

Separation Anxiety

It's normal, but it isn't easy.

"But you said you'd stay with me!" Kate demands with a strong voice and tears welling. "Don't go, I don't want you to go mom." Kate's mom lovingly explains to her that she is a big girl now, and mom will be back to pick her up very soon. Kate, a very expressive three year old explains to her mom, on her first day of school, "I hate this place, let's go and just get out of here and never come back!!!" Been there before? How painful is this? Yes, it hurts you as the parent, and it does hurt for the child as well. But we must understand that separation anxiety is all part of a child's developmental process, it is normal and things will get better!

Separation anxiety is defined as fear that children experience when separated from a parent, friend, toy, or activity. Separation anxiety may occur when a child begins school. This could be triggered by an actual unpleasant incident at school, or related to how a child is dealing with a situation at home. Children often do not want to be separated from their parents when there is fighting at home, separation or divorce, one parent working out of town, or an illness in the family. Young children may perceive these situations as their fault and if they do separate from the one parent they may be abandoned all together. Children's fear of separation ranges from mild to severe. A young child may be hugging their mom's neck or dad's leg quite adamantly with a few tears when saying good bye. This may be a pre-verbal child sending the simple message to his parents that he loves them and will miss them. These actions are the only means that he presently may have to express himself. On the other hand, turning the corner to get to school could be very devastating to a child, much less getting out of the car and heading into their classroom.

Children need to feel unconditionally loved regardless of their age. They must be reassured by parents often that they are loved and you will return. If you have chosen a wonderful school for your child and feel certain that their anxiety is not related to anything the staff is doing or not doing then you should strongly encourage your child to return to school and not give in to their desperate pleas to avoid it. This is not to say that you should not be aware of what your child is feeling and that you should not deal with it. This must be dealt with right away or the fear will only worsen over time and create bigger problems for you and your child later in life. Parents may want to confront their child's teacher about their anxiety and get suggestions on how it should be addressed.

Kate's mom wanted to empower Kate by allowing her to make the decision of when it was okay for her to leave the classroom. Their family is happy and healthy, however, dad is a commuter, and they only see him on weekends. No offense to dad, because he is doing the best he can to be a strong provider for the family. However, this has created a fear of separation for Kate from mom. This is not the end of the world, and that's what parents need to realize. It is only a stage that they are going through, and we need to be aware of their feelings, validate them, and follow through with what we say we are going to do.

When separation anxiety does occur . . .

- Identify the situation and what is causing the anxiety.
- Communicate with your child, (regardless of how young they are). Prepare them for what will happen next and what to anticipate in time terms they understand. For example, if you want to cue them for when they will leave for school, tell them when the Blues Clues tape is over, not in 5 minutes, or at 8:30.

- Transition them with ease. Use songs to prompt them for bath time, bed time, or clean up time. For example, Barney's clean-up song. They begin to understand this as a transition. They perceive it as my activity time has ended, it is now time to clean up, and prepare for something new.
- Validate their feelings of anxiety. Allow them to appropriately express their feelings and emotions. Hug them and explain to them that you do understand how they feel, and they will have a great time and you will return.
- **Be careful NOT** to transfer your own fear. When telling a child good bye, remember to do so with a great big gleam on your face. If you have wet, teary, red eyes and look panicked when you tell them bye, you will definitely make your fears their's.

By taking these steps to deal with your children's separation anxiety you are helping them learn to trust you and this fosters development of their self esteem and trust in themselves and future relationships. Building a child's self esteem and reducing their anxiety and stress assists children in approaching others and new life experiences with less fear.

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