

# "Please don't go!"

## Separation Anxiety for Toddlers and Pre-Schoolers



Most of us have suffered through a painful parenting moment of separation. It happened just the other day when you dropped your child off at the nursery and he/she hung from you like a 35-pound necklace, begging "Don't leave me, Mommy, please." You felt beyond terrible as you drove away! But just because your child gets teary when you try to leave her doesn't mean it will always be that way. Separation anxiety is a normal part of every child's development, and it comes and goes. It's often a positive sign because that your child is connected to you.

Since you'd like to get through nursery drop-offs tear-free or go out to dinner without a tantrum, I have prepared this paper to understand how your child experiences separation at each age, and how to make the break less painful.

### 1 to 2 years old

Your child is savouring the thrill of independence now that he can toddle around and explore on his own. He's moving away from you (literally and figuratively) - sometimes a little too far. For example, he may follow a cat he's spied in the garden, then panic when he realizes you're not close by anymore. This back-and-forth is typical of this age. Kids crave the chance to roam by themselves but like to know that they can reach for you at a moment's notice.

➤ **What your child is thinking:** *"I can walk around the play area now, but what if I need my mom and she's not nearby? If I'm left with this teacher, will my parents forget about me?"*

➤ **Soothing strategies:**

- Don't be surprised if your child starts clinging to a security object now. A blanket or a teddy bear can help him feel safe and connected to you no matter where he goes. It's fine to encourage the habit to make separation easier; experts stress that it's a healthy attachment.
- When you're at home, spend a few minutes apart from your child. For example, encourage him to play in a room next to the kitchen while you start dinner (to be sure he's safe, poke your head in without letting him see you) He'll learn that it's okay to be away from you for just a little while.
- Taking the seriousness out of longer separation can help. Some children hate the word *Goodbye* so try to make up silly words for it like *Gooblygook*, when it is time to say goodbye, say the silly word and the child would laugh. Separations got easier!
- Make sure you spend every day a minimum of 30 minutes *'One to One'* quality time with your child so she realises she is loved and the nursery is not a punishment. You can do puzzles suitable to her age, paint or perform a silly dance ... however, watching TV, wandering around malls or window shopping are not considered *'One to One'* quality time.

## 3 to 4 years old

Children are starting to feel more self-sufficient and in control of their surroundings at this stage. But heading off to preschool or nursery can be overwhelming for a child and make her pine for her parents even more. For some kids, this is their first experience with a prolonged separation, so don't panic if it takes few weeks for them to feel comfortable.

➤ **What your child is thinking:** "What if I don't like it here and I feel sad? What if no one comes to pick me up?"

➤ **Soothing strategies:**

- Send your child to preschool or day care with a photo key chain attaches to her bag or another reminder at home.
- It is also crucial to follow on to your promises. Be on time to pick up your child, which comforts him because he trusts that you'll be there when you say you will. Try rehearsing goodbyes at home prevent cries of "Don't go!" Have your child be the parent and let her pretend to leave and come back. Being in both roles helps kids see that goodbye isn't forever.
- Make sure you spend every day a minimum of 30 minutes 'One to One' quality time with your child so she realises that she is loved and the nursery is not a punishment. You can ask her to hold your grocery list and help you find the items on the shelves in the supermarket, do puzzles together (you can compete who will finish his puzzle first), paint or perform a silly dance ... Don't forget that watching TV and window shopping are not considered 'One to One' quality time!

## Five wrong ways to say 'GOODBYE'

1. **Sneaking out without saying goodbye** betrays your child's trust and could make future separation worse
2. **Lingering in the room** to see whether your child is okay prevents him from becoming absorbed in other activities, which ultimately helps him get over his anxiety.
3. **Acting sad** or even showing your worries make your child worry that you're leaving her in an unsafe place.
4. **Changing your routine** makes separations harder. Kids count on predictability when it comes to goodbyes, so stick to your rituals and Daily schedule of the homeroom.
5. **Getting angry** when your child has trouble saying goodbye will just cause him to cry harder, so don't let your frustration show.

## Is your child too anxious?

In about 4 percent of the older children, being away from a parent causes intense worry and can interfere with daily life. If a child can't go to school or maintain friendships, and it lasts for more than four weeks, she may have separation anxiety disorder, or SAD. Other warnings signs: Your child is excessively worried that you'll be hurt; she's afraid that a terrible event will separate her from you; she has recurring nightmares about losing you. Fortunately, treatment for SAD is fairly simple (your child makes controlled, gradually longer separations) and has one of the best success rates of all anxiety disorders.

## STOP Separation Anxiety

There isn't a wrong or right way for a child to deal with being away from Mom and Dad for the first time. Different children handle separation anxiety in different ways. The better you know your child's separation style, the more you can help him get through the first days.

<i>Type of child</i>	<i>What he's feeling</i>	<i>Your response</i>	<i>Our Advise</i>
1 <b>The Crier</b>	"I'm sad to leave my mom and dad and be alone in a strange place with strangers."	Try not to look worried because children can feel that. Remind your child how much fun he will have and that you'll be back to get him. You can also reassure him that his teachers are there to make him feel better.	If you want some reassurance of your own, call the nursery later to know how your child is doing.
2 <b>The brave (but scared)</b>	"Not going to cry, not going to cry, not going to cry. Not even going to say goodbye because that'll make me cry. Just going to push this fire engine like crazy..."	Don't panic if he doesn't say goodbye. he's just trying to hold it together. Say goodbye, but don't pressure him to respond. Don't talk about how you'll miss him it'll make him feel bad.	There's a chance he'll completely lose it when he sees you at the end of the day because he's been holding his feelings in. Make sure you spend some relaxing calm bonding time together at home

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<b>3 The delayed reactor</b>	"I'm cool with school. I'm cool with school. Then a few days or couple weeks later .... Wait-where's my mommy?!"	Talk to him about the things that he enjoyed so much at the beginning. Speak with his teacher so she can give him a little extra attention. Also, try to develop a <b>quick goodbye ritual</b> , like a high five or a wink that you can do as you leave.	It's not that your child suddenly decided he doesn't like the nursery. He was just so caught up in all the new experiences that he didn't even realize he'd been away from Mom and Dad. He'll bounce back.
<b>4 The silent observer</b>	"Let me check out what's going on around here before I jump in and start playing with these kids."	Give your child time to adjust to her new environment. Then help her get used to the idea of becoming involved by reading books about pre school together, playing school at home, and talking about the teachers and children.	Remember that your child is learning as she's observing. You might want to talk to her teacher about helping her find her comfort zone so she can get more involved.

**If you ever had a doubt, please feel free to ask for an advice, I might be able to help.**

Yours Sincerely,

Samia Chalouhi  
G.M.

