

SEPARATION ANXIETY

Complete Parents' Guide
Volume 2



 little beginnings
FERNHILL ROAD

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Introduction

Welcome to our Complete Parents' Guide Series of Ebooks!

These guides have been designed with the aim of assisting families who are currently clients utilising one of our childcare centres, families that may attend at sometime in the future, or any parent for that matter seeking a little extra knowledge.

The information contained within our **Complete Parents' Guide Series**, has been collated and organised in a manner that supports the policies and practices that are undertaken within our child care centres.

We see these guides not only as a valuable resource for families, but also as a useful tool for our Little Beginnings Educators, to extend the support we provide outside of the Centre's physical environment and positively impact the communities to which we belong.

We hope you enjoy!



Adam Sharpe
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Separation Anxiety

A mother rushes off to a new child care centre to drop off her 18-month-old son before work. She rushes in with him and hurriedly sets him down next to the educator and she lets out a quick "bye - bye sweet boy", but as she turns to the door she is met with desperate screams and flailing arms. As the mother peels her son from her leg, she tells him she'll be back after work. The mother makes a run for the door. The sound of her sons screams and cries, pull on her heart strings and she questions coming back just to give her son another hug but she knows she is already late for work so she continues towards her car feeling like she must be the worst mother that there has ever been. This is a familiar situation and an example of typical separation anxiety that any parent who has raised young children will immediately recognise. However when it comes to the case of this mother, is there anything she could have done differently to make her son's transition go smoother?



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Separation anxiety is a normal phase that many children go through as they age. It is characterised by fear and nervousness when the child is separated from their parent or another familiar caregiver. Children may begin to cry and scream as well as become very clingy when faced with their loved one leaving them with individuals with whom the child is not familiar. The child may physically lash out at the caregiver to try to persuade the parent to stay. Separation anxiety can even strike when the parent is still in the home but is simply in another room or when the child is put down to sleep.

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However, the behaviours associated with separation anxiety usually begin to die down once the parent has left the area and is out of sight. Separation anxiety normally begins when infants begin to understand “object permanence.” This can develop around four to five months, however most infants do not begin to exhibit behaviours associated with separation anxiety until nine to ten months. If an infant is exhibiting separation anxiety then the parent should not try to rush through the separation. They can hold the child and let them see their surroundings and get comfortable with their educator. Once the child is acclimatised then it would be appropriate for the parent to give the child a kiss and hand them off to the educator.

Some children do not experience separation anxiety, until they are around one and a half years old. At this stage of development, toddlers are generally gaining a sense of independence that will make them more aware of when separations occur. This new awareness can cause separation anxiety to bubble to the surface of children who previously may not have had any problems with their parents leaving.

Furthermore, toddlers do not have a good grasp of the concept of time. So, even if the parent leaves for only half an hour, the child might feel like he has been left with the educator all day. It is important with toddlers to make them feel comfortable with the educator, this can be accomplished by the parent greeting the educator when he or she arrives and introduce the child and tell them why they are there.

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For example, "This is Julie. She's here to play with you while mummy runs to the store!" The parent could then interact with the child and get them involved in an activity such as colouring, or get them interested in some toys that the child enjoys. Once the child is occupied, the parent should then give the child a hug, confirm their intention to return, and take their leave. Many children experience separation anxiety because they view their parent as their only source of safety and security. If that source leaves then the child feels that he or she is in danger and will act out in fear. So, although it might be tempting for the parent to slip out unnoticed while the child is occupied however, the parent should always tell the child they are going to leave but that they will come back soon. If the parent just tries to leave without saying anything then the child might interpret that as the parent trying to sneak away and abandon them forever. This triggers fear and feelings of abandonment which will produce stress and stress induced behaviours.

Normally, by the time children have reached preschool they have become more verbal and understand that when they call out and throw tantrums it has an effect on how the leaving parent will likely react. This does not necessarily mean that the child is undergoing intense stress but rather they are trying to create a change in their situation and bring their parent back. If the child does begin to cry or throw a tantrum, the parent should not give in to the child's demands.



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If the parent gives in to crying and screaming the child learns that throwing a tantrum is exactly what it takes to get their parent to come back and they will continue in this behaviour to get what they want. Ideally, parents should be teaching their kids how to adjust to their absence without resorting to tears.

Parents should communicate to their children when you will return. This, of course, should be communicated in an age appropriate way. For example, a parent could say something along the lines of "I'll be home after snack time" or "I will be home when the big hand is on the 3." The parent should be consistent and true to their word and return when they say they will. When children know that their parent is coming back and they'll be back when they say they will, the child will have reduced stress and be less likely to cry and throw tantrums.

No matter the age of the child, separation anxiety is a stressful stage for both parent and child. However there are a variety of practices that can ease transitions. For example, parents can practice separating from their children by leaving their children with unfamiliar caregivers for short periods of time or only going to the next room for a few minutes. This will make children of any age more comfortable with the idea of their parent leaving for short periods of time and will reduce negative behaviours associated with separation anxiety.

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Another way to ease separation is to make sure that children are fed before the parent leaves. It might also help to schedule separations after the child has taken a nap so they are well rested. Being sleepy and having an empty stomach will aggravate unpleasant feelings in anyone and especially so in small children. Some young children may also handle separation better if they are asleep when the parent leaves.

Creating a comfortable and familiar environment for the child may also reduce explosive tantrums. Letting them bring a toy or blanket of their choice will help the child feel more comfortable and curb stress brought on by the unfamiliar setting as well as being separated from their parents.



