

iBlankie

every parent's security blanket



**SEPARATION ANXIETY:
SCHOOL DROP-OFF**

INTRODUCTION

Independence is an important goal for every child. Positive separation experiences are a crucial element in fostering your child's independence. Solid separations are special gifts that you can provide for your child. This article explores goals, guidelines, tools, techniques, and emotional issues involved in parent-child separation anxiety in general. This article explores anticipatory activities to help process separations beforehand as well as in-the-moment words and techniques to ease your child's transition at the time of separation.

CONTENTS

<i>SOLID SEPARATION EXPERIENCES</i>	3
<i>ANTICIPATORY STRATEGIES: YOUR CHILD</i>	3
Play Theme: Things Disappear, Things Reappear, Things Disappear, Things Reappear	3
GAMES	4
SONGS AND FINGERPLAYS	5
DRAMATIC PLAY	5
BOOKS	6
Structured Focused Activities	7
TACTILE ACTIVITIES	7
TASKS	8
<i>ANTICIPATORY STRATEGIES: SCHOOL/DAYCARE</i>	8
School Visits and Open Houses	8
MAY OPEN HOUSE	8
SEPTEMBER OPEN HOUSE	8
HOME VISITS	9
<i>IN-THE MOMENT WORDS AND TECHNIQUES</i>	9
Concrete Sensory Connections	9
Choices	11
Teacher Help: Feeling Notes	11
<i>SUMMARY & KEEP LEARNING</i>	12
<i>FAQ</i>	12

SOLID SEPARATION EXPERIENCES

Solid separation experiences are special gifts that you can give your young child. The unspoken, underlying message should be that your child can function independently and happily away from you: *"You'll be okay, you'll have a great time. I'll be okay, I'll have a great time."* In reality, however, separating can often be difficult for both you and your child. Through various activities beforehand and specific words and techniques at the time of separation, both you and your child can reach the ultimate goal: separating with a smile.

In helping your child with separation anxiety, it is important to empower your child by working with the feelings that your child is experiencing on the inside and also the behavior that shows on the outside. Optimally, separation anxiety is eased by helping your child with their innermost feelings and also by engaging your child in activities, beforehand and at the time of separation, to help soothe your child and to teach your child to self-soothe.

ANTICIPATORY STRATEGIES: YOUR CHILD

Play Theme: Things Disappear, Things Reappear, Things Disappear, Things Reappear

Children learn through play; their play is their work and their work is their play. Your child's play helps them deal with their innermost emotional conflicts. Adults often talk through their conflicting feelings; the same relief and resolution that you find in words, your child finds in play.

Preparing for separations beforehand by playing through possible concerns helps ease separations for both you and your child. You can help your child play through separation issues with games, songs and fingerplays, books and structured focused activities. This playing through will help your child work through or play through anxious feelings concerning separations before these situations occur. These anticipatory strategies help with the anxious feelings on the inside.

At times of separation, young children often fear that they will never see their parents again. For young children, this can be age-appropriate—a child's fear can be based on their egocentric and concrete perception of the world: *"What I see exists, what I don't see has disappeared from the world."* Separation songs, games and activities should help your child play out the important concept that *"people disappear from sight, then people reappear, people disappear, then people reappear."* This rhythmic theme is to counter your child's fearful notion that parents disappear when out of sight and fall into a black hole, never to be seen again.

Children from the earliest stages are working on this rhythmic play theme of things disappear, things reappear, as can be evidenced with the popular peek-a-boo games that babies, toddlers and young children love. When a play theme, activity, game, or song is helping your child play through specific inner emotional needs, then your child often engages in repetitive play in an attempt to work through and resolve this issue in an internal manner, much as you may talk about a concern in a repetitive manner.

The anticipatory strategies suggested provide opportunities for your child to work internally on the issue of separation anxiety. It is important to know that, when your child wants to engage in these activities, often repetitively, then your child is working on that issue inside on an emotional level, even though it may not be obviously apparent when observing your child's outward behavior.

It is important to respect that your child often plays through their important conflicts and concerns internally as part of the solution to their conflict. Play is often the mode of empowerment and mastery of the separation themes: people disappear, people reappear, people disappear, people reappear.

GAMES

The game of Hide and Go Seek is a very important separation game; it is both fun and helpful. In Hide and Seek, if your child can be both hider and seeker, your child can gain a feeling of mastery over disappearances. Most children love this game because they are working internally on separation anxiety.

