

Separation distress in young children

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Children's reactions to separating from their parents will differ according to their prior experience with doing so, the coping strategies they have developed, and their age (Robbins 1997; Waters 1996). Timing is important. Infants adjust more easily when separations from their parents begin early in the first year (before stranger anxiety appears at around seven months), rather than later (Harrison & Ungerer 2002). Separation distress peaks between 10 and 18 months (Honig 2002). Toddlers aged one year to 20 months show higher levels of the stress hormone, cortisol, for the first two weeks in a new setting, with lesser elevations enduring even for some months (Ahnert et al. 2004). Although on the whole preschoolers adapt more readily, older children are not necessarily better equipped to separate than their younger counterparts (Robbins 1997).

Some youngsters will be settled during their initial days in the centre but then, when they realise that the arrangement is permanent, they develop problems; others have separation problems from the beginning. These can persist for some weeks and still be considered normal (Robbins 1997). Sometimes, a new stage of cognitive development signals a new understanding of being left in care, in which case separation difficulties begin unexpectedly after some months (Greenman & Stonehouse 2007).

The quality of the setting influences whether children's protests at separation turn into despair (Ahnert et al. 2004). Children are not only being asked to leave a parent, but also to engage in the program, which will be easier for them to do when it is inviting.

Steps for parents

Decide whether the separation is necessary. If you need to attend work or a recreational activity, or you want your children to have an educational experience, see the separation difficulties through until the children settle. But if they are having to separate from you to take part in an optional activity such as a dance lesson, consider delaying the activity until they can separate from you more happily.

Satisfy yourself about the location. Check that there is nothing frightening about the location or the adults with whom you are leaving your children. If the children express any concern about their caregivers or teachers, *listen* very carefully – particularly to any hint of abuse, as young children do not invent stories about abuse. On the other hand, children can feel unsafe in a particular setting or with certain adults simply because they feel out of place or misunderstood, which is a far less serious concern than abuse but nevertheless one that needs to be respected and acted upon.

Check that your children do not feel responsible for you. Some children have taken on the job of looking after their parents. Because they cannot take care of you unless they're with you, they will refuse to separate. In my

experience, this is most common to eldest children in large families who feel responsible for helping their parent with the younger siblings, youngest children who fear that their parent will be lonely if they are apart, and children whose parents are stressed.

This form of separation anxiety will not improve unless the children are convinced that you do not need them to look after you, and they can see that you are taking care of yourself. Therefore, even if you are stressed and not sure how you will solve your present problems, reassure the child that you are working on finding a solution and are still available to look after all the children in the family. It might be that you need to find some personal support for yourself and your family.

You can find out if your children think that you need them to look after you by asking who looks after whom in the family: children should be able to say that Mum looks after herself and Dad (if there is one in the family); Dad looks after himself and Mum; and both parents look after the children. They may be able to tell you that the children look after their dolls or family pet.

If, however, they tell you that they look after you or another family member, this could be your clue about a possible cause of some of their separation anxiety. In that case, let them know that you can take care of yourself, and they need to learn the skills for growing up. Be sure to thank them for working so hard until now to take care of you, and then let them know that it's now their turn to be looked after. You will need to back up this reassurance by taking better care of yourself, so they see that it is safe to abandon the responsibility of doing this themselves.

Accept children's feelings, even complaints about feeling ill. Empathise with and comfort them, rather than telling them that they are imagining things.

Make the children responsible for a solution. Having listened to the children's concerns or ills, ask them how they can help themselves to feel better. They might take an imaginary toy or friend, begin a favourite activity when they first arrive, or make friends with one of the other children.

Communicate your faith that they can cope. Tell them that you know they can find ways to be happy. You might talk about other times when they have overcome their feelings, and express your faith that they can do so again.

Join with them before you go. It might help to find a quiet corner in which the two of you can have a close hug. In the busy-ness of getting out of the house, there might not have been an opportunity to give them the emotional closeness that they need to get through the day.

Stay briefly. Once you are sure that the environment is safe, stay briefly with the children to ensure that they are okay, and then *tell* them that you are leaving. If you *ask* them if that's okay, they are likely to say 'no', leaving you frustrated and miserable, and meanwhile they will feel betrayed, as you will leave anyway.

Never sneak out on children when you are leaving them, even if they become upset when you tell them that you are going. If they have no warning

that you are leaving, they will remain vigilant and anxious the whole time in anticipation – and so will never seem ready for you to leave.

Avoid long explanations of the many tasks you'll get done while you're apart. I have heard some parents get caught in the trap of saying things like, 'No, I can't stay, love. I have to go home and feed the baby, and then I have to bake a cake for the school stall tomorrow, and then do some grocery shopping, pick up your sister from school and then come back for you'. Phew! When they hear all this, they might think that you're hassled and need them to help out. Try to get them to stay at preschool when they are needed at home, and see how far you get...

Help them to deal with their feelings. When children have a long history of separation problems, they can become upset not so much at the fact that you are leaving as that they feel so badly. When they become hysterical, children need their parent – not a caregiver or teacher – to help them. In this situation, the only way that I have ever found to work is for you to stay with them, holding them close and saying that you will stay until they feel better. You will leave when they have calmed down. (This can take some time, so you might need to plan to arrive earlier than usual until the problem is fixed.)

Reunions

Even those children who separated reluctantly from you at the beginning of the day can be off-hand when you return to collect them. This might only mean that they were certain that you were going to return.

A second pattern is that some children resist going home. Usually this does not mean that they prefer being at child care or preschool than with you, but might just be their way of involving you in this part of their life.

Third, when the children see you, they might experience renewed sadness at being parted all day and so become distressed. This reaction is heightened by exhaustion.

