Quick guide – separation anxiety

What is separation anxiety?

Separation anxiety is a child's fear of being away from their parents or carers. Separation anxiety is more likely to occur during the initial transition to childcare or formal schooling, but it can manifest suddenly following emotional upsets. We often see children struggle with separation anxiety at the start of a new school year.

What are common symptoms of separation anxiety?

Symptoms may include:

- worrying about you or them getting hurt or having an accident
- refusal to go to childcare or school
- refusal to sleep at other people's houses without you
- complaining about feeling sick when separated.
- becoming more clingy when you leave them



How can we support our children when they are struggling with separation anxiety?

Strategies:

- Acknowledge, validate and empathise, *"I can see that you're having a hard time, I understand that you're upset. I also get sad when I have to leave you. Would you like to talk about it/have a hug? I'm here when you need me."*
- Problem solve together – *"I can see that this situation is causing you anxiety, I am here for you and I'd like to help. What is the problem we need to solve? Can you list off possible actions and outcomes? Who else can help us with this challenge?"*
- Reward the 'have a go' behaviour…..praise for progress and for when they are being brave. Remind them of times that they have shown resilience/courage – we may need to provide the evidence for them!
- Create quick good-bye rituals to avoid 'rubber-band' goodbye e.g. two kisses and a high five. Before starting childcare or school, practice your good-bye ritual before you even have to part ways.
- Be consistent. Try to do the same drop-off with the same ritual at the same time each day you separate to avoid unexpected factors whenever you can.
- Be specific, child style. When you discuss your return, provide specifics that your child understands. If you know you'll be back by 3:00 pm, you could tell it to your child on their terms; for example, say, *"I'll be at the end of the school day after your teacher has dismissed you."* You can also talk about your return in terms of "sleeps" (if the separation is over two or more days). Instead of saying, *"I'll be home in 2 days,"* you could say, "*I'll be home after 2 sleeps."*

- Practice being apart by scheduling visits to family members and friends – this can be used as an opportunity to practise your 'goodbye ritual'.
- Talk about what you will do together later e.g. *"After I'm finished work, I'll come and pick you up and we can go to the playground and play on the swings together."*
- Visual timetables can be helpful as it will let your child know if there are any changes and also reaffirm that fact that they **will** see you after school. If someone else is picking them up, they that can be added to the visual timetable so they are aware and prepared.
- Transitional objects can be used to maintain that connection - this might be a photo of you all, a small teddy, a keyring or even something like a small piece of ribbon with your perfume on!
- 'Bravery kisses' - you could each draw a heart/kiss on your hands and reminder of how both of you are going to be brave.
- Positive affirmations/notes in the lunchbox - again to promote the bravery/courage of coping with this challenge.
- Maintain and calm composure - easier said than done of course! If children witnesses us in distress then they will mirror this. We need to reassure our child that they are safe, they are cared for and that they will see you again at the end of the day.
- Build connection with the person we are handing our child over to, whether it be a teacher, a friend and family member. Children borrow our trust first as a way to build their own. If they observe *us* build a connection with that person, they are much more likely to trust our judgement and feel safe in that person's care.

Books:

Jar Full of Kisses by Heather Bennett and Amanda Taylor Spiers



This is a story about "Prickles" the hedgehog that has to say goodbye to her mum and dad for one night. The deals with managing anxiety versus eliminating it.

The Invisible String by Patrice Karst



This book is about the connection we have with loved ones, even when we cannot be together physically. It gives kids a practical way to understand that connection.

The Kissing Hand by Audrey Penn and Ruth Harper



Mrs. Raccoon teaches her son Chester Raccoon about a family secret to help reassure him and ease his fears when she is not with him.

Llama Llama Misses Mama by Anna Dewdney



This is a story about Llama's first day of preschool and how he handles the new environment away from mama.

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