There are many variations to Hide and Seek. Hiding objects or hiding toys in a sandbox or in a room for your child to find is also helpful in providing experiences in separation and reconnecting; this can be very empowering if your child is challenged with separation anxiety. When hiding objects, you can play the "Hot-Cold Game", where your child is told they are cold or warm or warmer or hot as they progressively get closer to the object you have hidden. In addition, hiding your child's toys, if they are comfortable with this concept, can be part of the game.

Your child's response to the suggestion to hide their blankie can be an interesting barometer as to whether your child is comfortable with the theme that the blankie will disappear and then reappear. In this, as in all the suggested activities, your child's comfort level is the governing guide. Only play as your child is comfortable in the play, only hide the blankie or teddy bear if your child is comfortable with this.

Many playground and other games can be adapted for playing through/working through separation anxiety. For example, when swinging your child, push your child and say or sing "*Away you go, far away on an adventure*" and then as they return for a push, say or sing "*And now you are back here with me again.*" When playing tag, say, "*Now you are running far away*" and "*Now you are going to home base to be safe.*" When doing chase games you can talk about your child running away and that, no matter how far away they run, you are going to catch them or they can return, so that you can be together again.

Your child will want to play these games because they are working through separation issues in their play. These games help your child feel less anxious about separations, and help your child feel safer in the world.

SONGS AND FINGERPLAYS

Some songs and fingerplays to help with separation issues are: "*Where is Thumbkin?*," "*Two Little Blackbirds Sitting on a Hill*," "*Paw, Paw Patch*," and "*Open, Shut Them*." The words and motions for these songs and fingerplays can be found on the internet. These all involve things disappearing and reappearing to help strengthen the important separation theme.

DRAMATIC PLAY

Dramatic play, including puppets and representational play, can help ease difficult feelings about separation. Using puppets, figures, dolls, or toy animals, you and your child can act out the separation scenario, with your child directing much of the action. Rehearsing the anticipated separation situation at school/daycare drop-off and allowing your child to express any emotions—fear, anger, relief, joy—provide an important outlet for feelings.

For example, Papa Alex presented two dinosaurs, Daddy and Son, to his young child Bryan and told him that it was time to go to Dinosaur School. As son Bryan seemed comfortable with Dad's suggestion, Alex had his Daddy dinosaur take Bryan's Son dinosaur to school and leave. When Alex asked Bryan how the young dinosaur was feeling, Bryan said, "*Okay, I guess.*"

Alex then suggested they switch dinosaurs and go to school again. Bryan's Daddy dinosaur left school and then Alex had the Son dinosaur become very angry, crying, kicking, and yelling, "*Don't leave. Stay. Come back. I need you.*" A full-blown dinosaur temper tantrum followed. Bryan was smiling and laughing and loving the scene. Then Daddy dinosaur picked up Son dinosaur at school and took him home and the play ended with a great deal of tension released for Bryan. Alex and Bryan talked briefly about the school separation and about how Bryan might feel being left at school.

While the follow-up discussion was additionally helpful, your child's playing without any conversation often will provide all the play dialogue your child might need. Often parents are concerned that in this type of role-playing the temper tantrum or crying or anxiety may be an unhelpful model for their child; to the contrary, what usually occurs is that the challenging behavior acted out is actually cathartic for their child, rather than modeling inappropriate behavior—this behavior is not a new thought or experience for them.

This play helps normalize your child's complicated feelings concerning separation and it provides an outlet and expression for those feelings. As always, it is imperative that you follow your child's lead in the play and only continue if your child is comfortable.

Some children find puppet play very helpful; even a sock or a hand can be a puppet. As in the dinosaur example above, the puppet play can provide your child with an extra degree of distance or separation from the emotional issues and help your child engage in the separation work at a more comfortable level.

Dramatic play can be helpful and cathartic to both you and your child. Switching roles can help a parent express possible difficult feelings that a child may be feeling in a separation situation.

