



Transitions and Separation Anxiety in Young Children

Separation anxiety is a common experience among young children, typically starting around 8 months and often resolving by age 2 or 3. It involves fear or worry when separated from caregivers, which can manifest in clinginess, tantrums, or difficulty calming down after separation. By age 2, toddlers begin to understand that even though their parents leave they will eventually return.

When transitioning into a new classroom, with new caregivers it can be expected that children will begin to show some initial separation anxiety, however, Sometimes the pain of separation seems to hurt us more than our children. Most children quickly adapt to a new classroom, especially if it is in the same school with familiar friends.

Here are some tips to help with transitions and separations:

- **Know Your Child and Realize that Each Child's Response Is Different.** We all want our children to take to their caregivers with eager enthusiasm, but children's responses to transition and separation depend upon their age, temperament, and experience.
- **Be Positive.** Our children have incredible intuitive skills. They sense our anxiety and hesitation. As the first day for transition draws near, begin talking to your child about what to expect and about any concerns or fears they might have. Present school as a place where he'll learn new things and make friends.
- **Establish a Drop-Off Ritual.** Developing a quick, simple way to say "good-bye" and reassuring our children that we will return will help separation go more smoothly. Sneaking out creates a sense of mistrust.
- **Tune-In to Your Child's Behavior.** During times of change, our children may have behavior regressions, delayed reactions, or even outbursts at pick-up time. It's all normal. We can reassure them with positive comments, physical affection, and love.
- **Make a Connection between Home and School.** Little things from home may make our children feel more comfortable: a blanket, a stuffed animal, or for infants, a scarf with mommy's smell. Photographs also help. Try laminating a favorite picture or compile a little photo album.
- **Contact the Program to See How the Day Is Going.** If our children are upset when we leave them, we can feel uneasy or guilty. Just knowing they are okay can help us settle down and have a good day.

Adapting to transition and overcoming separation anxiety may take time for some of us, both young and old. Transition times are learning times for our children and us. Remember that becoming comfortable in a new classroom is an ongoing process, not just a single event. Our children learn through consistent experience that each goodbye, as hard as it may be, is followed by our happy return.

Recommended Books and Resources

Wherever You'll Be, by Ariella Prince Guttman

Hand to Hold, by JJ Heller

Llama Llama Misses Mama, by Anna Dewdney

First Day Critter Jitters, by Jory John

The Yes Brain: How to Cultivate Courage, Curiosity, and Resilience in Your Child, by Daniel J. Siegel, Tina Payne Bryson

Parenting Your Anxious Child with Mindfulness and Acceptance: A Powerful New Approach to Overcoming Fear, Panic, and Worry Using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, by Christopher McCurry, Steven C. Hayes

The Joy of Parenting: An Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Guide to Effective Parenting in the Early Years Paperback, by Lisa W. Coyne, Amy R. Murrell