Parenting Exchange

Persistent Separation Problems Pose Tough Choices

by Karen Stephens

Parenting Exchange columns, "Dealing With Separation Teaches Valuable Lessons" and "More Tips for Coping With Separation Anxiety" shared ideas for responding to children's typical separation issues. This column will address responding to persistent parent-child separation problems that are magnified and less typical and linger longer.

Many think separation anxiety only attacks children, but this line in Kathi Appelt's children's book, *Oh My Baby, Little One*, set the record straight: "Oh my baby, little one, the hardest thing I do is hold you tight, then let you go, and walk away from you." Yes, parents can be just as overwhelmed and scared about goodbyes as kids. Regardless, short periods of separation become necessary for children's development. Truth is, we can always be in our kids' hearts, but not always by their side.

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For most kids, the first transition from home to child care or school is a bit bumpy, but it smoothes out rather quickly. What seems to parents like months of struggle is usually just a matter of weeks. Here's one of my favorite memories of watching the process unfold.

I was holding the play yard screen door open for preschoolers coming inside for music. A stream of eager faces flowed under my arm, each one knowing what to do, where to go, and what was happening next. As three-year-old Alice passed by she brightly announced, "This isn't my first day anymore!" I cheered, "You're right. It's already your 13th day at our center! I'm glad you're here."

That same day Alice parked her big wheel in the right spot and told a nearby adult, "I know where it goes 'cause this isn't my first day anymore!" Her pride and sense of relief was unmistakable. Alice made it safely across the shaky bridge from home to child care. She was right on schedule. Within two weeks she'd adjusted to a new setting, new friends, and new teachers. And she thrived.

But for some kids, separations are overwhelming and debilitating, usually through no fault of their own. Sometimes unexpected events demand too much of children's energy and emotional reserves. A major move, death of a family member or pet, or recovery from illness makes it harder for kids to cope with pangs of separation. Family circumstances also affect kids' adjustment. Children coping with family violence or divorce already juggle a lot of stress. The pressure intensifies when new transitions are foisted upon them.

Some children have been abandoned by parents, literally or emotionally, such as when a parent disappears into chronic depression or substance abuse. For those kids, fear of separation is real. After all, they're used to unreliable caregiving. They honestly don't trust their parents will return and fear they'll be forgotten. In those circumstances, I'd struggle with goodbye, too.

Sometimes a parent's own ambivalence fuels children's anxiety. In fact, some kids are ready to separate, but their parents aren't. A parent's words may be supportive, but his or her body language speaks otherwise. Kids get mixed messages. If parents are grappling with guilt or worry about "their baby" growing up; they can make kids feel that going to child care or school is a bad thing to be dreaded. And some parents are so emotionally needy they secretly want their child to remain dependent. Kids can sense that desperation and will feel disloyal if they do begin to bond with caregivers or teachers.

One year, I saw a parent's struggle that was particularly hard to watch. Every day for months she pleaded with her four-year-old Micki to have a happy day at child care. Then, with tears in her own eyes, she'd give Micki a huge, almost never-ending hug. The minute Mom mustered the will to leave; Micki flew into an exaggerated crying fit. So mom stayed a half hour longer. She'd try to leave again, and Micki would fall apart again. Mom had a weak backbone; it swayed with the winds of tantrums.

Then mom tried something else. She told Micki if she had a "happy" day at child care, she'd bring her (and I'm not making this up) a five pound box of chocolate candy. Mom actually did leave then. But the bribe didn't serve a good purpose. For days on end Micki tearfully went from teacher to teacher asking them to tell her mom that she had a "happy" day. She wanted that candy, and she didn't mind asking teachers to lie for her so she could get it.

What Micki really needed was a parent who was far less confusing and far more decisive and consistent. One who was brave enough not to stoop to bribery. After months of prolonged torture (for everyone,) the parent dropped out of college and kept her child at home with her. I think that's what mom wanted anyway. For her child's sake, I wish she'd confronted her quandaries earlier.

Regardless of whether it's circumstance, parent hesitation, or a child's development, some kids just aren't emotionally ready for separation from parents. Causes for that vary. Perhaps the child care center and the child's temperament isn't a good match. If so, new care can be found that features a smaller group size, such a family child care home. Or a skilled caregiver can come into the home, so a child only has to adjust to a new person, not a whole new environment.

Though rarely an option for single parents, two-parent families might work split shifts so outside care isn't needed. Some families may decide to put off both parents working outside of the home until the child is a little older or more secure. When facing tough separation problems, there's never any easy answer, just one that has more pros than cons.

To help you with separation problems, I've listed signs that a transition from home care is premature or ill timed for your child. If behaviors persist for two months or longer, you have soul searching to do and choices to make. For help, obtain guidance from a family therapist or an early childhood specialist. If your child is school-aged, ask the school counselor for insight. Together you can work toward a solution that is in your child's best interests.

Signs of Separation Problems

1. Child wakes up crying and cries through morning routine.
2. Child physically fights to avoid being placed into the car.
3. Depression surfaces, such as irregular sleep or eating patterns or self-inflicted pain.
4. Child must be peeled from parent at separation. An hour later, there's still crying.
5. Child regresses in toilet mastery (if it was achieved prior to transition.)
6. Child withdraws into a corner or cubby refusing to partake in any activity.
7. Child carries security object around constantly. Anything that requires putting it down, such as using blocks, painting, or going potty causes visible distress and even tantrums.
8. Child fails to form an attachment or relationship with a particular classroom teacher, caregiver, or other child. He shows no interest in children's invitations to play.
9. Child is inconsolable and resists comfort from adults, even parents.
10. Child acts out persistent anger with children or adults, such as chronic, continual hitting or biting.

Book Citation

Oh, My Baby, Little One by Kathi Appelt (New York: Harcourt, 2000).

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.