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It is vital for there to be a good relationship between parent and educator. If there is underlying tension between the two, the child will pick up on it and become uneasy. Alternatively, if the relationship between the parent and educator is a strong one, then communication will flow freely and easily. Communication is vital to childcare. Parents should let the educator know about the child's normal schedule and other important information so as to create as normal of a time for the child as possible. Let the educator know of any recent changes in the schedule such as the child transitioning from two sleeps to one, the child having new teeth coming in, or if the child missed a nap and

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needs to be put to bed earlier than normal. This information will help the educator adjust accordingly and navigate any issues that may arise from such changes. Experienced educators will be able to comfort children struggling with anxiety through distracting tactics and activities, hugs, and comforting items such as toys or blankets. Additionally, if the child has had a change to their normal schedule, then the parent should call or text the educator to get updates on how their child is doing.

Developing a "goodbye ritual" can be something along the lines of blowing a kiss to each other as the parent leaves, a special secret handshake, the handing off of a treasured blanket or toy, or even reading a favourite story with the child. Children are comforted by routines and having a "goodbye ritual" will alert them that their parent will soon be leaving so they can mentally prepare and are not taken by surprise when mum or dad gets up to go. That being said, it is better to leave quietly and quickly without dragging out a goodbye, as this gives time for emotions and actions to escalate into a tantrum that will make life harder for everyone involved. There may be a few cries and whines with a quick departure but the likelihood of an explosive meltdown is much lower. Furthermore, stopping in for a "visit" will create confusion in the child and start the separation process all over from the beginning and often times this second (and possibly subsequent days afterwards) separation is far more loud and angry than the original separation ever was.

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If the child is a toddler or preschooler, the parent can help them create coping strategies. For example, before the educator arrives the parent can tell the child that they are coming and then ask the child to use their imagination to think of some activities that they and the educator can do together. The parent could also tell the child to create a picture in their mind of giving their parent a big hug when the parent returns from their errands. Encourage the child to think of that picture if they feel sad while mum and dad are not with them. The parent should also tell the educator about this so if the child begins to get upset the educator can remind them that mum and dad are coming back soon and to think of their coming home hug. Additionally, the parent could get a copy of a family photo for the child to keep with them. The child could then look at this picture of their family if they feel sad and be reminded that their family loves them.

Some separation anxiety finds its roots in fear, fear of abandonment, fear of danger, or fear of neglect, If a child is exposed to scary TV shows or movies or even the evening news then that child may hear or see things that may make them fearful. If a parent suspects that exposure to scary media is a factor in their child's separation anxiety then the first step would be to remove the opportunity for the child to be exposed to frightening images. Secondly, parents should talk to their children about the fears they might be feeling and ask if there is anything that could be done to help reduce any fears and make the child feel safer and more comfortable.

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It is important that as the parent carries out the separation process that they do so confidently. If the parent is wavering or questioning himself or herself then the child will pick up on that and capitalise off of that weakness by manipulating the parents emotions. It is the parent's job to act purposefully and not backtrack or waver on what they say. The parent should leave when they say they will and come back when they say they will and gently but firmly tell the child to exhibit good behaviour while they are not together.

Separation anxiety is most common in children aged 8-18 months and many outgrow this phase with time. Once they have gotten used to the separation transition, a child will not exhibit the same symptoms they once did when the concept of separation was

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still foreign to them. However, changes in the child's life may resurrect anxiety that had not shown up in months. If a child has recently moved, parents are getting divorced, had a new sibling born, or even if the child is starting to come down with a cold, any of these could trigger the child into regressing back into anxiety related behaviours and cause issues during periods of separation. As stated above, separation anxiety is most common in children between the ages of 8-18 months of age and is not really a cause for much concern. However, in the unlikely case that a child continues to exhibit separation anxiety as they enter kindergarten and primary school or if the child is exhibiting extreme symptoms such as vomiting, shortness of breath, or panic attacks,

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the parent should consider consulting their pediatrician and inquiring about whether their child's behaviour is abnormal or not. There may be further medical action that needs to be taken or if there are other methods such as support groups that would be beneficial to the child.

Let's return to the mother of the 18 month old from the introduction. What would be the outcome if she were to apply some of the techniques outlined above? Let's imagine that in the morning as she drove her son to day care she spoke to him in an enthusiastic voice and started telling him all the different activities that he can do while he's at child care. This alerts the little boy that he will be at child care soon but she portrays it as a fun and exciting time. Next as the mother carries her son in she warmly greets the educators and encourages her son to say hello as well. This helps the child become familiar with the educator. The mother then sat down with her son and let him look around the room from the safety of her lap, thus providing him the chance to take in his surroundings while still having the comfort of his mother close by. The mother then pulls a copy of "The Poky Little Puppy" off of the nearby bookshelf and reads it to her son just like she does every morning. This is an example of a "goodbye ritual". Finally, once the mother has finished the book she hands her little boy a toy to keep him engaged and kisses him on the head and says "Mummy is heading to work now! I'll be back to pick you up when you wake up from your afternoon nap," This communicates to the child when she will return in a way that he will understand.



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As she walks towards the door she hears a few heart breaking whimpers from her little boy but the mother says kindly "Have a good day, sweetie! I'll see you soon!" and walks swiftly out the door to go to work. This demonstrates that the mother will not bend to her son's crying or pleading for her to stay but rather stay confident in her plan.

Finally, just as each of the above techniques differs from each other so is every child unique. Some of these tactics may work wonders for one child and make separations much easier and have no effect whatsoever on another child whose transitions are just as difficult as ever. It is up to the parent to discover what works for their individual child.

Hopefully, the information above will be useful for helping families navigate separation anxiety in all of its forms.