

Happy Goodbyes

Helping Ease Separation Anxiety

What is Separation Anxiety?

If your little one cries or clings to you when you try to leave, that's separation anxiety. It's perfectly natural for children to experience feelings of sadness and vulnerability when you are leaving. In fact, it's a sign that your child has a close attachment and feels safe with you. Separation anxiety generally begins when a child is around seven months old, and may increase around 10 and 18 months old. It generally begins to decline around age two, but can last until kids are five or six.

What do you need to know about it?

Separating from a parent is one of the first ways that children begin to develop important coping skills. Handling your child's anxious feelings with sensitivity and directness will help her deal with future separations and other issues without fear.

Don't worry, most children only take a few days to get over separation anxiety. By the end of the second week of school, most goodbyes are happy. But, if your child is having a more difficult time we recommend you bring her to MMO more often for shorter periods of time, gradually increasing. If you only bring your child once or twice a week (or less often), she will have a harder time getting used to coming to school.

What can you do?

- **Play** We all know children learn best through experience. Playing peek-a-boo is a good way to practice separating. It's silly and fun, and it reinforces the idea that you'll come back. Start out with your baby by just hiding your eyes, then put a blanket over your head. You can progress to popping in and out of the room. And eventually, leaving your child with someone familiar now and then.
- **Talk.** Little kids want to know what's going to happen next. Calmly and clearly talk your child through what's going to happen. "You're going to stay here and play with Ms. Ellen and your friends while I go to work. And I'll come back to pick you up in a little while." Be positive, direct and specific. Don't say, "I'm leaving now, okay?" It makes you seem uncertain, and may give your child the idea that if he says no, you won't go.

- **Be cool** In a calm and confident way, tell your child about something exciting that will be happening in her day, "I bet you'll have a yummy snack today." Show your child through your expression, tone of voice, and body language, that this is a fun, safe place to be. (It's totally natural for you to be nervous, but the more you show it, the more your child will pick up on it.)
- **Plan** Create a routine for leaving. Get your child engaged in an activity by herself - looking at a book, or playing with a toy - or with a teacher. Tell her you're going to leave and will come back soon, kiss her goodbye and go. Don't sneak out, that only increases your child's feeling of insecurity.
- **Leave, don't linger** The longer you stay around, the harder it is on your child when you do leave. And, don't pop back in to check, they'll always catch you.
- **Comfort** Give your child a toy, stuffed animal or other item that she finds comforting. For some kids, just knowing it's in their backpack is enough.

What can we do?

We'll help you and your child through separations at school however we can. You may want to hand your child to her teacher, give her a kiss, say goodbye and go. You may prefer to sit and play for a few moments and then have a teacher take over so you can leave.

We'd be happy to send you a text to let you know how the day's going - just let your teacher know your contact info. Or, if you'd prefer, call the MMO Office, 356-7377, and we'll give you an update on your child.

Photos of friends and family are also reassuring. A small photo album with pictures of friends and family labeled with names can give your child comfort and help her bond with her teacher as they look at it together.

