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Separation Anxiety: When Saying Good-Bye is Hard

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My young daughter's panicky shriek of "Mama no go" and "stay Mama" was part of the morning ritual as I left the house to go to work. Screaming and clinging to my legs she tried to stop me with sheer toddler force. Her pleading voice would ring in my head throughout the day. My anxiety and guilt clung to me while I worried about the developmental impact of the separation on her. Was our separation harmful in terms of her growth? What could I do to help ease her anxiety and upset?

My child-care provider used to tell me not to worry about my daughter's upset as she stopped crying as soon as I left. I didn't have the heart to tell her that it was because the people she usually had tears with had gone to work. While my daughter had an amazing child-care provider, she just wasn't Mom or Dad and the relationship was quite new. My daughter would hold onto her tears until my return and unleash them in a fury. While our separation was unavoidable, it was clear to me we needed a better way to face our goodbyes.

Why is separation so hard?

Separation is provocative for young children because it is connected to their greatest need – attachment. The more immature one is, the greater the longing for contact and closeness because of dependency needs. They desperately need their relationships to work for them because this ensures they will be taken care of. Separation means facing the absence of their attachments and the more dependent they are on them, the more anxiety they can experience as a result. It is their desire for contact and closeness that makes them miss us when we are gone. Attachment is the doorway through which separation anxiety opens up.

Young children are creatures of attachment and are not built for separation without some protest and potential anxiety ensuing. In fact, all young mammals possess a separation cry that is meant to draw their caretakers near.[1] Signs of separation anxiety include clinging, clutching, crying, and protest, as if to say – “If you go, who will take care of me?” Bed-time separation can also be heightened as they face into the final disconnect of the day. The question is how to help them through the unavoidable separations that exist as part of life? It doesn’t mean we can’t separate from them then, it just means we need to consider matters of attachment in doing so.



Children grow best when they feel the presence of an invisible attachment matrix surrounding them. When separation from their closest attachments is necessary, the best thing we can do is to give them alternative adult attachments to hang onto. The challenge is children should not feel comfortable with people they do not know. Good attachment instincts will make a child shy away from people who are not sanctioned by their primary attachments. This helps to keep them safe and stay within their parent’s realm of influence.

When we lived in more intact villages, children often knew members in their community and formed relationships as a natural course of life. Parents didn’t need to work at building attachment villages and could take relationships for granted. Today the people that are often filling in for parents are ‘strangers’ to them. The challenge is to help a child accept the substitute adults in their life by building strong relationships with them. A child’s relationship with their careprovider helps reduce the separation anxiety by creating a sense of home.

What can be done to help reduce separation anxiety?

1. Introduce and Matchmake Children to their Caretakers

The parent has a key role to play in cultivating a relationship between their child and a new care provider or teacher. The parent becomes a matchmaker working to create the conditions for the child and care provider to get to know and like each other. This typically starts with an introduction to the caretaker, pointing out similarities in interests and activities. When the child sees that their parent is warm and friendly towards the care provider, their attachment instincts will start to accept this new person as part of their village. Gradual entry can help to slowly warm up the child and adult relationship, with trust building over time and with patience. The child’s separation anxiety will often decrease as they start to settle into the relationship with their care provider, feeling nourished and protected by their care taking. If we want young children to feel at home with their substitutes then we need to work at their relationship with each another instead of trying to tackle a

child's separation anxiety head on.

One of the biggest challenges to development in young children today is the routine practice of matchmaking children to peers instead of adults in order to help them settle into new surroundings. There is a belief that children will learn social skills by being around other children. As a result, they are often pushed into relating to each other frequently despite their immature form of interacting with one another. It is true that children can settle into new settings because of their attachments to peers but the question is at what cost? The clutching and clinging accompanying separation anxiety is now aimed at their peer who is ill suited for care taking with their own immaturity to deal with. Frustration can ensue between peers, especially if they feel they are not being offered the attention they are seeking.

