

More Tips for Coping With Separation Anxiety: Part 2



by Karen Stephens

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As children leave infancy, separation between parent and child is not only inevitable, it's desirable. Our nestlings must fledge one tiny-wing step at a time. If we don't prepare children for those steps, we leave them ill-equipped. Children need the self-confidence and strength to fly on their own, a little bit away from our sheltering wing.

When kids enter a new child care or school, there can be some turbulent goodbyes as they first get used to the separation from mom and pop. If parents and caregivers keep to a consistent routine, struggles usually smooth out within two weeks. Children (and parents!) adjust to separation differently, some easier, some harder, with most wavering in-between. And some kids do great at first, then regress once they realize it's now their regular routine.

Handling separation anxiety takes versatility, a bit of finesse, and a lot of patience, but I'm sure you're up to the challenge. I shared some beginning tips in Parenting Exchange column, "Dealing with separation teaches valuable lessons." This column shares more tips to help you and the kids cope with the pangs of parting.

More tips for separation anxiety

- Give children time to warm up to their new setting. For infants, toddlers, and twos, some programs request parents bring children in for shorter periods at first, gradually increasing the time over a two-week period. The first visits might even include mom or dad staying the whole time. If your work and family leave schedule can swing it, it's a good strategy. The very minimum warm up period would include one visit with mom and dad staying for several hours.
- Admittedly, some programs discourage parents from staying during warm up and first day(s) visits. However, a policy requiring children to endure cold turkey adjustment to new child care is not supported by research on kids' developmental needs. If a program doesn't cooperate with parents being present for warm ups, keep looking for more appropriate child care.
- From a child's perspective, a new child care or school is overwhelming and hectic. From the sidelines, help her analyze what she's seeing. Bend to her eye level and share observations: "Children are painting on easels. Some are riding big wheels outside. I wonder which one you'll do today."
- Trust your child's instincts and individual approach. Don't push your child into activities based on the theory of sink or swim. It doesn't work. If your child stands behind your legs and peers through your knees at children singing, that's a good start. He'll join in once the spirit moves him. Pressure and prodding doesn't speed the process; it usually makes kids dig their heels in.
- Once the beginning adjustment period has settled, daily morning drop-off routines should be predictable and matter-of-fact. Stay for a few minutes (up to 30 depending on your schedule) to help children settle in. Sign in and greet other families and teachers together. Help your child place coats and comfort items in his cubby.
- Tell your child where you'll be. Children feel calmer and secure when they literally know where loved ones are. Help kids picture your whereabouts. Describe your errands. If you work outside the home, give them a tour of your workplace. That mental picture helps children relax.
- Help kids anticipate when you'll leave. Never sneak out without telling them. In the short run, it's easier. In the long run, it destroys trust.
- Time is a fuzzy concept for kids; explain in terms they understand how long you will stay during morning drop-off: "I can put together one simple puzzle with you." (Emphasize "simple" or you'll be there all day with a thousand piece puzzle.)
- Another strategy is to gently help your child begin play with other children. If

- children in the play house are pretending to serve breakfast, sit down (yes, in one of those teeny tiny chairs) and order the breakfast special for two. Casually pull out a seat for your child. Once your child gets into the swing of things, separation will be easier.
- Keep goodbyes short, sweet, and direct. Hugs and kisses are great, but hearing “goodbye” is easier for kids to accept if they are standing on their own two feet. For younger children, place your child in their caregiver’s arms and then say goodbye.
 - Consistently communicate positive expectations. Though it’s well meaning, avoid long, huge goodbye hugs that nonverbally say, “I can’t stand leaving you; maybe I’ll never see you again.” Kids pick up on your anxiety. Project casual confidence.
 - Express trust in your child’s ability to adjust and cope. With words and body language, let your child know you believe in her. Also be sure your child knows you like, respect and trust those who will care for her while you’re gone.
 - Say goodbye once and be true to your word. Avoid emotional tug-of-wars where your child ends up begging you umpteen times to stay, and you put off leaving over and over. If a parent doesn’t literally walk their talk, the goodbyes will go on all morning. Prolonging goodbyes teaches children to control and manipulate adults through whining, begging, and fit throwing. Those behaviors can escalate and bloom into a full-fledged power struggle. It’s demeaning for parent and child. And in the rest of the classroom, it gets the other children’s anxieties all stirred up again, too.
 - Be flexible and follow your child’s lead. Sometimes you expect separation troubles, only to find your child is eager for you to go so he can start his routine. A good rule of thumb is to watch your child’s behavior and then take his cue. If your little one easily becomes engaged without you, don’t take it as personal rejection. Accept that it’s time for “adios” so he can start his day. Be proud that you selected care where he is so comfortable!
 - Leave a little bit of yourself behind. Record yourself on a cassette tape reading your child’s favorite story. Or record your favorite childhood memories, complete with sound effects. Leave it in your child’s backpack or cubby so she can hear a loving, familiar voice whenever needed. And it’s a way for her to share you with her friends and classmates, too. Kids are always so proud to “show off” their parents.
 - When possible, plan for both parents to trade or share the responsibility of morning goodbyes. Some parents are better than others at being matter-of-fact and casual about separating. And kids are smart. They know which parent they can (or can’t) play like a violin. If one parent gives into tears too easily, trade off arrival duties with the other parent or a supportive relative.
 - Use words, not bribes, to encourage cooperation during morning good-byes. I’ve seen kids bribed with candy, toys, or fast food meals, anything if they don’t cry at morning goodbye. It doesn’t work. In fact, it increases anxiety by turning the goodbye routine into a daily test. Even more insidious, bribery tempts kids to lie. And pairing an afternoon reward with a morning behavior is just too long for kids to remember what they did. It’s better to express pride over a cooperative, well meaning effort than to manipulate kids with trinkets and treats.
 - Avoid mad dash pick ups where you nag at your child to hurry and then whisk out the door with nary a goodbye to caregivers. Those actions make your child feel like pick-up is one more chore you grudgingly squeeze into your endless to-do list. Ouch.
 - Plan for relaxing end-of-the-day reunions. Bend down so your child can hug you. Even if you’re dog-tired, even if you still have to buy food for supper, take some time to look at your child’s art work or projects. Take time to listen to some stories, to smile, to laugh. Take time to take joy in the moment of reunion.

Children’s Books Addressing Separation Anxiety

- *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn (Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America, 1993).
- *Oh My Baby, Little One* by Kathi Appelt (New York: Harcourt Publishing, 2000).
- *Going to Day Care* by Fred Rogers (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1985).
- *Jesse’s Daycare* by Amy Valens (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1991).
- *Day Care Days* by Mary Brigid Barrett (New York: Little Brown, 1999).
- *When Mama Comes Home Tonight* by Eileen Spinelli (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).
- *Will You Come Back for Me?* by Robin Kramer (Chicago: Albert Whitman, 1992).
- *The Ticky-Tacky Doll* by Cynthia Rylant (New York: Harcourt, 2002).
- *Starting School* by Anne Civardi (London: Usborne House, 1995).
- *Timothy Goes to School* by Rosemary Wells (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2000).
- *Night Shift Daddy* by Eileen Spinelli (New York: Hyperion, 2000).
- *Wemberly Worried* by Kevin Henkes (New York: Greenwillow, 2000).
- *You Go Away* by Dorothy Corey (Chicago: Albert Whitman, 1999).
- *Look Out Kindergarten, Here I Come!* by Nancy Carlson (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1999).
- *My Mom Travels A Lot* by Caroline Bauer (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1985).

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*.

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