

# Helping Your Child through Separation Anxiety

It is considered normal for children to show distress, anger, and sadness when separated from their primary caregiver within the early childhood years (0-5 years old). In fact, the emergence of separation anxiety often emerges around the time of a child's first birthday. Although this is a normal difficulty that many children experience, it is nonetheless unsettling for all parties involved - the child, the parent, and the other caregiver or adult. In fact, many parents experience extremely difficult emotions similar to their child's distress when separating. However, it is important to manage this distress effectively to allow your child to make gains in the areas of independence and trust.

Below is a list of some tips you can try in helping your child deal with separation anxiety.

- Talk with the other adult caregiver and develop a plan that will both increase your confidence and also ease your child's difficulty with saying goodbye. If you think about it, your child's teacher, babysitter, or day care worker might have some experience in helping other children with this difficulty. Hear what they have to say and trust their experience. Overall, any plan you develop should focus on praising and rewarding your child for being brave and independent.
- Be aware of the timing of your goodbyes. In essence, children are more likely to display unsettling reactions, such as tantruming, yelling, crying, and screaming, when they are tired, hungry, or restless. If at all possible, schedule your goodbyes after your child has napped and eaten a meal or snack.
- Practice separation for short periods of time before you expect your child to stay away from you for longer periods of time. Even if it is just for 15 minutes, this will help your child learn that you return after you leave, which is a lesson children in the younger age groups have difficulty truly comprehending
- It may also be helpful to prepare your child for the separation. This may involve informing them of the routine of driving somewhere, saying goodbye, and then meeting up again when you return. It may also be helpful for your child to meet the adult caregiver ahead of time if possible.
- When saying goodbye to your little one, remember to be calm and consistent. Remember, that if you show distress, he or she will likely increase in their discomfort. One way to improve your consistency is to create a goodbye ritual, consisting of a pleasant yet firm goodbye. You can also mention when you will be coming back, and where you will be while the two of you are separated. A special kiss or wave can also be comforting. Once you have said your goodbye or completed your goodbye ritual, then it is time to leave. If you linger or come back, you will likely create more distress in your child, as they will then be more uncertain about your separation.

- Also, when it comes time to say goodbye, connect with the adult caregiver who will be taking care of your child. It may be best for the adult caregiver to make physical contact, such as holding your child in their arms or holding hands with your child. Reassure your child that you know the adult caregiver will take good care of them while you are gone.
- Be sure to return when you have said you would return. This is critical, as you want your child to develop the confidence that separating from you is a consistent and predictable experience.

If your child persists with difficult behavior upon separating even after consistent efforts as suggested above, or if your child is 6-years-old or above, then advice from your pediatrician or a mental health professional may be necessary.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Bravery Goals**

1. **Participated in class.** 😊
2. **Tried something new on his/her own.** 😊
3. **Did not cry and smiled.** 😊

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