BOOKS

Reading relevant books is an excellent technique for helping your child work through separation issues. Books that can be reassuring for you and your child include these classics, listed in order from appealing to youngest to oldest:

- Where's Spot?* Series by Eric Hill
- Goodnight Moon, The Runaway Bunny, Home for a Bunny*, by Margaret Wise Brown
- Owl Babies* by Martin Waddell
- Mooncake*, by Frank Asch
- A Mother for Choco*, by Keiko Kasza
- Are You My Mother?* by P.D. Eastman
- Corduroy*, by Dan Freeman
- The Three Little Pigs* (Disney version)
- The Kissing Hand*, by Audrey Penn
- Will You Come Back for Me?* by Ann Tompert
- Biggest Boy*, by Kevin Henkes
- Blueberries for Sal*, by Robert McClosky
- The Good-bye Book* by Judith Viorst

A personalized book, such as *Me and My Parents*, with hand-drawn pictures or photographs and personally written text can be a wonderful source for reading before a separation or for your child to hold and refer to while you are absent.

David's daughter Keisha was having a difficult time at daycare drop-off. David and Keisha's teacher took some photos and David and Keisha then mounted four photos onto separate

index cards and stapled these into their book *Dad and Keisha at Daycare Book*. The book consisted of four pages with the photos captioned:

- page 1: Dad and Keisha smiling together at school drop-off
- page 2: Keisha looking worried after Dad leaves
- page 3: Keisha having a fun time painting at the easel with her friends
- page 4: Keisha smiling again when Dad returns

Keisha carried this personal book in a fanny pack after her dad left and she seemed very comforted at having it nearby. She took it out to look at, especially during transition times, as transition times are often the hardest times for a child challenged by separation anxiety. The photo book proved to be very self-soothing for Keisha.

Structured Focused Activities

Structured art activities and structured cognitive activities can provide a powerful focus and a powerful container for anxious feelings, thus relieving your child of some anxiety. Providing your child with the following focused, structured activities prior to a separation situation or immediately after a separation, as offered by a substitute caregiver, can provide a definite framework so that your child's anxiety is not free-floating.

Any contained activity with structure and repetition and requiring focus can be self-soothing, as opposed to more open-ended, free-form activities, which are creative, but often don't reduce your child's anxiety in the short term.

Some structured activities include: coloring books and crayons, paint-with-water books, paint-by-number pictures, dot-to-dot books, tic-tac-toe, painting rocks or other objects, sticker books, puzzles with frames, mazes, beads to string, Lite Brite, and lace cards. Games such as Candyland, Chutes and Ladders, Sorry, Go Fish cards, checkers and computer games can help your child feel less anxious.

Your child may also be calmed by tactile activities such as playdough, sand play, and chewing gum (at an appropriate age).

TACTILE ACTIVITIES

If your child is experiencing separation anxiety at drop-off, tactile activities before going to school may help sooth your child. Also, having your child immediately engage in tactile activities at school drop-off can often be very helpful. For some children, the following tactile activities can be calming: playdough, sand play, water play, stress ball, and fingerpaint.

TASKS

It is also suggested that your child be given a small task for school/daycare: some glue to bring into the classroom for a craft project for that day, a book to bring to share with friends for story, a special snack to share, or a special toy to show the class. Having your child focus on a task when transitioning to school can help so that the focus is not on the separation itself but on the task at hand.

ANTICIPATORY STRATEGIES: SCHOOL/DAYCARE

There are several things that your child's school/daycare can provide to help your child separate with success at drop-off time. Open Houses and home visits prior to your child's school/daycare start date or prior to the start of school can help a child with separation anxiety adjust to the new classroom.

School Visits and Open Houses

Schools can offer open houses to ease the transition to school. If the school does not sponsor an Open House, you should try to arrange a visit to school for your child before the first day of school, perhaps during the day or two when the teacher is setting up.

MAY OPEN HOUSE

The May Open House for incoming September enrollees is a morning for parents and children to stay at school for one hour (split shift, overlapping a short time) so that the children can become acquainted with the teacher and the classroom and so that families can connect in order to plan playdates for their children to play during the summer. The more familiar the children are with each other, the easier is the transition to school. Having one familiar child's face in a classroom can make a huge difference in transitioning to a new childcare situation.

SEPTEMBER OPEN HOUSE

This open house, held before the first day of school, is a morning for parents and children to become familiar with the teacher and the classroom immediately before school starts. This can be a short morning, perhaps two one-hour shifts, with no group activities planned—a playtime only. Parents are encouraged to:

- help your child find their cubby
- take your child to the bathroom to show them the toilet and sink

- ☑ Find a special classroom activity and/or friend that you can concretely refer to when talking about school, such as, "The dinosaur will be here for you to play with tomorrow."
- ☑ Take a picture of the teacher with your child

Teachers, of course, interact with each child. Other types of separation connections may be made at this time with the teacher. The teacher can send home some watercolor cups that need to be cleaned by your child and brought back to school the next day; become a color team with a child, as in "*Let's both wear pink tomorrow!*"; or arrange quietly with the parent for a before-school phone call with your child to establish a verbal connection.

