



Separation Anxiety



Introduction

Separation anxiety is a normal emotional stage of development that starts when babies begin to understand that things and people exist even when they're not present – something called "object permanence."

Statutory Legislation & Considerations

- ◆ Children (Education and Care Services National Law Application) Act 2010
- ◆ Education and Care Services National Regulations 2011

Sources

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One of the most rewarding things about having a toddler in your life, is knowing that they love you unconditionally. When we feel our lowest, there at our side is our loving child, simply wanting a cuddle and our attention.

However there are times when we want our child to feel comfortable leaving our presence for various reasons – going to Grandma's, staying with a babysitter, attending pre-school – but for some toddlers, this can be a traumatic event.

Around the age of 6 – 7 months, babies typically start developing a sense of "object permanence". They start to understand that objects and people still exist even when they cannot see them. By the time they are around 12 months old, many toddlers become anxious (to varying degrees) every time one or both of their parents are out of their sight – even for a moment. Young children realise that their parents are not with them, and may become worried that they will never return, or will not be there when they need them. This is often why toddlers scream during the night. They require reassurance that mum and dad are still around to comfort them. Fortunately this normal developmental phase is generally outgrown before their third birthday, but in the mean time, there are some strategies that can help reduce the anxiety levels of both parents and toddlers.

Entering into a new child care arrangement can be an emotional experience for both parent and child. However, careful planning, and the knowledge that some separation anxiety and tears are normal, can make the transition from parent to caregiver as pleasant as possible. How quickly the child adapts depends on a number of factors including: the child's age and stage of development; the child's past experiences in the care of others; and the adults' ability to prepare themselves and the child for the separation.

It is important that you try not to get upset or angry by your child's behaviour. It is flattering that your child loves you so much that he or she cares that you are leaving even for a short time. But no matter how complimentary it is, you still want to help your toddler to transition effectively through this stage.

Share information with the caregiver

Share your child's unique likes, dislikes, fears, eating/sleeping habits and anything else that will help the caregiver understand your child, ease the transition and provide care that is reasonably consistent with yours.

Build trust

Let your child see you and the caregiver building a friendly relationship. Include the three of you in a brief conversation or play activity. Children often use their parents as a "bridge" for developing a relationship of trust with a new adult.

Tips to help your toddler manage their separation anxiety

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Here are some basic pieces of advice to assist you and your toddler to travel through this normal phase with less stress and tears.

Keep your own emotions in check.

If your toddler senses that you are upset about leaving them (whether it is at pre-school or with their other parent) they will react to your response.

Display confidence in yourself, your child, and the person that will be caring for your child, regardless of how guilty you may feel.

Prepare your child in advance.

Talk about the event ahead of time. If your child is going to Fit Kidz tomorrow, start talking about it at least the day before. Continuously remind your child of all the fun things he/she will do and see.

Do not draw out the "goodbye".

It is important that you leave your child without drawing out the scene unnecessarily. It is OK for your child to cry when you leave as it teaches him or her coping skills for the future. Cooing and cuddling your crying child is likely to exacerbate the problem and you may also end in tears yourself! Be firm but kind – give your child a quick kiss and a positive statement about when you expect to return, then leave.

Play "Peek-a-boo".

Babies love this game – it is fun for people to move out of their vision then return. As they get older, you can increase this to you moving away and hiding behind a couch then "popping back". Over time as they get older, you can leave the room briefly then return to reassure your child that you are still around. But ALWAYS let your child know what you are doing – do NOT just sneak out of the room!

NEVER sneak away to avoid a difficult situation.

Sometimes it seems easier as a parent to leave without the child knowing, however this reinforces the toddler's belief that if they cannot see you, you are no longer there for them. They are not going to let you out of their sight if they know that you might disappear at any moment! This will prolong the child's issues with separation anxiety and is therefore extremely problematic in the long run.

Take a teddy.

Often having a transitional object (eg. a teddy or a favourite blanket) will help them feel safe and comfortable. Your child can bring it and cuddle it when the need arises. My children still have their "kiss boxes" in which I sprayed some of my favourite perfume and blew in hundreds of kisses so they could take one whenever they needed to.

Establish a "goodbye" routine.

This works exceptionally well for toddlers. Some people have a fun little routine such as saying "See ya later, Alligator" and the child replies with "In a while, Crocodile" (or the closest approximation of that phrase that they are capable of!). You might also have a special handshake or kissing sequence which makes it fun for you to leave. It is important at the end of this to turn and walk out quickly and confidently so you do not prolong the agony for your child (or yourself).



How Fit Kidz will help.

To assist you and your child during this stage of development, Fit Kidz will use the following strategies to help your child feel comfortable and secure in their new environment.

- * Phone calls – Any family that has a child that is unsettled when being dropped off will receive a phone call detailing how long it took for their child to settle, and what experience they joined in. This will help parents and staff find a pattern of preferred experiences so in the future we can prepare in advance for their arrival.
- * Family Tree – Parents are asked to bring in photos of their families to place in the room. The staff will take the children over to these photos during the day to talk with your children about their families which will assist them to create a bond.
- * Routine – Each room will display a routine for the children to visit throughout the day. Staff will remind children when their parents will be arriving e.g. after afternoon tea time. This allows your child to feel comfortable knowing that you will be returning for them, and they can keep an eye on it during the day to 'countdown' to when they will see you again
- * Programming – By using events that happen outside of care hours to lead the curriculum, children will feel involved in their learning and will therefore be more inclined to participate, and in future, will look forward to attending care.

Persistence is the key.

For those parents who seem to face the same heartbreaking tears day after day at the door, be persistent. If you give in once, you are teaching your child that this leads to getting their own way. Make sure that they are not hungry or overly tired and that they have a clean nappy/underwear, then just follow the above strategies. With persistence your child will learn to adjust to the new routine! And you will too!

Remember, your child feeling really sad when you leave is a normal emotion. You probably feel just as sad. But this experience gives your toddler the opportunity to learn to cope with difficult situations and will lead to a healthier and happier child and adult in the future!

We assure you we will do everything we can to support you and your family.

By Sally-Anne McCormack M.A.P.S. and Fit Kidz Learning Centres

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Please note: *If you have any specific concerns about your child please speak to your G.P.*

