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MENTAL HEALTH

Childhood Separation Anxiety

Childhood Separation Anxiety is one of the most difficult things to see your child go through as a parent.



WHAT IS SEPARATION ANXIETY?

Saying goodbye to your child is always difficult. Drop-off can be especially stressful when it is in a new person and environment.

Though most toddlers understand object permanence-the idea that something exists even if it cannot be seen, the concept of time remains elusive for most children under 6 years old. Leaving them for a few minutes or a few hours feels all the same to them. By age 3 or 4, they start to understand time by using adverbs; soon, later, tomorrow, yesterday, first and then, etc. The act of leaving them can be scary and stressful for children since they don't understand when you will return. Also, "somewhat ironically, anxiety can be a sign of the child's increasing autonomy," saus Miranda Goodman-Wilson, assistant professor of psychology at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida. "They have their own opinion on the

situation—that parents shouldn't leave—and want to exert control."

Prepare Yourself

- Prepare yourself mentally for the potential tears
- Mentally walk through the process
- Make sure you are confident and positive
- Do not let your child see your anxiety (and sadness)
- Keep the positive front until you are away from your child's gaze

Prepare Your Child

- Talk to your child about going to childcare/school
- Verbally talk your child through the steps of dropping them off
- Have a visual schedule for them to follow (in the morning)
- Practice 'saying goodbye'; play the 'drop-off game'
- Establish a routine or a little ritual; a special kiss or hug or handshake to do at drop-off

Books About Saying Goodbye And Separation Anxiety

- The Kissing Hand
- The Invisible String
- I Love You All Day Long
- Llama Llama Misses Mama

Additional Tips To Ease The Transition

- Send a comfort item
- Buy a special 'stay-atdaycare/school' stuffed animal
- Send a photograph of your family or Mommy and Daddy with the child
- Send a shirt, scarf, gloves, hat that belongs to Mom or Dad (that smells like you)
- Children do better with routine and consistency; ideally, keep the same routine daily (children should attend daily programming if they struggle with changes)
- Have the same parent do dropoff and the same parent do the



pick-up daily.

• If someone different is doing a pick-up, let their teachers know so they can tell your child ahead of time

At Drop-Off

- Be positive and confident
- Say a short 'goodbye' and remind them that you always come back
- Once you have said 'goodbye' do not come back, leave
- Don't linger, it makes the child nervous and think that they should be panicked or scared and will cause them to cry more and longer
- Don't make empty promises; if you say 'We will go to the park afterwards' then follow-through
- Don't use bribery; it only works short term and the child will continue to have bigger expectations daily
- Try to do the drop-off at the same time daily

Part of Childhood Development

- Separation from your child will have to happen sometime
- Make it as easy on them as possible
- Crying is an expected response from children
- Children are not under distress, they are just adjusting to a new situation
- Parent-guilt is real; don't let it get the better of you



Remember

- You are not a 'bad' parent by leaving your child, it's a natural part of their development
- You have done your research and have vetted the program you have chosen for your child, don't doubt yourself on the first day, the first drop-off
- You are not alone, the staff understands how difficult it is for parents and they are here to support not only your child, but you also
- Check-in with the teachers if needed
- Don't project your stress and anxiety on your child

When To Worry(After 4-6 Weeks In the Same Program)

- There has been no improvement in their level of anxiety, even if there's still some tears, there should be some overall improvement (less tears, shorter period of crying, etc,)
- Your child cannot function 'normally' due to anxiety when in programing
- Your child's appetite, sleep and toileting as not returned to their 'normal'
- Your child spends their time away from the program



• Regression of any kind that doesn't resolve itself; toileting, bed-wetting, etc.

What To Do If You Think Your Child Needs Help

- Talk to your child's teacher; we have access to additional resources and can give you referrals
- Talk to your child's pediatrician; they will give you some recommendations and/or referrals

Don't be too hard on yourself and remember, there is a light at the end of the tunnel. Soon enough, your child will wave goodbye to you with a smile!

Goodbye