

Strategies for managing separation anxiety



If your child is suffering from separation anxiety, there are lots of things you can do to help her in the coming months.

Avoiding separations from your child because she gets upset can make the problem worse.

The key is to gently encourage your child to separate from you by practicing as often as possible. The more positive experiences of separations and reunions your child receives now, the better she will be able to cope next year.



- ✓ **Develop a strong and predictable morning routine now.**

Going to school for the first time will be demanding for your child, especially if she is very anxious. Don't put extra pressure on her now by saying things like 'You'll need to be able to do this when you go to big school next year.' Instead, structure your mornings so that they are as stress-free and predictable as possible and then continue this routine next year. Your child will manage better when she has had lots of practice.

- ✓ **Tell your child when you're leaving and when you'll be back.**

Some parents feel that it's easier to sneak out when their child is settled, but this can make things worse – your child might feel confused or upset when she realises you're not around, and might then be more difficult to settle the next time you leave her. Start practicing your farewells now. Every time you leave your child at preschool or with friends or relatives, tell her when you'll be back...and most importantly, make sure you keep your promise! Parents who do not arrive when they say they will can make separation anxiety worse for a child.

- ✓ **Say goodbye to your child briefly – don't drag it out.**

Teachers will tell you that the vast majority of children recover from the emotion of separating from their parent or care-giver within minutes of being. Leaving a tearful, sometimes hysterical child is never easy, but with the help of your child's current early educators, you can help your child to rehearse these farewells and become more used to them.

- ✓ **Keep a relaxed and happy expression on your face when you're leaving your child.**

If you seem worried or sad, your child might think that school isn't safe and can get upset too. Stay calm, reassure your child that you love her and that you will be back for her...and then go! If you need to take a moment to compose yourself, do it away from your child's line of sight because if she thinks that you are sad, she will be sad too.

- ✓ **In the months before school starts, spend time at school with your child.**

You are likely to be invited to your child's new school for an orientation day or two this year, however if your child is very anxious, these group sessions may not be enough. Speak to the school about arranging some extra visits so that your child becomes familiar with their new environment and knows she's being left in a safe place with people you can both trust.

✓ **Allow your child to take a reminder of home with her.**

To increase your child's feelings of safety, let her take something she loves from home, such as a very small toy or even something of yours such as a handkerchief or photo on a keyring. If she needs to feel close to you during the day, teachers can direct her to these objects and remind her of your love for her. These objects can be gradually phased out as she becomes more settled.

✓ **No matter how frustrated you feel, avoid criticizing or being negative about your child's difficulty with separation.**

Separation anxiety is all about emotion, and it's not helpful to add to your child's already heightened feelings by telling her that her feelings are silly. Avoid saying things like, 'He's such a mummy's boy' or 'Don't be such a baby'. These kinds of statements are rarely helpful and can make it harder for an anxious child to manage their emotions.

✓ **Show empathy when your child is upset**

Sometimes, children melt down because they want to make sure you notice how they are feeling. Instead of downplaying your child's separation anxiety, acknowledge the way that she is feeling. Words like 'It's hard to say goodbye, I know' or 'I can see that you're sad that Mummy is leaving' show your child that you do understand how she is feeling. With these responses, your child will know that you understand. Showing empathy is a positive strategy that you can use in any situation with your child and can be particularly calming for an anxious child who is very upset.

✓ **Read books or make up stories with your child about separation fears.**

Social stories are a great way to familiarize children with challenges that they find difficult. On and off-line bookstores have some excellent story books that could help your child separate from you and get used to the idea that children need to be independent from their parents. Some great books to start with include:

- *Owl Babies by Martin Waddell*
- *Lama Lama Misses Mama by Ann Dewdney*
- *The Kissing Hand by Audrey Penn*
- *First Day Jitters, by Julie Danneburg and Judith Dufour Love*

If your child is very anxious, talk to the teachers at her new school this year so that they, and you, can develop a support strategy that will meet your child's needs in those early days and weeks of next year. Remember, Kindy and Prep teachers usually have lots of experience and have supported many kids and parents through the transition to 'big school'. Trust them! They know what they're doing!

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