

Parents and Children Learn to Endure Separation

by Linda Clare

Darla pried three-year-old Matthew's chubby fingers from her coat sleeve and thrust him at his caregiver. "Mommy's sorry she has to go to work," she apologized as Matthew wailed for her to stay. Back in the car, Darla cried, too.

As I wrote in last week's column, young children often go through a period of discomfort as they learn to separate from their parents. This phase can cause parents to experience more separation anxiety than their children. Parents who feel guilty when they leave their child often have trouble saying goodbye.

All parents feel guilty at times. When separating is a problem for your child, it will be your problem, too. But as Joseph Novello, M.D., points out in his book, "How To Survive Your Kids," feeling guilty isn't necessarily bad. It means you care.

When you worry too much, however, you move into an overprotective role. Overprotecting doesn't allow the child to experience the discomfort of learning separation skills. Guilt feelings regarding separation surface in different ways.

Deal with Guilt. By apologizing for working, Darla blames herself for Matthew's unhappiness. She sees Matthew's separation fears as failure to nurture him, and internalizes guilt by asking "What's wrong with me?"

By contrast, Joyce externalizes her separation anxiety by constantly finding fault with her daughter's preschool and care arrangements. She feels that if the teacher, school, or caregiver did things differently, Susie would be fine.

Both these parents feel something is wrong, and must affix blame, either to themselves or to the circumstances. But child expert Fitzhugh Dodson says the developmental task of separation is a normal phase that must be mastered by children.

One way to lessen the guilt is to talk it over with your spouse, a friend, caregiver or teacher. Be honest. Darla says, "My sitter pointed out that I had been so apologetic about leaving, it was no wonder Matthew was clinging. When I stopped acting guilty, he calmed down."

Don't Dawdle. Barbara lingered in Trevor's preschool classroom because he was afraid for her to leave. Frequently, she allowed him to miss the first hour of school because of his fears. By hovering over Trevor, Barbara slowed his adjustment to school.

Sarah's dad hovered over her by phone. He called the school office each day because she fussed when he left her in her first-grade classroom. At work, he worried about Sarah and couldn't believe she was all right so soon after his departure. A conference with Sarah's teacher finally persuaded him to stop phoning.

Mitzi Lytle, former child development coordinator for Eugene School District says, “In fact, most children adjust very quickly after the parent leaves. It’s best to work through separation anxieties early in the school year so that the child won’t be robbed of critical instruction time.”

A step-by-step transition might help parents and children let go more easily. Novello recommends a careful game plan to gradually learn to be apart. Begin by leaving your child for short trips to the store. Increase the time you are gone little by little. Before school starts, take your child to the school playground to get used to the surroundings while having fun.

Send Positive Messages. When my twins turned 4, I returned to work part-time. Like Darla, I apologized to them for working. When they sobbed as I left, I’d run to the car so I could blubber, too. My message to them said, “leaving is not something to feel good about.”

It wasn’t easy, but I learned to stay calm and cheerful. I stopped apologizing, and waited until I was out of sight to cry. By appearing self-assured, I conveyed a positive message and the twins felt more secure.

Four-year-old Danny got a different message. Each time he went to day care, he was promised new toys or a trip to the candy store before he stopped pouting. Danny understood clinging was a way to get things.

Indulging your child with bribes reinforces the message that you don’t think your child can do this on her own. Lytle says, “In my experience, rewards seldom cure separation anxiety in children.”

Remaining upbeat may be easier if you remind yourself that your child is learning to be independent and resourceful. In their booklet, “Learning to Love and Let Go,” Greta Mayer and Mary Hoover say that by sending a message that you are confident in your child’s ability to adjust, you strengthen his wish to do so.

For children, separation anxiety is usually a passing phase. But Moms and Dads may not be so lucky. Letting go of our children is a lifelong process. As Lytle points out, “Parents will always have tugs on the heart strings, no matter what age the child.”

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