Separation Anxiety at Child Care and at School

Your 2-year-old cries and clings to your leg when you say goodbye at child care. Your 10-month-old baby wants to be with you every minute and will accept no substitutes. Your 5-year-old cries every Monday morning and begs to stay home from school.

Clingy and tearful goodbyes are a part of the daily routine for many parents of young children. They are perfectly normal, but that doesn’t make it any easier to hear your child’sanguished pleas at the start of your workday every morning. If you find that saying goodbye is the hardest part of your day, there are some steps you can take to make life easier for everyone.

What is separation anxiety?
Sometime between the ages of 7 and 13 months, babies become intensely aware of the difference between their parents and strangers. Many toddlers become clingy, wanting to be near one parent all the time. As children grow older, they gain an understanding of the routines of coming and going, and most become comfortable over time with the goodbyes in their daily schedule. But even school-age children can go through the same separation worries when there’s a change in the routine -- a new caregiver or teacher, a new school, or the first week of kindergarten.

Separation anxiety is a normal and healthy part of development. It means that there is a close and loving bond between you and your child. But tearful goodbyes can also be painful, and can make it harder for you to head off to work with confidence that your child is happy and in good hands.

Coping with separation at different ages
Infants
Babies don’t realize that when you leave you’ll return again. When your baby experiences separation from you, his reaction will probably depend on his temperament and personality. One baby may fuss when you leave but then will be distracted by his curiosity about new people or surroundings. Another baby, who finds changes of any kind stressful, may well cry longer and show greater distress when you begin to leave. If your baby tends to find change more difficult, you may need to plan a very gradual transition toward separation -- taking time to work up to longer absences. Here are some tips for easing separation anxiety in infants:
• Practice separating. Try leaving your baby with a relative or other caregiver. Start with a short absence of an hour or so, and gradually increase the amount of time you’re away to three or four hours at a time.

• If your baby is breastfed, occasionally use a bottle. Letting friends and relatives sometimes feed your child will help her prepare for time apart from you.

• Leave the door of her room open at naptime. A child care center or a family member’s house will have all sorts of unfamiliar noises. Let your child get used to different sounds.

• Anticipate changes. If your infant will be using a different type of diaper or bottle at child care, begin getting her used to that type of bottle or diaper at home.

Toddlers and preschoolers
Toddlers and preschoolers reactions to separation reflect their temperaments and personalities. Your toddler or preschooler may be the one who is very excited about a new child care situation or the toys and other children at the house of a family friend. He may play happily until you return and then burst into tears when he sees you arrive to take him home. These pick-up time tears actually reflect the fact that he feels safe in expressing any vulnerability because you, his anchor, have arrived.

Your little one may be the one who seems content at first but becomes worried and upset when the novelty of the situation wears off. Your caregiver will not be surprised by this typical reaction and will be prepared to be comforting and reassuring.

It may be that your child is the one who clings to you and cries long and loud when you try to leave. He will probably need a little more time with you before you leave. Your reassurance that you love him, that you know this is a good place for him to be, and that you will return for him may not seem to be getting through. But over time he will begin to trust the consistent pattern and discover activities he enjoys.

All of these reactions to separation are completely normal, and all of these children will learn to handle separation. There are some things that you can do to help:

• Visit a new setting before you will be leaving him there. Take your child to visit his child care provider before the first day, staying a little longer each time. When your child is comfortable, leave him alone with the caregiver, increasing your time away.
• Talk to your child’s caregiver. Ask for advice about how to introduce your child into his new routine gradually. Make sure your caregiver knows your child’s eating and napping schedule, as well as his favorite games or activities. Sticking to a familiar routine will make your child feel safer and more secure.

• Try reading a book to your child about a child who is having a new experience being apart from her parents -- going to child care for the first time, or to play at a friend’s house. Talk with her about how you and she will be doing something similar.