When you collect your children from care, preschool or school, do not tell them that you miss them, in case they think you need them to keep you company, which can make them reluctant to separate in future. Instead, tell them that it's wonderful to see them, which is what you mean anyway.

Steps for teachers and caregivers

Preparation. At enrolment, talk with parents about how they would like you to respond to any separation difficulties and how they plan to handle these themselves (Greenman & Stonehouse 2007). Ask how their child has responded to previous separations and what they think will work for their child if separation problems occur, and also pass on your suggestions.

A staggered start, with frequent visits before their actual start date can help, although can be impractical. Many parents will not find or do not use child care until the last minute before they return to paid employment, with the result that some children are introduced into care abruptly.

You can ask parents to bring in their child's favourite comforter from home, and try to give the children some favourite activities and foods, especially in the early days. If it can be arranged, it can also help to introduce them into only a small group.

Suggest that the parent join with the child before she leaves. It can help if the parent and child find a quiet corner in which to have a close hug so that they join emotionally before separating. In the busy-ness of getting out of the house, parents are not always able to give their children the emotional closeness they need to get through the day.

Recommend that parents keep goodbyes brief. Suggest that the parent states briefly and calmly that she is leaving now, and hand the child over to a familiar caregiver. Encourage parents to leave once they say they are going, and not to return (Greenman & Stonehouse 2007). If this means that parents have had to leave a distressed child with you, invite them to call you later to check on the child.

A structured goodbye routine can be useful when children often have difficulty accepting the departure of their parent. It might be that the children put their bag in its place, are helped by their parent to begin an activity, have a hug, and then the parent leaves. It might help to make the children active in saying good-bye, perhaps by opening the door for the parent (Greenman & Stonehouse 2007).

As described above for parents, ensure that parents *never* sneak out on children when they are leaving, and suggest that parents *tell* their child they are leaving: if they *ask* if that's okay, the children are likely to say 'no', leaving everyone frustrated and miserable and the children feeling betrayed as their parent will go anyway.

Allocate a primary caregiver. To help settle new or distressed children, in the initial days, allocate one person to be their primary caregiver, and then move the children on to other adults gradually once they have formed a steady relationship with their primary caregiver.

Join with the children. Rather than pointing out the attractions of the centre – that is, asking children to find what you offer interesting – instead, ask the children to bring in something from home that interests them and make an effort to become engaged with the children over whatever fascinates them. One suggestion provided to me recently was for a child to bring into the centre a compact disc that was being played in the car on the way, and play that until it ends. In this way, there is some continuity between home and the centre.

Explain exactly when the parent will return. Do not tell young children that 'Daddy will be back soon' when 'soon' can mean anything from a few minutes to many hours (Greenman & Stonehouse 2007). Instead, explain that Dad will be back after a particular activity.

Accept children's feelings, even complaints about feeling ill, rather than telling them that it's all in their imagination. Comfort them when they are distressed, rather than trying to distract them from their feelings.

Make the children responsible for a solution. Having listened to children's concerns or ills, you could ask how they can help themselves to feel better. They might begin a favourite activity or ask one of the other children to play, for example. But if they are determined to remain miserable, you cannot prevent that.

Communicate your faith that they can cope. You can tell children that you know that they can find a way to feel happier. You might learn from the parents about other times when the children have overcome their feelings – such as being scared of the dark - and remind them of these occasions, expressing your faith that they can take charge of their feelings again.

Interrupt the pattern. Pattern interruption can be a solution to chronic problems. With respect to separation difficulties, this can mean changing the sequence of events. The usual sequence is that the parent and child arrive, the parent leaves, and the child becomes upset. It could help to rearrange this sequence so that it is less upsetting to everyone, so the children can be soothed by the person dearest to them (namely, their parent), and the workload for caregivers is minimised. For example, you could tell children that their parent is about to leave and they should become upset now, while their parent is still here to comfort them. Then, once they are calm, the parent can depart. If parents have inflexible working hours, this might require forward planning, such as arranging for them to arrive 15 minutes earlier for a week, so that there is time to provide their child with the comfort he or she requires.

The rationale for this suggestion is that when children have a long history of separation problems, they can become upset not so much that their parent is going, but that they feel so badly and are out of control of their distress. When children become hysterical, they need their parent – not a relative stranger – to reassure them.

Permit the crying. Normally, you will have tried to reassure distressed children that there is nothing to be upset about, tried to soothe their feelings and generally distract them from their distress. When this has not worked, you can instead instruct distressed children to cry, explaining that it is quite okay for sad children to cry. Find them a comfortable corner, tell them that you understand that they are sad and that they can be sad for as long as it takes: all day if necessary. If they stop crying, you can remind them that they do not have to stop if they still feel sad.

The rationale behind this suggestion is that children will continue to communicate their distress until someone says 'Message received'. Once they feel that others now understand, they do not need to keep letting you know how they feel. It also reflects the fact that, for some unknown reason, reassuring has not worked so, when something isn't working, you should stop doing it, as suggested in chapter 10.

Recommend another placement. Centre-based child care does not suit every child. If individual children cannot settle at all in your centre even after patient and sensitive handling, it might be that a home environment (such as

family day care) would suit their needs better. You might have to recommend this to their parents, in the interests of the children's emotional wellbeing.

Reunions

In the section above for parents, I describe children's various reactions to reunions. From teachers' perspective, your main task for managing reunions will be for those children who are picked up later. These youngsters often experience growing distress as they see other children going home before them. It can be useful to reserve some special activities for this time of the day and to make use of the improved adult-child ratio to give these children some special attention (Greenman & Stonehouse 2007).

References

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