



WHEN GOODBYE IS TOO HARD:

Supporting children through
separation anxiety

WHAT CAUSES SEPARATION ANXIETY?

We are wired for connection, and particularly in times of stress, danger, or upset, we long for it and seek it with intensity. This longing for connection is primal - a basic instinctual need that our psyche drives at relentlessly. For many children separation anxiety comes with transitions - such as starting daycare, attending school, visiting family, having a babysitter - because the experience is perceived as stressful, dangerous, or otherwise upsetting to them. This could be because of a sensitive temperament, learning exceptionalities that make the school day particularly challenging, too much that is new or unknown, negative experiences with friends, teachers or family members, the coming on of a cold or illness, general fatigue, or something else that you haven't quite been able to put your finger on.

SEPARATION ANXIETY AS SURVIVAL

Regardless of the cause, this stress alerts the survival centre of your child's brain that danger is upon her. Rational thought is now no longer going to be operational. Rather instinct will take over, singularly focused on ensuring a connection with their parent.

The drive for connection will have the child engaging in what psychologists call "pursuit behaviors" - anything that will keep you close. Clinging, crying, melting down, pleading. All in a desperate attempt to have you save her from the (perceived) impending danger. And to the child, this feels like actual danger! It is not a ploy or a conscious manipulation. It is as though you have asked her to jump off a two-story building. In this moment she is literally pleading with you to save her.



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WHAT NOT TO DO WHEN SEPARATION ANXIETY SETTLES IN



Do not try to reason with separation anxiety

Trying to prove your child wrong by telling them that school is fun, playing with friends is great, and hot lunch is awesome, is never going to actually convince them that they will be okay. Why? Rational thought is not part of separation anxiety.



Avoid sink or swim approaches

Forcing a child to face their biggest fear to make them realize there is nothing to be afraid of is highly problematic. There is a very significant risk of the child being utterly flooded by alarm, which can lead to other problems. One such problem is that they could numb out to the fear - and everything else.



Do not use rewards or consequences

The use of rewards or consequences has the central flaw of assuming that this "behavior" is within the child's control. It is not. It is an instinctual reaction from the survival centre of the brain and is highly alarming for the child in an utterly consuming way.



Avoid shaming

Sometimes adults try to use "alarm against alarm" by shaming a child. Using language like "you are acting like a baby" or calling upon social judgment with something like "everybody is looking at you" causes the child to be even more alarmed which can lead to numbing out and intensified behavioral push-back, as described above. It also comes at the cost of the child's relational connection with you. You no longer feel safe.



Avoid anger

Separation anxiety sometimes alarms parents as well. What if my child isn't normal? What if everybody is judging me? As a parent's alarm gets the better of them, anger can erupt. The child experiences this as a "relational disconnect" - something upsetting to them at the best of times, but potentially catastrophically so during separation anxiety, when the child is instinctually driven to connect to us to preserve themselves.



Being the expert on your child's personality and temperament, and combining that with some knowledge about the survival brain and general child development, there are actually a lot of things you can do as a parent to help your child who might be struggling with separation anxiety.



WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP YOUR CHILD WITH SEPARATION ANXIETY



Artful introductions

As a basic principle of social psychology, we tend to like people who like us. You can facilitate an understanding of a blossoming fondness between your child and his educator/care provider, making it more comfortable for your child to be left in their care. It might sound something like "Did you see the smile on Ms. Robinson's face this morning when she said hello to you? I think she is taking a shine to you!"



Birds of a feather

Look for a common ground between your child and their care provider/educator. Maybe they both love reading mystery novels. Or maybe they both play guitar. Or maybe they are both science junkies. Find something that is the same between them and shine a light on it. As another basic principle of social psychology, we also tend to like people who are the same as us.



Pass the connection spark

Your child is going to take his cues from you in terms of what is safe and not safe. It helps for your child to see that your connection with his care provider is solid and positive. So be certain that you are tending to that as you work to have your child be more settled in his new environment.