• “Rehearse” the separation. For many children knowing what to expect makes the transition easier. If your child enjoys dramatic play, or “make-believe,” you can try acting out “going to child care.” Your child will probably give you lots of cues about what he needs to know. You can act out going in the car to, for example, the child care center. When we go inside, Jane will be there to say hello to you. We will take off your jacket, hang it up, and you can see who is there and what they are doing. Then I will give you a big hug and say, “Mommy is going to work now. I love you and I will come back to take you home after it gets dark outside.” Many children enjoy this and will want to add even more steps and details. This kind of play often stimulates children to ask questions they might not otherwise ask, such as “Will I sleep there at night?”

• Plan the first day. Leave plenty of time to get ready on the first full day of care. Rushing can make your child nervous. Stay with your child for at least an hour to make sure he’s comfortable.

• Give your child a familiar object to take along. A favorite stuffed animal or crib toy may make separation less painful.

• Be enthusiastic. Talk about the new friends he will make and the games he’ll learn.

• Express your feelings. Let your child know that you’ll miss him when he’s at grandma’s house, but that you know he will be taken care of by people you like.

• Say when you’ll be back. Describe when you’ll return in terms of an event: “I’ll be back after your afternoon nap,” or “We’ll have dinner together tonight.”

• Always say goodbye. Never try to slip away when your child is busy. Your child needs to know that you haven’t disappeared, but have left for a while and will be back soon.

• Follow a routine. Giving three kisses every morning or waving and saying “Bye for now” will help your child learn what to expect when you leave. Your child may respond best to a goodbye ritual that he helps to create.
Offer extra support. While your child is adjusting, give plenty of hugs and praise. Try to keep other major changes to a minimum.

In child care, children learn to say goodbye every day. Your child may feel a little sadder about leaving you on Mondays than on other days. On Fridays, he may feel a little sad about leaving child care for the weekend. These feelings are normal. Remember that your child is learning the joys of being together again, along with the sadness of saying goodbye.

School-age children
Children entering kindergarten and the primary grades usually still need support when they are entering school for the first time, or moving on to a new grade, classroom, or teacher. Being prepared will help your child feel secure. Tell her as much about a new situation as you can. If, for example, your child is entering a new school or a new after-school program, talk about the activities she'll take part in and the friends she'll make. Also discuss practical questions, such as how she'll get to the school or program and back home again.

Visit the new school or after-school program with your child before she actually starts to attend. If she has not already met her new teacher or caregivers, try to arrange to have her meet them.

If you are in a new community, try to find other families with a child who will be attending the same grade or after-school program as your child. Many schools have a contact list for new parents. After-school programs may share their parent list to help you find other families nearby.

Arrange for your child to be with friends. If your child already knows someone in a new school or after-school program, see if they can arrive together on the first day.

Share your own experiences. Tell a story about changes you made at school when you were a child, how you felt at first, and how it worked out in the end.

If it's feasible, help your child to remain in contact with old caregivers or teachers.

Offer to take your child back for a visit to her old caregivers or teacher if you are still in the same community. If not, you might ask her if she wants to send a postcard or drawing of your new community to them.

Once the school year has started, keep in touch with your child's new teacher or caregiver. Find out how your child is adjusting. Let her teachers and caregivers know about any problems or concerns at home that might affect how she will get along at school or in the after-school program.

Listen. Talk to your child frequently about what school and her teacher are like. Ask her to tell you about the children in her class. Some children will do
this easily and spontaneously. If your child is less talkative, try to draw her out to find out whether she is worrying about something at school.

• Notice. Does your child seem to be making friends or continuing relationships she already has? Is she enjoying activities at or after school?

**Helping your child say goodbye to a caregiver or teacher**

Part of your child’s process of learning about separation will be learning to say goodbye to other adults she has come to know and trust. Your family may be moving or you may be changing child care arrangements. Your child’s caregiver or teacher may be moving away or leaving, or your child may be moving to a new group or classroom. It will be important to plan how to help your child to say goodbye.

