



by Karen Stephens

Dealing With Separation Teaches Valuable Lessons

Attachment and separation. If parents and children achieve the first, struggle with the second inevitably follows. But if handled sensitively, the trials of separation anxiety can help kids learn important skills, like self-sufficiency and independence.

Parents can encourage emotional resilience by helping children cope constructively with partings. If our kids are to make the most of all the opportunities the world has to offer, they must gradually learn to tolerate—and even enjoy—time away from loved ones. Through the process, they'll learn that out-of-sight doesn't equal out-of-mind—or out-of-heart.

Coping with the tension of separation recurs throughout life, beginning with infant games of peek-a-boo, then progressing to school-agers' play yard games of hide and seek. And though we like to ignore the reality, the last challenge of separation lies at death's door.

In the short term, strong family attachment sets the stage for some very uncomfortable childhood worries. There's fear of rejection from those we love, fear of being abandoned by those we completely depend upon, as well as fear of strangers and the unknown.

Over the long run, the tenderness of family attachment is well worth the risk of bitter-sweet, even painful separation. Kids learn powerful lessons from the cycle of going apart and coming back together—lessons of trust, faith, patience, courage, self-confidence, pride and family loyalty.

If children don't master their natural fear of separation, they risk spinning into hopelessness, even depression. That fuels a sense of failure and timidity, not self-reliance and resourcefulness.

This time of year with the first days of school and child care just around the corner, scenes of separation anxiety will be in the family spotlight. So, today I offer suggestions to help you ease into the drama. If you put the tips into action, you'll honor the strength of your family ties. And at the same time your children will discover their potential to be brave and adaptable. The lessons will support them a lifetime.

Tips for coping with separation anxiety

1. When parting, practice traditions and rituals that affirm your love. One of the dearest rituals I've heard of comes from the children's book, [The Kissing Hand](#) by Audrey Penn (Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America, 1993.) The story has helped more families than I can count smooth out their morning good-byes. In the book, mama kisses little Chester's palm before his first day at school. She tells him, "Now, when you feel lonely and need a little loving from home, just press your hand to your cheek and think, 'Mommy loves you. Mommy loves you.'"
2. Prepare your child for the upcoming change. Before leaving your child alone with someone else, together visit the school or child care. Schedule it during a fun time of day, not during naptime. Play with and get to know the teachers and other children so kids will know what to expect; it goes a long way in helping them get over *first day* jitters.
3. Empathize with legitimate feelings, but don't dwell on negativity. Simply say, "I understand it's scary going to child care for the first time. It's different than being home with me. The children and teachers will be strangers at first, but you'll get to know them better each day. And then they won't be strangers any more."

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4. Affirm and encourage children's efforts to adjust to change. "You can be proud of being brave enough to meet new friends at school. You're learning to be a flexible, friendly person. I admire that."
5. Establish routines children can trust. Kids thrive on predictable time schedules. Before leaving, tell children when you'll come back for them. Describe the time in a way they'll understand. For instance, with young children say, "I'll pick you up after you eat your after-noon snack."
6. Provide security and stability. Keep to your promised time schedule so children learn you're dependable and reliable. If you HAVE to be late, call and ask a teacher to inform and reassure your child. Being late should be a last resort, not a regular occurrence. Chronic late pick-ups tell children they aren't a high priority.
7. Make drop off time calm and relaxing. A smooth walk across the bridge from home to child care or school is your goal, not a hectic mad dash to an invisible finish line. Comforting good-byes require good time management.
8. Pack and organize what you can the night before so mornings can include meaningful talking or cuddling together. Enjoy the time with your child, rather than rushing around as they get ready for school and you get ready for work. Avoid saying over and over, "Hurry up, slow poke, I'm late. I've got to get to work on time."
9. Arrive in the morning when an adult can spend individual time greeting your child. And arrive early enough so your child can easily join into play groups. Avoid arriving during morning meetings, circle times or when structured activities have started. Instead of making them comfortable, the interruption puts too much focus on your child and can make them shy and embarrassed.

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10. Leave children with comfort items, such as a teddy bear or favorite blanket. Think of meaningful, creative ways to help kids *feel the connection* between you even when you're apart. Some children wear a locket with a photo of their family in it. Others post a family portrait in their cubby or carry one in their backpack.
11. En route to school or child care, anticipate the good things that will happen. Whenever possible, relate it to on-going events. For instance, wonder out loud if the guppy in the classroom aquarium will have her babies soon. Ask what kind of building might be created in the sandbox.
12. Make sure a caregiver is on hand to help your child become engaged in activity before you leave. Soothing and relaxing activities, such as playing with clay, building with blocks or playing in a water table are great ways to ease children into the classroom environment.
13. Give your child a sense of involvement. For instance, they can help decide where you'll say good-bye. At the door or at their cubby? Will they wave from a window or blow you a kiss through the door's keyhole? Will you share a secret handshake or a knowing wink?

Because each child is unique, some will have rockier adjustments to separation than others. If that applies to your child, turn to the *Parenting Exchange* archive library for more tips on coping with children's separation anxiety.

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*.