Be certain and confident

It is hard as a parent to watch your child go to pieces. As part of your wiring, you are going to want to rush in and solve it. Every child is their own individual and as a parent, you will have to step your way forward in a manner inspired by your child's needs. Whatever this looks like for you, step forward with gumption and swagger so your child can just "smell" that you've got this.



Script it

Make sure you tell your child the whole sequence of what will happen from the beginning until the end of the day. And have the end always be "and then I will pick you up." By giving your child a specific sequence of events that ends with a reconnection you take the guesswork out of the day. It is also very helpful for anxious kids if you can make that script visual - write it out or use pictures.



Travel "with" them

Find ways to be with your child figuratively. For example, send magic kisses captured in a locket that hangs around their neck. Or be connected by an invisible string. Or laminate a little picture of you loving on your child that they can tuck into their pocket. Be creative!



Highlight "hello" rather than "goodbye"

Spend as little time as possible focused on all the things the child is going to do through the day. Instead, orient the child's brain to when you will be back together again. So maybe it sounds like "We will walk to school, Mr. Smith will meet us at your classroom door, I will help you get settled, you will have your school day, and then as soon as art is over I will be coming back to pick you up and we will go for a play at the park on our way home."





Have some goodbye rituals

Do you have a way you say goodbye? Is it a family cheer in the car in the parking lot? A wink and an ear-tug on your way out the door that your child does back to you? A little saying you whisper into each other's ear? Routines and rituals help our brains stay calm. Come up with a goodbye ritual to serve this quieting purpose for your child.



Try a gradual entry

If you have the sense that your child is really going to struggle with separation anxiety, or if you can see that this is already not going well you might try gradually extending the time your child spends in the classroom or daycare over a period of days or weeks

TEARS ARE LOVELY

One of the universal proximity seeking behaviors of children the world over is crying. When our children cry, it is unsettling to us, driving us to stay close and take care of the tears. Sometimes this becomes confusing though when we find ourselves rushing to prevent tears because we don't want the experience - for them or for us - of being unsettled. But the goal of "no tears" is not necessarily one you want to hang on to. Sometimes tears are actually a necessary part of adaptation and core to nurturing resilience in your growing child. Your sign of "success" in settling your child is not necessarily going to be a tear-free drop off. It is okay if your child cries at the classroom door as long as there is a nurturing, connected adult available to support your child through those tears.

SHY IS HEALTHY

Children who come across as "shy" often have a more difficult time with separation anxiety. And sometimes this has us thinking about "shy" as a bad thing. But answer this question: Do you want your child doing the bidding of someone who is not part of her inner circle? Of course the answer is "no."

Luckily, children are wired to resist the influence of outsiders. That resistance is what we call shyness. It is a lovely, normal, instinctual, healthy thing that we need to honor. If your child happens to be more sensitive, intense, or otherwise needs a little extra TLC, her shyness may come out more strongly, making the experience of separation anxiety more likely. And that's okay. It needs to be worked with rather than against.

WHAT IF IT DOESN'T GET BETTER?

The vast majority of children will respond well to the efforts described here, and you should see your child comfortably settling in within 3-4 weeks of the transition. However, a small percentage of children will continue to struggle.

How do you know when enough is enough and it has simply become too much?

- If it continues for longer than the first month of daycare or school with intensity
- If you are seeing significant behavioral repercussions at home
- If your child's sleep has become interrupted in a significant way
- If your child cannot manage to be alone anywhere in your home
- If your child develops physical health ailments that appear to be psychosomatic in nature (the mind-body connection) - headaches, stomachaches, frequent vomiting, ongoing virus, etc.

These are all signs that things are not progressing and that it might be time to find a professional to help support you as you work to support your child. In selecting somebody for that role, make sure they have a strong understanding of child development and that they are prepared to work together with you - the expert on your child - leading the way.