

iBlankie

every parent's security blanket



**SEPARATION ANXIETY:
HELPING YOUR CHILD SEPARATE
WITH A SMILE**

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.

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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

Anti-Anxiety Vocabulary

Children often feel anxious because they are feeling vulnerable, helpless, small, and incompetent. By helping your child feel more capable, competent, and safer you can help reduce their anxiety. Using words that encourage your child's self-concept and boost their confidence can be very powerful. The two concepts that you need to emphasize for your child are: strong and powerful, and safe and comfortable.

STRONG AND POWERFUL

Find every opportunity to remind your child that they are strong and powerful. When you do this, your child will beam. These reminders bring to the forefront of their consciousness how especially competent they are. They love how they shine in your eyes and they shine in their own eyes, too. This adds to their self-esteem. This encourages their autonomy and promotes their independence. They feel able and capable. They feel less anxious.

Your child will never have enough of these reminders of how strong and powerful they are. I encourage parents to remind their children every 30 to 45 minutes about their strength.

- "Renee, look at you helping carry in the grocery bags. Your arms are so strong."*
- "Ahmad, you are running so fast in your new shoes. You run like the wind. Your legs are so powerful."*
- "Jose, that was a clever idea. You are an amazing problem-solver. You are SuperJose!"*

SAFE AND COMFORTABLE

We need to make children feel safe and comfortable in the world. Reminding your child that they can make themselves safe and comfortable in the world can reduce the stress level in your child.

First and foremost, our job as adults is to keep children safe. Young children do not have the judgment necessary concerning everyday living to keep themselves physically safe and this extends from crossing the street to safety on the playground to safety near fires and kitchen appliances to using child car seats, etc. This exercise is to help reduce your child's anxiety regarding the world as a comfortable place; all parents need to set appropriate limits around the physical safety of their child.

The operative words here are safe and comfortable. The object is to bring to the forefront of your child's consciousness the concepts that your child is safe and comfortable in the world and to empower your child so that your child can become more at ease. You will probably see your child's face and body relax as they hear your words. Once again, it is good to remind your child of their safety and comfort several times an hour.

- "Montana, you look so comfortable sitting on the couch watching that video. You know what makes you comfortable."*
- "Nathan, I saw you playing with your friends in the sand box. You looked so comfortable with your friends. You were being a good friend and enjoying your friends' company."*
- "Duncan, you look so comfortable using those scissors. And you know just how to walk with them, held low and moving slow—low and slow—that's great!"*
- "You are holding on to the sides of the slide steps as you go up and then sitting flat to go down the slide. Isabella, you know just how to stay safe on the slide."*
- "I see you eating eggs and toast and juice for breakfast. You know how to eat healthy food to help your body grow."*
- "I like how you looked both ways and held my hand when we crossed the street. You know how to stay safe with me when crossing the street."*

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.

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.

As an example, Mary was a single mom and she knew her son Kevin would have a difficult time when she dropped him at grandma's when she traveled for work for several days. Mary took some photos and Mary and Kevin then mounted five photos onto separate index cards and stapled these into their book *Mom Leaves and Kevin Goes to Grandma's*. The book consisted of:

- Index card/photo 1: *"Here's a picture of Mom and Kevin smiling together at Grandma's"*
- Index card/photo 2: *"Here's Mom and Kevin hugging and kissing goodbye."*
- Index card/photo 3: *"Here's Kevin looking worried after Mom leaves"*
- Index card/photo 4: *"Here's Kevin having a fun time playing with his trains at Grandma's"*
- Index card/photo 5: *"Here's Kevin smiling again with Mom when she returns."*

Kevin carried this personal book in a fanny pack after his mom left and seemed very comforted at having it nearby. He took it out to look at throughout his stay at Grandma's and he slept with the book in his bed. The photo book proved to be very self-soothing for Kevin.

(Also, see our article [Traveling Parents: 15 tips to stay connected to your child](#)).

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).

IN-THE MOMENT WORDS AND TECHNIQUES

At the time of an actual separation, there are two important concepts to help ease the letting go for you and your child: concrete sensory connections—providing very concrete sensory connections in the separation; and choices—providing gentle, but firm limits within which your child has a number of choices and can feel empowered within these choices.

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 "lovey" 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.

SUMMARY & KEEP LEARNING

In summary, separating from a young child can be challenging for both you and your child. Well-planned anticipatory strategies, such as [games](#), [books](#), and [structured focused activities](#) can ease the separation experiences and reinforce the play theme of things disappear, things reappear. By structuring the actual separation situation with [concrete sensory connections](#) and [choices](#), letting go can be made easier for both you and your child. Solid separation experiences are special gifts that you can give your child. Using appropriate words and skills and techniques, the ultimate goal can eventually be achieved for both you and your child: separating with a smile. See our [article on school drop offs](#) for more strategies around separation anxiety 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.