

Questions & Answers about separation anxiety

Children need to be close to their parents to feel cared for and loved. This emotional closeness means that it's not easy for children to part with their parents. Children ages 10 to 24 months usually feel this separation anxiety the most. Children at this age are learning to remember their parents when they are apart, but they don't always understand that the parent will come back. Three and four year olds can feel this way as well. There are several ways parents can help their young children with these emotions. Learning to cope with goodbyes early in life will also help children handle separations as they grow older.

1. How early should I teach my child to say goodbye?

Begin teaching your infant goodbyes so that you set a positive pattern for the future. The fact that your child may not understand your words is unimportant. Tell your child that you are leaving and will be back, put him or her in the arms of the care provider, and kiss and wave goodbye.

2. My 18-month-old son is going to start a new child care center soon. I know separating at first will be hard for both of us. What

can I do to make separating easier?

You can help your son if you take him to visit the child care center before he starts. That way he will get used to the new place and the people there and feel more comfortable when you leave him. On his first day of day care, tell him ahead of time when you plan to leave him and that you will miss him until you return. Let your child see that while you will miss him, you feel confident about separating.

3. How do I explain to my toddler when I will return if

he can't tell time?

Use events in your child's life to explain when you will return.

"After you have lunch and your nap, I'll be back again." Telling him that you will return again is the most important thing for him to remember.

4. I have to leave my child in child care while I work. Is there anything that can ease the pain of separation for my child? He always cries when I leave.

Special toys and blankets can be comforting during times of separation. Having a special toy or object close can help your child feel safer and more secure. He might also like having a picture of you to keep while you are gone.

5. What should I do if my child says she is not going to child care because she doesn't want to be separated from me?

Allow your child to make choices about things within their control to help ease the power struggle. She can't decide whether or not she is going to child care, but she can decide what to take along. Give her choices over smaller

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events: “Would you like to take your bear or doll to school today?” Would you rather wear your overalls or your jumper today?”

6. Should I just slip away while my child is not looking so he won't cry?

It is best to say goodbye instead of slipping away. It may be easier for you to slip away while your child is happy and busy, but it may damage your child's trust in you, which may cause more difficult separations in the future. It's best to say goodbye, give him a hug, tell him you'll return, and leave.

7. What is the best way to say goodbye?

The best way to say goodbye is in a positive, upbeat way (even if you feel sad). Give your child a big hug and tell him or her you'll be back. Don't linger over goodbyes; this makes separating more difficult for both you and your child.

8. My son always acts out when I return after we have been apart. How should I handle this?

Try to be patient at these times. When your child sees you, he feels safe enough to unload all of the day's emotions that he has been keeping inside. Tell your child you understand, give him a big hug, and tell him how much you missed him. Spend some quiet time together reading a book or listening to music. This will give your child time to calm down and make an easier transi-

tion from day care to home.

Sources:

Hall, N., & Schmidt, P. (1996). *Goodbyes: How to say "see you later" to your little alligator*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Katz, L. (1986). *Coping with separation anxiety*. National Parent Information Network. . [On-line]. Available: <http://npin.org/library>