



Separation Anxiety and School:

What's normal, what's not, and how YOU as the parent are your child's most valuable support

An Introduction to Separation Anxiety

As a parent or caregiver, there is no heartache like your child crying in distress as you try to leave them. It makes for a stressful start to the day for them and for you, probably causes you to question if you're doing the right thing, and may make you worry that you're causing permanent damage and trauma by leaving them without you.

The first thing I want you to know, as both a clinician and a mom who has been there, is that some separation anxiety is normal. Kids who are securely attached to their caregivers want to be with them, and asking them to separate, particularly to new places, or new people, is hard! Here is some information that can help empower you as you work to support your child.

Separation Anxiety: What is it?

Separation anxiety can develop in babies often at around 8 months when they develop "object permanence" - the understanding that objects continue to be present even when they aren't seen - this can occur earlier in some babies. It's also normal for there to be a period of separation anxiety in early toddlerhood, between 1-2 years old. It's also really normal for bouts of separation anxiety to pop up during times of big transitions, like moving, having a new sibling, going to a new school, or changing classrooms within the same school.

What can separation anxiety look like?

- asking if or when the parent is coming back
- following parents around the home or not wanting to be left alone
- protesting about the separation
- disruptions in sleeping, eating habits, and new behavior challenges

What to avoid...

Separation anxiety is stressful for parents, and we often work really hard to avoid it - no parent enjoys seeing their child in distress! But there are things we do, as very well intentioned parents, that can actually make separation anxiety harder, such as...

- having lengthy conversations about transitions (like school drop off or a babysitter coming over)
- trying to rationalize with our kids about why they shouldn't be anxious

- bribing with rewards ahead of time if the child promises they won't be upset or cry during the transition

How to Help...

If your child has anxious feelings or you notice behavioral changes that go on for more than a few weeks, it might be worth taking a step back and making some adjustments.

Here are some strategies for how to help, before transition times and during the actual transition:

Before Transitions

These strategies will be best utilized the night before and morning of a transition -

- Give your child information about what the day will look like - who will drop them off and when, a few things to look forward to at school, and who will pick them up
- Avoid talking for too long or trying to give too many details. This just ends up being overwhelming, and often creates more questions for kids, rather than calming their fears.
- Try to minimize stress and decision making in the morning - have clothes picked out the night before, lunch packed, and breakfast planned.
- Create a fun goodbye routine with a hug / kiss / silly phrase, etc, and practice it ahead of time

During Transitions

- Be mindful of your own emotions - expressing feelings authentically is important, but during transitions, you are calm, cool, and collected on the outside, even if you don't feel it on the inside.
- Use brief language to validate your child's feelings, and express confidence that they will be ok.
- Redirection is the most underrated strategy for toddlers, and this is true during transition times too! Work at getting them actively engaged in something, like a preferred game, toy, or activity.
- If your child is really struggling to separate, having them transition to a caring adult, rather than the open playground or classroom, can be very helpful.
- Leave when they're happy! It's so easy to want to stay and linger to watch them, or to make sure they're ok. But remember this can send a message that we don't feel good about the transition, that we don't trust our child's teacher or caregiver, or that we're not sure our child is actually capable of handling it.
- And if they're not happy, it's ok to leave too. Sometimes kids respond well to our comfort and redirection in the moment, and sometimes they don't. And if they don't, it's ok to leave them with a caring adult who will support them and can get them engaged in something else.

If this was helpful and you have questions, or you would like more individualized support, please contact me at:

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