

Separation anxiety & distress

Separating from parents in the morning can be a stressful time for children, parents and educators. Separation anxiety is completely normal in preschool-aged children (and sometimes even older children), and simply reflects a child's attempts to hold on to what is safe. Here are some tips based on what we now know to be most effective when trying to help children with separation distress and anxiety.



Show empathy.

Get down on your child's level. Offer them love and hugs. Acknowledge rather than distract them from their distress, e.g. "I know this is hard". Stay close. Remember, this is normal.

Don't dismiss.

Try not to use statements such as "You're okay" or "Don't be silly". The distress is very real for them. To hear that "they're okay" when their body is telling them that they're not can be confusing, and send the message that they shouldn't listen to what their body is telling them.

Have a short, predictable routine.

E.g. puzzle, book, say goodbye. Kids love personalised goodbye sequences/rituals too.

Stay calm.

Don't yell. Speak softly. Aim to be as calm and positive as you can.

Don't sneak out.

Unless you need to leave at a certain time, try to stay with your child until they're feeling calm. If you need to leave, try to organise a key person you can leave them with, who will offer the same empathy and support that you would.

Consider the drop-off person.

Some children may find it easier to separate from their primary caregiver at home, then have another adult they are close to drop them off at school. Consider what works best for your family.

Focus on the next "hello".

Talk about what you'll do after school, e.g. "When I pick you up, should we go home or go to the park?"

Use transition items.

Pack their bag with family photos or a comfort toy. Draw a heart on their hand, and a matching heart on yours. They can tap the heart throughout the day when they need some love to "travel" to/from your heart.

Leave notes.

You can leave a picture of something meaningful to them (such as a love heart, or an activity you're going to do together after school) in their pocket or lunchbox, to remind them of you.

Don't discipline.

It can understandably feel embarrassing for parents, or like "misbehaviour" from the child, when they struggle with separation. However, ignoring their stress or treating it with discipline will likely make the child's anxiety worse.

Please get in touch if you would like more help or information.

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