HOME VISITS

Some teachers will be willing to arrange a home visit before your child starts school, within the first few weeks of school, or on an as-needed basis with a child having a particularly difficult time separating and adjusting to school. A home visit, where the teacher meets your child on their home turf for 20-30 minutes, can ease the transition to school/daycare. Home visits can be extremely successful in building that important bond with your child's teacher to ease the drop-off transition from you.

IN-THE MOMENT WORDS AND TECHNIQUES

At the time of the actual separation at school/daycare drop-off, there are two important concepts to help ease the letting go for parent and child: providing very concrete sensory connections in the separation, and choices providing gentle, but firm limits within which a child has a number of choices and can feel empowered within these choices.

At the time of drop-off, teachers can also help with Feeling Notes.

Concrete Sensory Connections

Your child interacts with the world on a very sensory, concrete level. When you leave a child, a concrete sensory connection between you and your child can be very helpful. Your child can't keep you with them, but your child can have pieces of you in very concrete sensory forms and that can be very reassuring. It is important to think of all of the senses that may be important to your child.

VERBAL

Using words, you can paint a simple, very concrete picture of your whereabouts so that your child can have a clear mental image of where you will be. For a young child, one or two sentences is usually sufficient for a verbal connection.

- ☑ *"I'll be at the grocery store where we always shop. I will be buying oranges and graham crackers and then I will be back home after your afternoon nap."*
- ☑ *"After I leave I am going into my car to drive to work. I will be sitting at my desk working on my computer and talking to people all day while you are with the babysitter. Then I will be coming home through this door right before dinner time."*

In addition, you need to convey the important message that your child is capable of surviving successfully without you present. A statement addressing your child's competence during the time away is a real vote of confidence.

- ☑ *"I am going now. You seem sad. I will miss you, too. I will be busy at work today. I know you will have a busy time, too. You will do fine. "*

These words acknowledge feelings of sadness and also convey a sense of confidence in your child's ability to function without your being present.

TACTILE

In addition to a verbal connection, and beyond the transitional "love" or blankie, a concrete sensory connection can be made by leaving a special possession of yours with your child.

For example, when Jennifer left her 3-year-old Jessica at school, she would take off one of her pierced earrings and pin it onto Jessica's dress, which was very reassuring to Jessica.

Sometimes a small love note, with a heart or a lipstick kiss, or photo of Mom or Dad, that your child can keep tucked in a pocket and pulled out whenever necessary, provides the necessary concrete connection.

VISUAL

Having a photo of you and your child can be especially effective for your young child who needs a visual to help them feel secure and to help feel that you are near.

Jennifer liked to look at the photo of her and her mom on her nightstand after Mom left the room at bedtime.

AUDITORY

Having an audio recording of you reading a favorite book or singing a favorite song can be very reassuring to your child whenever they want to hear your voice while you are away.

OLFACTORY

Young children often have strong associations through their sense of smell. Having you take a handkerchief or piece of cloth and rub it on your body—hair, underarms, etc.—can provide an olfactory reminder of you. Your child may feel closer to you when they can

smell your shampoo, pheromones, etc. This cloth could then be tucked into your child's backpack or pocket, to be used when your child wants a whiff of mom or dad for reassurance. Or you can take the tee shirt or undershirt that you have worn all day and, without washing it, offer it as a nightshirt to your child to help them smell you near throughout the night.

Choices

The fact that you are leaving is a definite limit over which your child has no choice. But if your child can be given several choices within the separation framework, your child can have some sense of control and power in the situation and this may ease the separation.

Parent: *"I need to leave soon. Do you want me to leave in two minutes or three minutes?"* is an example. If your child says, *"Never,"* you can respond, *"I wish I didn't ever have to leave either. But I do have to go. You can choose two more minutes or three more minutes before I leave, or else I will have to choose."*

Sometimes using a prop, such as an hourglass sand timer or an analog kitchen timer, to de-personalize the separation decision can be helpful and it can give your child something to hold, which can be reassuring.