• Talk about the future. Both you and your child’s caregiver should talk to your child about the change ahead. Often young children are not only sad about saying goodbye; they may be worried about whether a new adult will like them. You may hear your child say things like, “Gloria knows how to push me on the swing just the way I want it. The new lady won’t know that.” You might say, “Remember when I first brought you to Gloria, she didn’t know you very well, but you got to know each other well. I’ll bet you can do that with your new teacher.”

• Stay in touch. If your child is moving to a new classroom or group, he will usually have opportunities to continue to see his former caregiver or teacher. If possible, you might even arrange a visit. If you know that will not be feasible, because the change is a move or a departure, your child will certainly have some sad feelings, and it is important to acknowledge these, and help him to talk about them. “I can see that you are sad about saying goodbye to Jackie. Can you try to tell her you will miss her? Do you want to tell her how much you liked singing with her? Would you like to make a picture to give her to help her remember you?”

• Be upbeat. Emphasize the positives about the new situation. Help your child to be aware of things to look forward to in the new situation.

**What if my child doesn’t adjust?**

Children who feel less secure try to make their parents stay by crying or having a tantrum. If your child knows she can make you stay, she will lose faith in the child care arrangement. That’s why it’s important to be firm when saying goodbye.

If your child continues to object loudly when you leave and is unhappy at child care for more than the first month, there may be a problem. Talk to your child’s caregiver about how your child does during the day. Is she rejecting or clinging to the caregiver? Is she able to enjoy playing with other children at all?
Does she get involved with any of the day’s activities? Is she eating and napping normally? You can also ask your child what she does during the day and how she is feeling. Try spending a few hours at child care to see how things are going.

Your caregiver may be able to give you valuable insights and advice. Sometimes children have a long, difficult struggle with separation, but can ultimately and positively resolve it. If, however, you have concerns that the caregiver may not be sensitive to your child’s feelings and needs, you may want to look for another arrangement. You and your child may have learned some new things about his needs and tolerances. Some children, for example, are more comfortable in a smaller setting like a family child care home, while others want the activity level and stimulation of larger groups of children in a center.

Dealing with your own feelings
Children aren’t the only ones who have a hard time separating. You may feel sad about leaving your child, and many parents struggle with feelings of guilt, even when they have done everything they can to find a good situation for their child and to prepare him as well as they can. Even though most mothers of young children are in the work force these days, the image of the stay-at-home mom is still the image many parents carry in their imaginations as “the right way” to be a parent. Even before the separation takes place, it will be important for you as a parent to work on reassuring yourself that you are doing the best you can. Part of this process will involve being realistic and setting priorities about what your child needs most from you.

Forgive yourself ahead of time for the fact that there will be mornings when you are stressed and rushed and evenings when you are tired. Don’t feel guilty about taking advantage of timesavers and shortcuts in preparing meals and doing household chores during the week -- the most important thing your child needs from you is your love and attention. Eating dinner together (even if it’s takeout food you picked up on the way home) is what is important, and some time spent in the evening to talk or play together, to read a story, or to get ready to go to sleep. There are also some things you can do to help yourself with the transition:

- Ask for advice. Talk to other parents about how they handle separation. It helps to know your feelings are normal.

- When you drop your child off, make sure he is OK. If your child is crying when you say goodbye, you might stand outside the door (out of view) until you hear his cries stop, or call your caregiver once you get to work to make sure your child has calmed down. Knowing your child is playing happily will make your day less stressful.
• When you drop your child off, give yourself time to calm down. After saying goodbye, take a short walk if you have time, or find a quiet place (even your car) to take some deep breaths and try to relax.

• Remember there will be bad days. There will be times when you and your child have both had a bad day, and you feel that neither of you will be able to cope. Try to remember that this happens to every parent -- there is no such thing as a stress-free family. Try to be good to yourself and your child on those days.

• Remember that you know your child best. If friends or relatives criticize your child care decisions, try saying, “You might choose something different, but this is what’s right for us.”

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