

Farewells Not So Fun? Make a Separation Anxiety Plan

You've heard it said before: Saying goodbye ain't easy. That's especially true for a baby or young child struggling with being away from a parent — or for a parent listening to big feelings from a clinging-for-dear-life little one before an impending parting of ways.

I have recently been working on separation with my toddler. It reminds me of when I waded through similar times with my older daughter, who is now nearing 8 years old, and who will sometimes now shoo me away upon dropping her off somewhere so that I don't "embarrass" her in front of her friends. How times have changed!

But what do you do in the early years, when separating from a child can feel very, very challenging?

First, realize that *separation anxiety is not something that comes out of nowhere*. Children flourish on their sense of connection with their parents. When all is well with that connection, kids feel that they dwell in a land of love, flexibility, and safety. A child's brain feeds off of this connection — literally, when the brain is getting this emotional food, learning proceeds at a rapid clip!

If only we could give our babies and kids this social-emotional nourishment all of the time, in the form of connection. But here's the rub: We cannot. No one can. There are times when even seemingly minor actions, like turning to take a phone call in a baby's presence, can break that contented feeling of connectedness.



When bigger separations occur — for instance, you leave for the office, or drop your child off at daycare or preschool — a whole backlog of stored feelings from earlier separations and earlier hurts gets kicked up, and...hello, tears and tantrums. Yes, you've got enormous feelings streaming out of your child, and you're already running late! I have been there, and I understand that stress.

What to Do

My 15-month-old is very comfortable with her grandmother, who lives nearby and takes care of her quite regularly. Still, a few weeks ago, she began having a very hard time saying goodbye to me when I left the house. *Here's an example of how it went once:*

I let her know that I would be leaving soon, and then she frantically reached her arms out — a gesture for me to hold her. I took her in my arms, and said, softly, “Honey, I am going to have to go.” And she started whimpering and crying.

I try to, as much as possible (and it's not always possible), be unrushed with my departures. We've found it works best to take time with the goodbye, making space for all of the feelings that bubble up to be heard and supported. (We call this supporting of a child's feelings Staylistening.)

After her cries settled a little, I gave my daughter to her grandma. She didn't like that, and she cried again. But grandma held her, and I stayed close, holding her hand, maintaining eye contact and a relaxed warmth, and saying, “I'm sorry this is hard, sweetheart.”

I listened until her cries stopped. She soon gestured for grandma to put her down, and she started playing with a ball. I wasn't sure if we were really done, so I ventured, “OK, honey, bye-bye.” She didn't hesitate with a “bye-bye!” back.

However, I know we are not done with this emotional project. To help bolster our connection so that my daughter trusts me even more with her feelings about separation, *I am trying to do short daily periods of one-on-one time with her, where I completely and enthusiastically follow her lead regarding what she wants to do.* (We call this Special Time.)

Similarly, I have used extra Special Time with my older daughter to help her in times of separation-related and other challenges. Separation was often tough going in her preschool years. As a working mother, I couldn't afford the time to stay with my child until she was ready to say goodbye. Thankfully, her teachers were capable and ready to listen to her feelings when they did come up, but the hardship of separation showed itself in other ways during those years. I was so grateful to have the Hand in Hand tools handy. They truly helped my older daughter — and my husband and I — as we navigated the tricky waters of farewells.

Making a Separation Plan

Here are some things that you can begin to do, as you face an impending separation.

- If you're gearing up for a first day at daycare or preschool or another new situation, make a plan to have regular Special Time in the days leading up to the big event.

- Build into your Special Time some extra time at the end (don't tell your child about this time), to make space for any feelings that might bubble up. Especially if your child is aware that an event involving separation is around the corner, he or she may use this time of feeling safe with you to reveal some of her worries. If that happens, you want to be able to listen to all of those feelings, to help her release some of the tensions and stresses that she's holding within.

- Talk to your child's new caregivers and teachers. Explain how you intend to deal with the feelings that might come up when it's time for you to go. Let them know how vital you feel it is for your child to be able to have her feelings heard, and that you would like to take your time separating from her. You can even show them this article.

- Leading up to the first day and thereafter, take opportunities to broach the topic of the new situation (e.g., preschool) with your child. If mention of the topic brings up tears and/or other emotions, stay close and listen.

- Always let your child know that you will be coming back. And try to resist any urge to sneak out without saying goodbye. After all, you and your child are building a relationship that revolves around trust.

- Get support for yourself! Separation can be hard emotionally for us parents, too, especially if it means a new life rhythm that involves fewer hours in the day with your sidekick. Talk to a Listening Partner, or a trusted friend, about your fears, concerns, and feelings of sadness. Have a good cry. Shedding tears helps relieve tension, not just for our babies and kids but also for us grown-ups.

It's true: Saying goodbye is never a piece of cake. But, if you can take the time to plan for it, you can help ease the transition for your child, while also helping her deal with and heal from a whole emotional backpack of fears and anxieties. With your guidance and support, your child really can function — even without your round-the-clock presence — from a place of ease, confidence, and zest for life and learning.



-Susan Derby,
Certified Hand in Hand Instructor
and mother of 2 in Los Angeles