

Separation Anxiety

One of the most difficult parts of school for a child is separation, learning that when mom or dad leaves, the parent won't be gone forever. It's normal for children to express these feelings with tears. They have different timetables of adjustment, depending on their age, previous experience separating and their individual reactions to change. Parents needn't feel embarrassed if it takes their child longer to adapt. Guiding your children through this separation anxiety is one of the most important tasks of parenting, since it's your job to raise them to be able to leave you. Part of that is to let them feel they can successfully be independent of you. They need to face problems and learn to solve them on their own. Your message is that you have faith in them that they can do this.

Here are a few strategies you can use to help your child deal with separation anxiety.

1. Lay out your child's clothes the night before and get up early enough so that your morning routine is not rushed. With less morning stress, children arrive at school in a calm, happier mood.
2. Keep good-byes short and simple. If your child keeps begging you to stay a few minutes more and you do, you set up a power struggle neither of you can win. Hug and kiss him and then leave while the teacher finds an activity to distract him. Avoid sneaking out without saying goodbye.
3. Don't let your child see that you're sad or upset—it will make him all the more anxious. Be reassuring and upbeat, reminding him you'll see him later in the day.

Help Your Child Help Himself

When your child says, "I'm afraid and I miss you," don't try to talk him out of his fears. Instead say, "I know it's scary when I'm not with you at school. You wish I could be with you all the time. I wish I could be with you too, but I can't. You're a big boy (girl) and I know you will be fine."

Then help your child solve the problem. "When you're at school and miss me, what can you do?" The two of you come up with, and actually practice, putting the solution to work. You can do a role play with you and your child.

The most obvious solution is for your child to tell the teacher that he misses you. The teacher's job is to respond with an understanding ear, to help your child keep track of time until you pick him up, and to provide him with activities to keep him busy.

Your Routine

Remember that children like consistency and routine. If your "good-bye session involves pleading with your child not to cry, and he cries on cue and clings and runs after you anyway, that's your routine. Unpleasant as it is, it starts your child's day off in a predictable fashion.

Change this routine early in the morning before getting dressed by saying, "We'll be leaving for school at 7:00. You can cry if you like. When we get there I'll give you a kiss and a hug. I'll pick you up at 3PM"

Don't talk anymore about it. If your child starts to talk about you leaving, say, "What did I tell you about that?" When it's time to leave, go quickly. The teacher can hold your child so he can't cling or run after you.

Remember, if your child is clingy, congratulate yourself. Yes, congratulate yourself. If your child doesn't want you to leave, it means you are raising a normal, healthy child who is secure in your presence.

These books can help prepare your child for separation:

The Kissing Hand by Audrey Penn

The Runaway Bunny by Margaret Wise Brown

Owen by Kevin Henkes