



So you want to know more about...

# Separation Anxiety in Preschoolers

## Don't leave me here!

It may be casual: "I don't want to go to preschool today," or it may be a crying, clinging, dramatic show at the center. Whether your child is comfortably enrolled in a program, changing rooms, or starting at a whole new center, occasional separation anxiety in preschoolers is a perfectly normal occurrence.

In some ways, this stage can *feel* harder to manage than separation anxiety in an infant or toddler, because older children have better verbal skills and are more tuned in to your weak spots. However, their communication skills and cognitive understanding actually give you *more* tools for getting to the root of the problem and helping them feel more secure.

If you believe that you are the only person who can offer him security, your child will believe it, too. On the other hand, if you truly believe that your child's teachers and

programs have something valuable to offer, that message will also take root. It may not happen overnight. Your child will still need to observe things and come to conclusions for himself. But he will be in a better position to do that if you give him "permission" to become immersed in his new experience. Here's how to send that message:

- Spend time in the classroom enjoying yourself. An hour or two in the room or on a field trip gives your child a chance to see your positive interactions with teachers and other children.
- When you are at the center, point out interesting opportunities that are there and not at home.
- Show your child the center is a new kind of home for them too. Bringing a favorite blanket, spare clothes, and photos from home helps your child physically move in.
- Find a transitional object to help your child bridge the gap between home and center. If he doesn't already have a "lovey," find something new he can cling to (temporarily) in your absence. It could be something that represents you, like your keychain or your t-shirt. Or it might be something new: a big-kid coat, hat, etc.
- Develop and keep a consistent drop-off routine. It's okay to say, "Today you look like you need one extra hug," but staying ten minutes longer will only confuse him.
- Discuss drop-offs with your caregiver and decide at what point she should step in.
- Try not to overanalyze the causes of the anxiety or your child's emotions. Most remedies for separation anxiety employ the same skills: patience, consistency, and a positive attitude.

## NAEYC on Building Bridges

Caregivers with a strong knowledge of child development recognize how important it is for children to have a sense of belonging, being loved, and trust in their environments. Warm and caring relationships with adults provide children with the basis for all types of learning. For instance, studies show the presence of attentive caregivers encourages children to explore their worlds. Responsive adults help children extend their learning and reach out to other children and adults.

from *Early Years are Learning Years*, available online: [www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org)

### Further reading

- *Wemberly Worried*, by Kevin Henkes
- *The Runaway Bunny*, by Margaret Wise Brown
- *Guess How Much I Love You*, by Sam McBratney

# Clues to Their Blues

Personality or temperament has a lot to do with how kids adjust to change. Some kids charge into a new setting gung-ho because they are excited about the activities. Only after they've had time to check everything out do they pause to feel the loss of their old setting. Other children tend to take time to evaluate the situation *before* they make any moves. They may cry for 2 weeks while they gather information, but once they decide they are sure about a place, they move right in. Some kids alternate.

These factors can also affect separation:

- Home-life changes: a traveling or separated parent; personal loss; a new house; a new sibling.
- New faces at school: new teachers or children change the mix. Parents can help children practice

making friends or communicating their needs to adults so they will feel more powerful.

- Parent anxiety is frequently a contributing factor.
- Sometimes there's no clear answer. Anxiety may signify new cognitive awareness that the child can't articulate: they might recognize that other children have experienced a loss and they could, too; they might realize that moms and dads have lives outside of caring for them.

The actual cause of anxiety is usually less important than your reaction to it. Kids want to know their affection for you is reciprocated, but they also need permission to develop trusting relationships with others.

# Transference

Children who are working through separation anxiety will often transfer their clingy behavior to a caregiver in the parents' absence. This is progress! The caregiver's job is to function as a **bridge** to the other children and staff. The key to moving this phase forward is for the caregiver to be **available** to the child, but not **indispensable**. Caregivers can act as an island for insecure children in these ways:

- Allow the child to accompany them on errands throughout the center. Give the child a "bridge" job — handing the new paper towels to the other teacher when they return, for example.

- Narrate the other children's activities. Comment on places the clingy child might like to explore, with or without help.
- Caregivers should give children extra attention with limits. Say: "I can have you on my lap for two books, but then other kids need a turn, too."

In extreme cases of transference, the child may be better off separating from the preferred caregiver. Talk with your teachers and director if you feel your child's progress has stalled, they may have suggestions or a different perspective.

# Frequently Asked Questions

**I can't take these 20 minute drop offs anymore, but I don't want to be unresponsive.** Those long painful drop-offs are hard for us, too, because we need to care for other children while we help your child settle in. Read **Better Drop-offs & Pick-ups Purple Page** for specific suggestions. Children tend to recover within 5-10 minutes of a "rough" drop-off, but that recovery time increases with the length of a bad drop-off.

**My child seems more attached to the other teacher than to his family group teacher.** Children tend to develop loving relationships with all the staff who care for them. You may not see these interactions that happen *throughout* the day. When children have a favorite grandparent, it doesn't mean the other

grandparent is not a good caregiver or that the child doesn't enjoy his/her company. This can also be the case with caregivers.

**I have a personality conflict with my child's teacher.** You need to ask yourself who has the real problem: you, or your child? If your child seems content during the day (ask the director for feedback), if he has positive things to say about his experiences at the center, he is probably fine. You don't have to "love" your child's teacher, but you do need to be able to communicate. A conference with the director can help you *both* clarify your communication styles and concerns for your child. See the **Resolving Caregiver Conflicts Purple Page** for more tips.