobs, “Don’t leave!”

For many toddlers and preschoolers, separating from Mom and Dad may seem as scary as imaginary monsters under the bed. While some youngsters race into new situations with enthusiasm, others become very anxious when they face a new school, day care, or babysitter.

Separation anxiety is common in small children. Child development experts are discovering that individual temperaments, circumstances, and parents’ reactions all influence how well children handle separation. According to Penelope Leach, author of “The Child Care Encyclopedia,” separation anxiety is the same emotion as being lost or stranded in a strange place. “We all don’t want to be deserted,” she says.

What are some positive ways to handle leaving your child? The following suggestions may help parting to be less painful—for both you and your child.

- **Understand from a child’s level.** The child who is afraid to leave Mom’s side needs an extra measure of loving attention, Leach says. She also advises not to load the anxious child down with many new routines. For instance, if you begin toilet training your child the same week he or she starts day care, he or she may become even more anxious. Wait until he or she feels comfortable with one change in routine before introducing another.
- **Consider your child’s circumstances.** Look for clues in recent events, especially if separation anxiety begins suddenly. Michael, age 3, cheerfully attended preschool and day care. Then he began to cling when his mother left. After a week of tearful departures, Michael’s mom figured things out.

“It finally dawned on me that my husband and I had recently gone away for a weekend, something we had never done before,” Sue recalled. “Understanding why Michael was upset helped my husband and me realize he needed extra attention.”

- **Explain when you’ll be back.** Use language a child understands. To a 4-year-old, “6 o’clock” sounds like forever. Tell your child you’ll be back after naptime or when “Sesame Street” is over.
- **Help them feel secure.** Stanley Greenspan, professor of psychiatry and pediatrics at George Washington University Medical School, says feeling secure is an important factor in mastering a new task. Symbols of security, such as blankets or stuffed toys, may help your child adjust more easily to school or day care.

My own experience, both as a teacher and as a caregiver, bears this out. “Lovies” brought to my home include Sammy the Seal, a hand puppet named Sharkey, and an odd assortment of blankets. One 3-year-old even brought his own toothpaste and toothbrush.

Objects can also help your child feel “grown-up.” A new backpack or lunch pail looks important to a preschooler. Going to school becomes as necessary as going to work is for Mom or Dad, even if “school” is day care. Kasey, age 2, proudly wears her hot pink backpack to my house every weekday. Her anxiety about leaving Mom has been replaced by her sense of independence. The backpack makes Kasey feel “big.”

- **Prepare them for the big day.** In kindergarten and preschools, the trend is towards home visitation. Teachers visit each new student at the child’s home before the school year begins. The child gets acquainted with the new teacher while in familiar surroundings. Then on the first day of class, the teacher is not a total stranger. Children are less likely to fear a teacher who has seen his or her students’ bedrooms and favorite possessions.

Most schools hold orientation sessions before the first day of classes. Visiting with Mom or Dad makes it easier to explore a new environment without worrying about being apart from them. Day care centers and homes should also allow a “get-acquainted” visit before you leave your child in care.

- **Say goodbye—then leave.** Even when parents take steps to avoid clinging, some children still cry and hold on. The most important part of leaving your child is a firm, yet positive goodbye.

Matthew’s mom, Darla, had trouble saying goodbye. Each day she gave into his pleas for “just one more” hug until she began to arrive late for work. “I had to learn not to let Matthew drag out our goodbyes,” she said. “Now I make sure I am cheerful, but brief. If I don’t act guilty, he accepts the situation.”

Once you have said goodbye, don’t hang around. Don’t try to slip away when your child is not looking, either—a disappearing act only complicates matters. If necessary, enlist the support of the person who will care for your child. Once children become interested in activities, they often forget to be anxious.

Even though separation tantrums seem like a negative experience, most children outgrow clinging as they become more independent. As Matthew’s mom put it, “Before you know it, he won’t want to go anywhere with me.”

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