Gerald and son Rashid used both an hourglass sand timer and hug choices to ease the transition. *"Would you like me to stay for one or two flips of the sand timer, Rashid?"* Rashid would hold the timer and, when needed, flip it. Then, when the timer was up, *"Should we do ten hugs good-bye or eleven hugs, Rashid?"* and, after the hugs, papa Gerald said goodbye. By giving Rashid some choices within the framework of the separation, he felt included in the process of separating and had a feeling of some control over the separation.

Teacher Help: Feeling Notes

Feeling notes can be extremely powerful in helping your child work through separation anxiety. Feeling notes are similar to adult journaling, where putting the feelings to words and words to paper can be extremely cathartic and empowering. To be deeply heard and understood by an adult can help your child overcome their separation anxiety.

Helping your child write their feelings in a note can also ease separations. This can be done beforehand, but it is usually most helpful when a teacher uses this technique at drop-off times. It seems counter-intuitive to begin a feeling note when a child is upset or crying, but starting it in the middle of your child's crying can actually be very effective.

When young Carrie was dropped off at daycare, she couldn't stop crying. Her teacher Naomi said, "Your feelings are important. Let's write a note about how you are feeling. Should we make it to your mom or your dad or your dog or your grandma?" Carrie continued crying. Naomi began writing the note:

Dear Dad,

I am crying and crying. I am sad, very, very sad." (Aside—"Carrie, how many 'very's should I use—one or two or three?") Carrie stopped crying a little. Naomi continued writing and read as she was writing, "I miss you so, so, so much." (Aside, "Carrie, how many 'so's' should I use?") Carrie's crying abated even more. Naomi continued: "I want one hug or two hugs or three hugs when you come to pick me up? (Aside, "Carrie, how many hugs do you want?") Carrie stopped crying and said, "I want a BUCKET of hugs!"

They continued the note. As Naomi wrote another sentence or two, Carrie gained more and more control and then said she wanted to play. Naomi asked her what she wanted to do with the note—Carrie wanted it in her cubby to take home.

Often the first feeling note or two can be the most challenging to write. After feeling notes become a part of your child's repertoire, these notes can be very helpful.

SUMMARY & KEEP LEARNING

In summary, separating from your young child at school or daycare can be challenging for both you and your child. With some well-planned anticipatory strategies, such as [games](#), [songs](#), [books](#) and [play](#), and by structuring the actual separation situation with [concrete sensory connections](#), [choices](#), and [feeling notes](#), letting go can be easier for both you and your child.

Solid separation experiences are special gifts that you can give your child. Hopefully, the ultimate goal can be achieved for both you and your child: separating with a smile. See also our [article on separation anxiety](#) more generally, and our article [Traveling Parents: 15 tips to stay connected to your child](#).

FAQ

Q. My child's caregiver wants to let her cry at the separation without comforting her. Is this best?

All children, all people in distress need comforting and support, be it a hug or a sympathetic conversation or a hand on the shoulder. Sometimes your child may prefer space before comforting; then the caregiver needs to check in often to see if your child is ready for support or to engage in an activity for distraction.

Q. How does a child's concept of time impact separation anxiety?

Sometimes parents can forget how time moves much differently, much more slowly, for children than for adults. An interesting guide for understanding time concepts for your child is to compare your age and your child's age. Suppose you are 33 years old and your child is 3—you are 11 times older than your child. This can translate into conceptual time differences: what is 6 hours in your child's life is what almost 3 days would feel like to you.

When you are leaving a child for what seems like a short time to you, it is really a long time in your child's world given their concept of time. Sometimes this deeper understanding of time for your child can help you understand the anxiety that your child may feel at separations—the time apart may seem like a very, very long time to your child.

Q. How do adults' own experiences with separations and separation anxiety affect this issue with their own child?

Many feelings, often difficult ones, may emerge for parents when they are separating from their child. Anger, sadness, feelings of abandonment, guilt, fear, and relief can sometimes be experienced by parents as they anticipate separating or as they separate.

Eileen felt sad when she dropped her daughter Alicia off at school, a sadness that she later realized was connected to her own difficult separation anxiety from her own mother when she was a kindergartener. Every morning as a young child Eileen had experienced stomach aches from her worries about being dropped at school.

Sharing these feelings with other adults is important. Reflecting upon your early separation experiences, at school or in other situations, can help differentiate the anxiety that you may bring to the separation experience from your child's own separation anxiety.