

MANAGING YOUR CHILD'S SEPARATION DISTRESS

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If you have a young child who becomes upset when you have to leave her in daycare or at preschool, it's important to speak with your child and your child's teacher to ensure that there are no serious causes for concern, such as bullying or learning difficulties.

If it seems that the issue relates to being separated from you, here are some tips that might help:

1. Ensure that your child connects with their teacher:

Some parents think that a worried or upset child needs to be engaged in an activity when left in the care of others. More importantly though, is a child's need to connect and feel safe with a new person. Speak with your child's teacher about the approach you're planning to take and ask the teacher to assist you by taking the same, consistent approach to managing these separations.

2. Acknowledge your child's distress: All of us feel better when we feel understood. You can help your child to feel understood by getting down to her level, mirroring your child's facial expressing and saying, "I know you're feeling really sad that we have to be apart from one another. I understand that you want me to stay with you. But I have to go soon and I know that you'll be safe here with your teacher."



3. Make sure you leave your child with her teacher: If your child is still feeling upset when you have to leave, you can say to her, "Let's go and find your teacher and let her/him know that you're feeling sad." Then, you can let the teacher know together that your child is feeling upset that you have to leave and will need to stick with the teacher until she is feeling better. Your child's teacher can then reinforce the same consistent message by saying to your child, "I understand that you're feeling sad but you're safe with me and I'll be your grown-up for the day. Let's stick together until you're feeling better."

4. Say good-bye: "I'll be back after I've finished my work. Your teacher is going to stay with you until you're feeling better. I'll be here at pick-up time and we'll have a big cuddle then. I love you." As you say this to your child, it's important to keep your own emotions in check. If she senses that you're stressed about leaving her, this can make your child more worried about what might happen. Once you've left, don't keep returning as this will be confusing and perhaps more upsetting for your child.

5. Discussion at home: At home, speak with your child about your goodbyes and, if your child is old enough, seek her ideas about how these goodbyes might be made easier for her.

6. Practise through play: Children really benefit from practising these separations through role-plays and in their play. Simply let your child know that you really want to help her feel better in these situations and that you think it would help if the two of you practised your goodbyes, including what you will say to each other. You might also want to set up some little play characters to allow your child to gain further practise in her play. When children practise challenging situations in their play, they can develop a sense of mastery more quickly.

7. Books: There are some wonderful children's books written on the subject of separation distress. A great one is "The Invisible String" authored by Patrice Karst which helps to reinforce the idea that we remain connected with our children even while we're apart.

8. Transitional objects: Finally, it might help to give your child an item of yours, such as one of your necklaces to wear under her clothes with one of your kisses on it. This can then stay over your child's chest and remain with your little one all day.

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