

Tip Sheets

Separation Anxiety in Infants and Toddlers

It is normal for children to feel sad and have a difficult time transitioning to child care when they are separated from their primary caregiver. They may even develop **separation anxiety** and need extra support from the grown-ups in their life.

What is Anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of worry, nervousness, or uneasiness that is typically related to an upcoming event or something with an uncertain outcome.

What is Separation Anxiety?

Separation anxiety is anxiety that is provoked by separation- or the threat of separation from a caregiver. This typically occurs after a child has developed object permanence (understanding the concept that people and objects continue to exist even when not seen, smelled, touched, or heard).

Separation Anxiety in Different Age Groups

Young children may experience separation anxiety during the daily transition from home to child care. Here are some typical behaviors/tips for each age:

Birth–7 Months

- Though parents may have difficulty separating from their young infants, children in this age group generally have an easy transition to a consistent early care and education setting.
- During this time, infants need love, comforting, and basic care to satisfy their physical needs.

7–12 Months

- It is normal for children to develop stranger anxiety at this age.

- A baby may become distressed when going to child care for the first, changing centers, or being cared for by someone outside the family.
- Ease the child into the new environment.
- If a child is already familiar with their child care program, but begins to become upset:
 - Help the parents develop a short and simple good-by routine. (Parents can kiss/hug the child and tell them they are leaving and when they will return. Then leave.)
 - If a child begins to cry, assure the parent that the child will be okay and encourage them to leave. Follow up with parents to let them know the child has calmed down.

12–24 Months

- Separation anxiety often peaks at this age. The child may cling and cry when the parent leaves.
- It is important to consider that the child may not truly understand that the parent will return.
- Reassure the child that their parents *will* return.
- Remind the parent not to reappear until they are ready to bring their child home.

Toddlers

- Some children do not have separation anxiety as an infant, but develop it as a toddler between the ages of 15–18 months.
- You may find that separations are more difficult when the child is feeling hungry, tired, or ill.
- Behaviors will likely be loud or tearful, and the child may be difficult to regulate.

Strategies to Support Transitions

The following tools and strategies may help make the drop-off transition less challenging.

Getting to Know Each Other

In the beginning, it is helpful for the child to spend time with their parents and program staff at the same time. (For example, you could have the family arrive early on the first day). Having parents share likes and dislikes, routines, and other important details about the child can also aid in the child feeling known by the program.

Practice

Practice saying “bye-bye” by having stuffed animals go on pretend journeys and return. Playing games like peek-a-boo can also teach that parents will return. Leaving children with familiar adults for shorter increments of time (30 minutes to an hour) can increase the child’s comfort level. This will also teach the child that their loved ones return.

Familiarity/Predictability

Parents can help ease anxiety in new situations by spending time getting their child familiar with their surroundings and having a consistent routine. They might also provide something from home like a favorite toy or blanket to remind the child of the feelings of security and comfort at home.

Having a predictable home routine that encourages positive connections can be helpful for the child. Consistent playtimes, mealtimes, and bedtimes help children feel secure and helps a child adjust to being away from parents/caregivers.

Always Say Goodbye

Encourage the parents to always say goodbye. Sneaking off while the child is distracted or crying may make the next departure even more difficult. A goodbye routine will comfort the child and parent.

Courtesy Cry

Remember that crying is one way that infants and toddlers communicate their needs and feelings. It is normal for children to cry when being dropped off. Oftentimes, the child quickly stops crying once

their parent/caregiver leaves and child begins having fun. In this case, children are likely communicating that they would prefer to stay with their caregiver, but will be just fine at child care.

Go — It will be OK!

It is natural for a parent/caregiver to want to console a crying child. But, staying to offer comfort can prolong the transition—and the child’s distress. Instead, when parents leave with a hug, kiss, and a reminder that they will be back, children will usually stop crying before the parent gets to their car.

Photos

Having photos of the child’s family and pets in a photo album or on a wall may allow the child to feel close to their loved ones while separated. Many times, child care programs also send photos of children to parents at work. Having a photo of the parent at work may be useful for the child.

Voice Recordings

Hearing a recording of a parent reading a story, singing a song, or saying *I love you* may help a child calm down.

Reuniting

Having reunion rituals is important and will aid in helping children know that their loved ones will return. Encourage parents to be present during this time and interact and play with their child to support their bond. (It might be good to leave the cell phone in the car so that when the child reaches up to get a great big hug there are no distractions).

For more information, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

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