

Separation Anxiety: Some Hints and Tips

Separation anxiety is a common problem for some children, especially during the first few weeks of school. You may also see some separation anxiety in children after an illness, a vacation, or even a long weekend, where they have become accustomed to being at home for a long period of time.

A school child is at an age where they are learning to negotiate their independence, a concept that is both exciting and scary at the same time. With the realisation that they are their own person, with wants and needs that are separate from yours, comes the realisation that you may not always be by their side. Going to school can make this last point painfully clear, causing your child to become anxious about letting you out of their sight. Here are some tips for cutting down on separation anxiety when starting school:

1. Do not automatically assume that your child is worried about starting school or that they will have separation anxiety. Do not signal that they should be nervous by asking leading questions, such as, "Are you worried about starting school and being away from mummy?" Instead, focus on the exciting aspects of starting school.
2. Know and react to your child. If they are not prone to worrying or clinging, don't make them worried by making a big deal out of going to school for the first time. However, if they are prone to getting upset or stressed, talk through going to school with them and try to explain that it is a safe and normal event.
3. Make sure that you have made the right choice in selecting a school for your child. Check out a few different places, ask for referrals from other parents, and spend time in each school that you are considering. Think about the environment with your own child in mind: Is this a place where they will feel comfortable? Is this a good match for their personality and activity level?
4. Allow your child time away from you, before starting school, such as spending a day with a grandparent, friend or auntie. This will help your child to adjust to being apart from you.
5. Show your child around the school before they start (if this is an option). This allows your child to be familiar with the environment. If there is an orientation, make sure to attend it with your child so they can meet the teacher, or arrange another time for them to do so. If possible, spend time in the classroom and in the play areas, or simply walk around outside the building on a few different occasions. Make sure your child knows where the bathroom is located and any other orienting details that they need. The more time you can spend at the school before school actually starts, the easier the transition will be.
6. If you know children who are going to be in the same class as your child at school, allow them to spend time together and make friends with each other before the school term begins, so that your child can identify a familiar face on their first day.
7. Sort out their sleep schedule. Tiredness makes tantrums, clinginess and tears more likely, so make sure that your child is going to bed early enough and is used to getting up in time for school at least a week before term starts.
8. Prepare ahead of time for the first day of school, and make it a special event to look forward to. In the days leading up to the first day, talk to your child about what will happen that morning. Tell them how excited you are about all the fun they are going to have and how you can't wait to hear about everything they are going to do.

9. Make sure you arrive at school on time so that your child is not under extra pressure. Arriving at the same time as other children may help your child feel at ease.

10. Show that you trust the class teacher and that school is a safe environment. This is more likely to make your child feel safe and secure in the new environment.

11. Do not drag out the separation process, especially on the first day. Take your child to the classroom, hug them, tell them that you love them, tell them what time you will back to pick them up, and then leave. Do not stay or return if your child begins to cry. If you have put the effort into selecting the right school for your child, then the teachers will know how to distract your child and make them feel comfortable.

12. Allow your child to take something from home with them to keep in their bag or on their peg, whether this is a soft toy, a piece of a blanket or just a special pen. This acts as a comfort blanket, making the school environment less alien for them.

13. Don't hang around once you have said goodbye, as this only prolongs the separation and gives your child hope that you will not leave after all. Instead, establish a goodbye ritual so your child has a clear signal as to when you are going to leave, preventing them from looking around hopefully for you.

14. Remember that children do pick up on your mood, even if they cannot yet articulate their feelings, so try to remain calm and positive about your child going to school, especially if it is for the first time. Don't show your anxieties, as this will make your child more anxious. Instead, look relaxed to reassure your child that being left at school for the day is a normal and safe occurrence. You can always begin to cry once you have left the school gates!

15. Always be there on time to pick up your child. Being on time is especially important during the first few days of school. If they believe that you will be there to pick them up when you said you would, then they will be more likely to separate easily.

16. At pick-up time, ask about the fun things they have done today at school, and start talking about what there is to look forward to at school tomorrow to help your child realise that they do want to be at school.

17. Talk to your child about their problems and try to get them to identify why they don't like separating. Understanding their fear, such as that you won't come back, will help you to explain that their fear is unfounded.

18. Don't give your child the option of backing out of school. The longer they are away, the harder it is to go back.

Children may display anxiety about separation in different ways, such as fighting with you about getting dressed in the morning, refusing to make eye contact with or talk to the teacher, being overly clingy, and/or throwing a tantrum. Understand that different children react to separations and new situations in different ways; some children adapt more easily (which does not mean that they don't love you or miss you while you are gone!) and some are shyer and take longer to adjust. However, if you can manage to stay consistent with your routines, both at home and at school, your child should eventually become comfortable with the process of you leaving them at school.

Planning ahead can cut down on problems with separation, both for you and your child. Stay calm, be positive, and trust the teachers to handle the situation once you leave. Keep to a regular routine as much as possible, and keep any other major changes to a minimum in the few weeks leading up to the start of school.