The long term consequences and fallout from kids peer attaching include a lack of receptivity to adult guidance, anxiety, and diminishing emotional expression. Children do best when they have adults they can turn to and not when their peers are their best bet for comfort, contact, and closeness. When helping a child with their goodbyes, we need to ensure we don't place a peer in place of an adult to hold onto. Only mature, caring adult attachments can deliver a secure, safe connection that a young child needs.

** 2. Cultivate growth by deepening attachment*

One of the best resolutions to separation anxiety is to grow children into independent functioning individuals. This is the overall goal of good development but it takes time to get there and young children are far from this. Children cannot be pushed to grow up but a generous provision of care is the best way to get them there.

Our best bet to fuel growth is to provide generously for children's dependence needs by providing undivided attention where possible and conveying through words and deeds that we are trustworthy when it comes to their care taking. When children feel their dependency needs are taken care of, the bias to become their own person and "do it myself" will open up. It is this bias to be one's own person that launches them toward separate functioning. Without a strong home base there is not sufficient freedom to grow into personhood.

By providing room for our children to grow free from distractions (e.g., technology, peers, structured activities), we are much more likely to help our kids in becoming separate beings who explore their own worlds. It is care taking and growth that can deliver the ultimate resolution to separation anxiety in that one feels confident to stand on one's own and navigate the world. Until that time comes our role is to help them hang onto adults who can deliver the conditions that free them up to grow.

3. Help them Find their Tears of Missing

It may seem odd that one of the answers to separation anxiety is having sad tears about missing loved ones. There is a commonly held belief that tears and upset are a sign that something is wrong or harmful for the child. Feeling sad and crying is actually one of the most natural things for a child when faced with the things they can't change or hold onto. One of the best predictors of mental health in an adolescent is actually a three year old that can find their tears of sadness about all the things they want but cannot have.

What we need to ensure is that there is someone there to collect a child's tears, helping them express the sadness that is within. Telling a child not to worry about it or not to cry when they are missing further diminishes their feelings and sense that a care provider can take care of them. Tears of upset are a natural course of life and it was one of the best signs I had that my child felt comfortable with their 'Mommy substitute'. With enough tears and a consistent caring adult to help them, children can settle into their new relationship and surroundings.

4. Bridging the Distance

The word goodbye signifies a parting or separation but in many languages the word actually means, "until we meet again." This is what young children also need to hear when goodbyes are necessary. If we want to reduce separation anxiety we need to help them face them into the next point of connection. This can be done by talking about when you will see them again and how you will spend time together. A child is then left to hold onto the next time of contact and closeness instead of the distance between you.

Having children physically hold onto something associated with their parent can also be helpful in bridging the distance. Giving them a locket with pictures of loved one or little notes to be read throughout the day helps them feel closer. One Mom put a picture of herself in a plastic bag and into her son's back pocket before leaving for preschool. He said that whenever he missed her he pulled out her picture and gave her "a kiss on the lips" and that seemed to help a lot. Many items can be used to bridge the distance as long as the child associates it with their parent, e.g., a keychain, a special rock and so on.

Separation anxiety is part of what comes in the wake of being apart from people you are attached to. The more immature and needing of care one is, the more stirred up by separation they can be. We shouldn't hold it against young children but rather help them to hold onto us or another adult in our absence. Their separation anxiety is a sign they are alarmed and in need to feel safer in their surroundings. There are some separations that are too much to ask a young child to bridge and in the early years the consistency and generosity of care is important in terms of overall development. Separations are unavoidable but we can help them in saying goodbye when we take their attachment needs into our hands and cultivate villages to help us raise our children.



Copyright Deborah MacNamara, PhD, Kid's Best Bet – *Dr. Deborah MacNamara is a counsellor in private practice and on faculty at the Neufeld Institute. She works with parents, educators, child-care and mental health professionals in making sense of kids from the inside out. See www.macnamara.ca or www.neufeldinstitute.com for more information.*

References:

[1] Thomas Lewis (2007). General theory of love. Random House.

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