

Easing Separation Anxiety

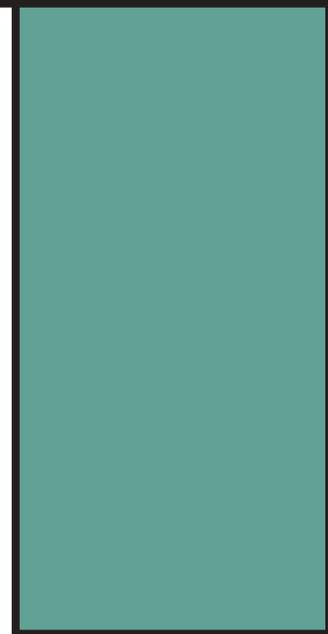
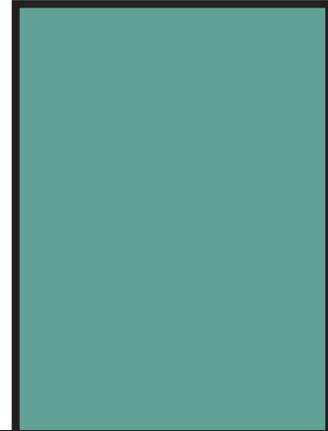
Is there any parent around who hasn't had to leave a sobbing toddler behind at daycare or preschool, Leaving for home or work feeling guilty? With more mothers working today than ever, and with more children starting their school experience at a very young age, this scene has become more and more common. Years ago, young children were cared for by their mothers or other extended family members until they were ready to go to first grade or kindergarten (sometimes called Pre1a). Today, however, children go into daycare at a very young age and, as a result, separation from parents occurs much earlier than ever before.

- No matter how old your child is, leaving him with a caregiver or teacher for the first time usually triggers "separation anxiety." The degree of separation anxiety a child exhibits varies, depending on his temperament and other factors. There are some children who are able to say "good-bye" easily. But most children cry, scream or cling to their mother or father.

- Separation anxiety can take different forms. Most often, your child may not want to go on to the school bus or into the classroom. He or she may not want you to leave and may throw a crying fit or a temper tantrum. Once you're gone, your child may refuse to make eye contact with the teacher or refuse to play with the other children. Some children may go willingly for the first few days and then refuse to go back afterwards. And some children may regress and have toileting accidents or start sucking their thumbs.

- Separation anxiety is a normal reaction to leaving a parent. From around seven months of age, a baby shows signs of clinging to you as you leave the room. Separation anxiety usually peaks at nine months of age and reappears when a child is a toddler, or around 18-24 months old. And separation anxiety is not necessarily bad. A child who protests being separated from his parents is showing that he's formed an attachment and that he cares for a person other than himself. Caring about someone marks a big step in a child's emotional development.

Even so, most parents find separating from a crying and pleading toddler very difficult, There are, however, some things you can do to prepare your child that will help make sending your child to school less of a traumatic experience.



The first step, however, in dealing with separation anxiety is for parents to get in touch with and understand their own feelings. We are all understandably anxious when we first send a child to be cared for by others. Recognize your own anxiety. This will allow you to be more in control of your own behavior. If you know you are anxious, you will be careful not to make statements or exhibit body language that will provoke anxiety or exaggerate already existing anxiety. Often it is the interaction of child's anxiety with that of the adult which triggers the most intense emotion in the child.

Things You Can Do to Prepare Your Child

Trying some of these suggestions may make the transition from parent to teacher or care provider a little easier.

- * Tell your child what to expect. Describe the school building, the room he'll be in, and the person he'll be meeting on the first day.
- * Acknowledge your child's apprehensive feelings. It's normal for a child to be fearful of the unknown. You might reassure him by saying, "You're feeling sad because we won't be together today. I'll miss you too." Or, "Teacher Deborah will take care of you, and then after recess, I'll pick you up and we'll go to the supermarket."
- * Discuss what your child will do at preschool and when he will come home in terms she can understand. For example, you could say, "After snack time, you'll go outside to play. I'll come back to pick you up (or, the bus will bring you home) during that time."
- * Talk to other children about their experiences in

daycare. Have a brother or sister, cousin or neighbor share their daycare experiences with you and your child.

- * Walk or drive past the school or daycare center. Talk about what you see and answer all your child's questions. If you don't know the answers to your preschooler's questions, write them down and call or ask about them before the child goes to school.
- * Arrange a tour of the program your child will enter. Before the first day of school, meet the teachers, show him his classroom, and let him watch some children engaged in daily activities.



- * Read books about going to school or daycare. Choose books that address separation issues.

- * Make the separation gradual. Have your child stay at the daycare center alone for a short time, then for half a day and finally for longer periods.

- * Show or tell your child where you'll be during the day while he is gone from home. Explain in simple terms where you'll be until you come back to pick him up or the bus drops him off.

- * Follow a routine. This should include packing up his knapsack before he goes to bed at night and saying good-bye at daycare or at the bus stop. Some parents give choices like, "Would you like one, two or three kisses before I go?"

- * Keep your good-byes short. Smile and follow through on the routine including good-bye, then leave. Don't dilly-dally or your child will sense

your ambivalence and don't sneak out because then your child won't trust you.

* Notice what the child enjoys and ask the teacher to offer it each day. If she likes painting or playing with a puppet, make sure it is available. It will make drop-off time easier.

* Let your child bring items from home to comfort him. Photographs of family members, blankets, pacifiers, or some other "transitional object" like a favorite doll all help make the connection to home.

* Involve your child's teacher. The teacher or caregiver is your ally in helping ease your child's transition. Discuss any problems your child may be having and use the teacher as a valuable resource.

* If you pick up your child, always come at the time you promise you will be there. If your child knows you'll always return on time, she'll be more comfortable staying in daycare.

If you're alert to the signs of separation anxiety in your child and work to prepare him or her for the preschool experience, your child will benefit for

years to come. When children learn that they can feel secure away from Mommy and Daddy, they have an easier time making friends, being independent, and growing into confident adults. So when you help ease your child's "separation anxiety" in daycare, you're not only preparing him or her for "big boy" or "big girl" school, but also for the rest of life.



RESOURCES

BOOKS FOR PARENTS

Monsters Under the Bed & Other Childhood Fears by Stephen & Marianne Garber & Robyn Spizman (Villard Books, 1993).

More Effective Jewish Parenting by Miriam Levy (Artsroll, 1998)

Touchpoints Three to Six: Your Child's Emotional & Behavioral Development by T. Berry Brazelton & Joshua D. Sparrow (Perseus Publishing, 2001).

BOOKS FOR CHILDREN

The Berenstain Bears Go to School by Stan & Jan Berenstain. (Random House, 1978).

Betsy's First Day at Nursery School by Gunilla Wold (Random House, 1982).

A Child Goes to School: A Storybook for Parents and Children Together by Sara Bonnerstein (Doubleday, 1978).

Going to Day Care by Fred Rogers (G.P. Putnam's & Sons, 1985).

I Go to School by Rikki Benefeld (Hachai Publishing, 1998)

I'd Rather Stay Home by Carol Barkin & Elizabeth James (Raintree Educational).

My Going to School Book by Freddi Felt (F&F Publishing Company, 1987).

Tell Me What You Think by Tzila Margalit (Feldheim, 2002)

Will I Have a Friend? By Miriam Cohen (Macmillan, 1987).